

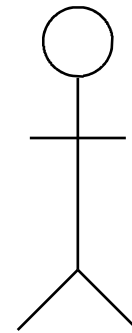
A Theory for Bible Reading and Study

A fundamental question for the serious disciple of Jesus Christ is simple: “How do I get into the books of the Scripture and understand the instructions given there for my life?” I am struck by the fact that Jesus was very familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures and used them extensively for reflection and teaching. He could read, it seems, and the New Testament reflects the same sense of literacy for the disciples who later became apostles. Can we who have the advantage of the printing press do less than those who had only hand written copies?

I. What is writing

I assume it goes without saying that verbal communication is before written communication. The noises made and the inflection of the voice was restricted at first to a small group (the man Adam, and his wife). As the population grew and various clans and peoples were created differences in language led to misunderstanding. What might mean “weight” in one culture, might mean “wait” in another. Within these groups the necessity for contracts and bills of sale came, and when other trading groups were involved the situation called for some form of commonly understood permanent, or at least semi-permanent, form of representation.

We might say that stick figures were used to represent things in the beginning: The scientists and archeologists tell us that these stick figures progressed to fuller forms. Some forms of stick drawing have survived into the modern age such as Chinese and Japanese. These representations can be very complicated. Beyond complications there are interpretive disagreements between seller and buyer. How specific can such a system be? And when there is more than one, better yet more than one hundred, then some modification is necessary. Roman numerals come to mind. (e.g. I, IV, X, etc.)



These pictures are not the language, but they represent the language, or at least the things of language. Anyone who is the least bit educated is familiar with some sort of written representation of thought. Just learning the letters of the alphabet can impose an interpretive scheme on a person’s perception.

Let me give an illustration. What do you see?

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In most of the world the answer I would get is the number seven. This is not the answer. Another answer might be an upside down L. Again, this is wrong. What it really is, is black ink on white paper (or black dots next to white dots on a computer screen). The first two attempts to answer the question are both interpretations based on something a person has been taught. Yet the interpretation is the most useful way of using contrasting colors.

The point of the illustration is to be aware that at a very basic level reading is an interpretive task. Not only is the form of the writing important, but the style can influence a person.

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This represents a more creative and sophisticated idea!!! What about

2x3+1

as representing a more brilliant thought. But wait, it is the same thought. Or is there something different in the representation that communicates part of the message? Every written communication represents not itself, but the meaning the writer wants it to have. Yet our background, experience, lineage, family, and education influence the reading. It also counts as to whether we know the person sending the message, and how well we know him or her.

What about the phonetics? The Word of God is heard primarily, not read. This can also be confusing because so many things can be heard in reading something out loud.

ICU

If this is said in a hospital I understand this as “intensive care unit.” This carries physical and emotional elements as a place where very sick people are being treated. But if I see the same letters on an electronic message it is phonetic for “I see you.” This becomes part of the structural element of the communication and surely informs understanding of the hearer.

I have found that it is important to remember when I read or study the Bible, that the book I have before me is nothing more than ink on paper, with some glue, plastic, leather and cloth thrown in. It only becomes the Word of God when the message is understood.

These bits of ink must be constructed into words that have meaning. These words must be organized into phrases and thoughts. These thoughts must be collected into statements, arguments, questions, and illustrations that provide substance and reinforcement to realities that are applicable. It is at all of these levels that the Word of God comes to us.

II. Some Obstacles

The first obstacle to understanding the Christian Scriptures is the size of the book. A disciple confronted with about 1100 pages of text, in most printings, can be overwhelmed by the amount of material presented. As human beings our patience is strained just thinking about mastering a book of this size. A Christian finds that quick answers that are reliable is a better approach. But the point is exactly “reliability.” There are a variety of ways that the church addresses this obstacle, most generally by saying, “Just trust us, we know.” This method is challenged on almost every page of the Bible by the prophets, apostles, and Jesus Himself. A further question becomes, “Is there benefit in the effort?” To this question I say simply, “yes”. (My reasons come later in the essay.)

Another obstacle that I find frustrating is that most Christians are dealing with a translation of writings that are in other languages. Not only is there the problem of trying to understand what another person has written, but I have the extra burden of reading it through the efforts of another in between. He, she, or they have influences that color the words that I re-

ceive, or in some cases it is not the words that are translated but the thoughts of the writers. Most translations are reliable, but there are always things put in and things left out that might clarify and communicate to me more clearly the message (or Word) of God. Is there benefit in the effort? To this question I again say simply, "yes".

A third obstacle that comes to mind are the limitations of the reader. How much time do I have to put into the project? What are limits of my vocabulary? Am I disciplined in reading what is written, or do I stumble and substitute other words and thoughts? What kind of memory can I count on to bring various parts together into some whole? What kind of resources do I have to help me when I am short in any of these areas? How certain can I be of my results? It is human to want epistemological certainty. Is there enough benefit in the effort? To this question I again say simply, "yes."

III. The importance of method

Dt 17:18-20

Practical Bible Study Practice

This paper is not about whether the Bible (Holy Scriptures), the Old and New Testaments, is inspired; or to what extent it is reliable. These questions are covered in many other fine theological works. This work is about an approach to learning the content of the Bible, and how this content might become part of the repertoire of a Christian person. These issues were commonly understood in an academic setting that is long past in most places, even as a literary exercise. A certain mastery of the Scriptures is necessary to read most western literature of the last sixteen hundred years, in the sense that many stories are used as shorthand. Statements like "the writing on the wall" (Daniel 5:1ff) are bereft of their larger context without a basic reading of the Bible.

Where to start?

Sometimes this question is simply a procrastinator's ploy. The God of the Bible is everywhere in the Scriptures, but not always obvious. A person can start anywhere, as long as the goal is to read the whole Bible multiple times. There are so many backward and forward references that the first time through is going to introduce many questions and some sense of con-

fusion. I personally have read the whole Bible over 110 times in many translations and even the original languages, and it was many readings before certain parts of the Bible began to show their place in the overall scheme of things.

The Bible is difficult to read through, at any time or at any place. There are areas that seem to cry out for lingering, and others that tempt one to jump right over them. A person must have a conviction that the whole Bible is mutually supportive. The battles of Joshua which make for exciting reading, must be seen as supporting the divisions of the land which are hard to understand without a map, and have no immediate meaning to most modern people. The genealogies can seem to go on forever, but if you are a descendant they grow in importance. They show the relationships that led to some of the conflict that is so interesting. The whole Bible is the whole special revelation of God, even when extra Biblical sources are mentioned (Jude 6,9), within the context of the canonical book they are clear in meaning.

The answer to this question depends on church background (if you grew up celebrating the Resurrection it is hard to comprehend how difficult this is to believe) and your Sunday School was more traditional, you may be able to begin in Genesis and grind your way through the whole Bible on the first try. Most who try this set a goal, and when progress is slowed, or frustration sets in, feelings of failure may discourage a person from pursuing systematic Bible reading.

If a person is a new Christian, some say that the New Testament is the place to start. One of the gospels, perhaps John, would be the easiest to grasp. There is problem with this. How does a person understand the last supper apart from Moses; how does one understand the concept of truth apart from the prophets; how does one conceive of the Spirit of God apart from Genesis and the Psalms?

And where will you go from there? The order of the books is somewhat arbitrary, but simplicity and experience dictate that following the order of the Bible, at least the first few times through, has merit. This is the difficult road to take, but this can be overcome by the approach. Most people are negative and look at what has not been accomplished, and therefore look at the size of the task, and almost certain failure to finish, as hard on a person's self-esteem. But, if a person takes a different approach, the ap-

proach of accomplishment, i.e. how much of the Bible is already read, not how much is left, every page is a step in the right direction. At the age of fifteen I was given the advice, begin at the beginning, put a book marker in and keep it moving. If there is a lull, simple go back to the point you stopped, and keep going.

How much to read?

Most Bible reading plans are of the yearly variety. Read the Bible in a year. This is problematic for most people because they lack the discipline and regularity of life that make this possible. Even in the life of Jesus there were times of intense ministry, and withdrawal for retreat. The Bible yields to this kind of approach. Good books have a flow, and the Bible is a good book. There are natural breaks, similarly there are long passages that make more sense as a whole, not chopped up. Most of the people that I trained in Bible reading were encouraged to read 12 to 20 chapters at a time, 4 to 5 times a week. More if so inclined. This will generally get a person through the Scriptures 2 ½ to three times a year, and basically acquainted with the general facts and movement of God's activity. It is as if one were to see a mural that covered a giant wall. If a person observed the wall in its entirety over a period of months and years, the details may not be firmly fixed, but a person could be confident of what was not in the mural. In the same way Bible reading protects a person from teaching that adds to, or seriously distorts, the revelation.

Bible Reading Effect

Bible reading on this scale has an unintended consequence. It is faith building. It is an exercise in Hebrews 11:6. God rewards this diligence with various good things. Perhaps a favorable coincidence, introduction to a piece of information that proves very useful, a clarity of thought will come that proves that God is responding to the faith it takes to hear His word. In my circles we call this Bible Reading Effect, and it is common to all who read the Bible, not read about the Bible. The power is in the Word of God itself, not in its interpretation.

Thoughts on Bible Reading 1. The problem – How does one work big to little, broad to deep, and keep the commands of God to be diligent?

Diligence is the key word to address this problem – does the Bible itself give any clues to this dilemma?