

Chapter 1

Common-Sense Guidelines for Studying Your Bible

“Aw, come on. You can make the Bible say anything you want it to! That’s just your opinion.”

Have you ever heard anyone say something like that? Have you ever said it or thought it yourself?

Opinion. Interpretation. Truth. How do you know which you’re dealing with in any given situation? Everybody has an opinion on what the Bible teaches, it seems. You have an opinion. I have an opinion. Even pastors, theologians, and scholars disagree over the meaning of various passages of Scripture. The simple fact is, we can go through the discipline of learning Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, so that we can read the Bible in its original languages; we can study the complex history of Bible translations from the earliest bits of parchment to the latest modern editions -and still have differences of opinion on what the Bible means.

In one way, this is healthy. There should be room for honest minds to disagree and still be friends, shouldn’t there? However, as a historical pattern, such differences have proven to be very unhealthful for those who happened to be on the “wrong” side (read: minority side). During the Reformation, both Roman Catholics and Protestants became adept at persecuting those who disagreed with them. Protestants from one camp even persecuted Protestants from another -all in the name of what they thought the Bible meant. That same spirit of hostility and bitterness is seen in our day, too, with ringing denunciations and condemnations coming from pulpits and television platforms week after week.

I’m persuaded that a great deal of the confusion and bitterness of the past could have been avoided had believers been willing to bring a few common-sense guidelines to their Bible study. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not trivializing the serious disagreements that have arisen between sincere Christians down through the ages, or even suggesting that the debates have not been useful in arriving at a closer understanding of what God had in mind when He inspired the various writers and compilers of the Bible. But when the apostle Paul counseled young Timothy to study the Scriptures “which have power to make you wise and lead you to salvation through faith in Christ

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Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15, NEB) he was emphasizing an important truth: Bible study should lead to wisdom and faith. When it leads to bigotry, hostility, and divisiveness, one must ask what spirit is involved.

We all need to study far more than we do. Yet our study would be considerably more fruitful if we did it with a bit more generosity of spirit and intellectual humility.

The guidelines in this chapter are just that -guidelines, not rules. Mostly, they are practical suggestions on how to handle the Scriptures faithfully, with a large dose of common sense. They identify some of the more frequent mistakes that developing Bible students make in the way they approach Scripture, and they suggest alternatives. As we approach the Bible, it’s important to keep our expectations within reasonable limits. We rarely if ever can determine the absolute meaning of a given passage of Scripture or the single application appropriate for all situations. Even after a lifetime of study, none of us will know what the Bible means in every case. All we can hope for is increasing insight. My suspicion is that the more fully we grasp the fullness of God’s Word, the more we’ll realize how little we actually understand.

Everything else we look at in this book will reflect the concepts we discuss in this chapter. How we handle the Scriptures predisposes us to certain types of theological thinking and practical, everyday behavior. What we believe has a direct and inevitable influence on what we do.

Those who have passed over into the “twilight zone” of ideas have often done so -partially at least -as a reaction to the rigid, cruel, and unforgiving attitudes displayed in the traditional Christian churches. When our own reading of the Scriptures leads us into closed, negative attitudes and behaviors that drive others off, how can we blame them for being confused about God? Aren’t we His representatives? Aren’t we supposed to show people what He’s like by what we’re like?

The reason we’re considering this factor here is that the way we behave as Christians usually stems from what we think the Bible teaches. Few of us would say, “Well, the Bible teaches that we should all be loving and compassionate, but I’ve decided to be a real bigot, treating those who don’t see things my way with cruelty and derision.” We don’t directly disobey God. Instead, we find biblical support for the attitudes and behaviors we elect to display. We take a text here and a text there and combine them to justify our approach to others.

We usually don’t do this consciously. We’re just reading the Bible selectively -clinging to those passages that ring true to what we want to believe and ignoring those that don’t. For example, the Old Testament

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is filled with statements that affirm the loving nature of God and testify to His plan of saving mankind through the gift of His Son, yet the Israelites persisted in trying to work their way to salvation. He sought to establish a covenant of faith, but they demanded a golden calf. He wanted to drive out their enemies before them in the Promised Land, but they persisted in waging war. He wanted them to be a city set on a hill, a beacon light to the surrounding nations, but they built walls and fortifications, keeping the truth to themselves and rejecting all overtures from the Gentile world.

Taking their lead, many of us today continue to use our understanding of biblical truth to shut out the ideas of others. Instead of finding in the Bible the loving God who made overture after overture to lost mankind, we're like Jonah, who sat on the side of a hill waiting for God to destroy the ungodly city of Nineveh, and who even went so far as to lecture God for being more interested in saving lives than in fulfilling the judgments His agent had declared.

Understanding the Bible involves more than reading its words. We must also grasp the larger picture of what God is doing in the world. We must put specific texts and situations into the broad background of God's plan to save the human race. Short of that, our reading of the Bible will always lead us into confusion and loss. What God says is part and parcel with who God is.

Guideline 1: Never study God's Word without asking God's Spirit to guide you.

A prayerful attitude toward the study of the Bible involves more than just tossing up a terse, "Help me to understand Your Word, O Lord," before plunging in. It requires a conscious willingness to be led into deeper understanding, which often means seeing things which run counter to our entrenched opinions.

This is an issue of particular impact for those who already profess some expertise about the Bible, such as pastors, Bible teachers, and church leaders. It's very difficult to approach God's Word with humility when everyone around us is praising us for our insight and depending on us to speak with authority. It is hard, sometimes, to say, "I don't know," or "all I can give you is an opinion." Yet, if we were really honest about it, much of what we proclaim so dogmatically -even from the pulpit -contains more than a little personal opinion.

We all have opinions -and have every right to defend them enthusiastically. However, it's when we deceive ourselves into believing

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our opinions are more than opinion that we get into trouble. We should all stand by our convictions; yet we need to avoid the temptation of playing God. We're all merely mortal humans, struggling to get a clear understanding of what God wants us to know. It never hurts to allow that others' opinions, even when they differ from ours, are possibly true.

God will lead us into truth. But we have to be open to being led. Prayer puts us into this willing attitude.

Guideline 2: Organize your schedule to allow a systematic approach to Bible study, and plan a time when you can give it your full attention.

Haphazard study of the Scriptures is little better than no study at all. You've no doubt heard people described as "having just enough information to be dangerous." That's the way we are when we develop sloppy Bible study habits. We think we know the Bible, when, in fact, we only know part of the story.

Some people find an hour or so early in the morning before the rest of the family members are up and moving about to be the ideal time for systematic study. Others prefer the hours after the family has gone to bed. The time doesn't matter so much as our commitment to give our study a reasonably uninterrupted segment out of our schedule. We're all busy, with many important tasks to achieve during each day. But if we include God's Word in our schedule, the rest of the day will go easier.

Similarly, the amount of time we spend is no more important than how carefully we spend the time. Quality of time is the key -what we might call a results orientation. We study to grow, to know God better, and to find encouragement. We don't study to "put in our time." However, we need to be honest, not trying to claim we're spending "quality time" when we're just too lazy to invest significant time. It can generally be said that if we spend less than an hour at a time in study, we're probably not providing a segment long enough to achieve any significant insights. There's a difference between garnering an inspirational "thought for the day" -which can take only a moment - and doing real Bible study. And there's a place for both.

A similar issue is the question of getting an overview of the whole Bible, as opposed to focusing our study only on a particular segment. Those who consider themselves "New Testament Christians" sometimes fail to see the value of studying the Old Testament in light of the deeper, more profound teaching provided by Jesus and the

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apostles. They divide the Bible into old dispensation theology and new dispensation theology, inferring that the Old Testament teaches a gospel of works, while the New Testament teaches the gospel of grace.

There is a surface appeal to this logic. The New Testament is a more obvious presentation of the gospel. Many prophecies about Jesus had been fulfilled in Jesus. But it is very difficult to grasp the full meaning of what we read in the New Testament without the strong foundation provided in the Old Testament. Remember that the Bible Jesus used in teaching His disciples about faith and love was the Old Testament. The Bible Paul used to support his majestic theological dissertations on righteousness by faith was the Old Testament. And it was from this Bible that the early church brought to the Gentile world the good news of a Saviour who died to save us from our sins.

It is true that at times the Old Testament seems to suggest a gospel of works. The Jews were always trying to find new ways to work their way into God's favor -as we all do. But the Old Testament doesn't teach a gospel of works, in the sense that it was God's plan for people in that era to be trying to work their way into heaven. From Genesis to Malachi, the Old Testament shows God offering salvation through faith in His coming Son. The New Testament itself cites examples from the Old Testament, over and over again, where this is true. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews, in particular, traces in detail the great champions of faith all through the Old Testament.

The God of love is in the Old Testament too.

Rather than trying to read the Bible from beginning to end, many find it useful to be reading in several sections at the same time -in a form of parallel-tracks approach. Try reading from Genesis, the Psalms, and the Gospels as your three starting points. Read each section for a few minutes, then turn to the next, and then the next. During the course of a year, you can probably read through the whole Bible this way, keeping your interest alive through a variety of writing styles and emphases.

Guideline 3: Use a variety of translations in your study, some quite literal and others more interpretive.

Unless we're true biblical scholars, having spent a lifetime handling the original languages in which the Bible was written (and perhaps even then), we need to be careful in assuming we know what a passage of Scripture means. The use of many different translations helps us be cautious in asserting specific applications until we can stand firmly on a

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wide body of biblical teaching and general agreement among translators.

My personal study of biblical languages and textual criticism during college and graduate school was in many ways an exciting, illuminating experience. But what I really learned during it all was how very cautious I need to be about interpreting the Bible -and how very slow to claim expertise. As I spent those many hours studying microfilms of the ancient manuscripts themselves, laboriously translating words, sentences, and paragraphs from those handwritten fragments of skin, cloth, and paper, I acquired a great dose of respect for those who have labored to transmit a fair rendering of the Scriptures for our use today. It was a tougher job than most people realize.

Bible issues are usually far more complex than they seem on the surface, and the dogmatist who pounds the pulpit and proclaims, "My Bible teaches that ..." had better make sure he's talking about the broad concepts of Scripture that are repeated over and over in different settings. If he's trying to prove too much from a single text, chances are he's in deeper water than he realizes.

There are numerous translations of the Bible available today, and we can usually tell what kind they are by reviewing the introductory material in each. Some, like the New American Standard Bible, strive to give a very literal rendering of the words of Scripture, though they do include some interpretation, since it is impossible to translate without it. Others, like the New English or Phillips versions, are more casual and interpretive -more a paraphrase than a translation. They seek to give some flair to their translations, and in the process introduce more opinion. They are refreshing, but need to be studied with perhaps a little more caution. Still others, such as The Living Bible, are paraphrases. They seek to capture the meaning of passages, rather than depend on the specific words in the original languages. They, too, have value -but should be used more for inspiration than for careful study.

The key is to compare translations of passages in several versions. If you love the majestic language of the King James Version, you're in good company. Millions do. There may never be another translation as beautiful. But when it comes to study, use it in conjunction with several others.

Guideline 4: Assemble some basic study aids to make it easier to develop skill in moving from passage to passage in the Bible.

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There is no spiritual merit to be obtained from going blindly into the Scriptures, using intuition as your only source of assistance. Many others before us have also labored to understand the Scriptures better, with the result that a wide variety of very useful study aids has been developed.

The single most valuable tool for systematic study of the Bible is a good concordance, such as Young's or Strong's. These are bulky books, and they're not cheap. But, if we want to do serious study, it's essential to be able to trace the key concepts in their various applications all through Scripture. You could do it all yourself, comparing word to word laboriously, but the investment of time required can easily become discouraging. There's no reason to reinvent the wheel. So buy a good concordance.

There are also numerous commentaries available that illuminate the meaning of the Bible, from single volumes covering specific books of the Bible to multi-volume sets that cover the whole Bible. These commentaries offer introductory sections on each book of the Bible that explain the historical background of the book, including such matters as who the author was, when he wrote, and what historical factors may have influenced his writing. There is usually also an outline of the book in the introduction, which will help you understand how the various sections relate to one another. These introductory sections are then followed by a verse-by-verse commentary on the book, with insights into the developing message the author was communicating, along with comparisons with similar concepts or wording in other parts of Scripture.

It should be noted, however, that commentaries are, by nature, highly interpretive. What you get in a commentary is somebody's opinion. You'll probably feel most comfortable with a commentary written by a person or group whose theological slant is fairly close to your own.

Keep in mind that it is difficult even for scholars to draw the line between historical fact and the suppositions they draw from it. They write out of their own perceptions about God, His Word, and the Christian life. No commentary is absolutely correct in all places. Still, a good commentary can be very illuminating.

Guideline 5: Before taking a text from one part of Scripture and connecting it with another from a different part, study each passage of Scripture in its context.

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There is much to be said for a thematic study of Scripture. It's exciting to see how a passage in one part of the Bible fits with another somewhere else to create a tapestry of truth. It's like doing a term paper, where we gather quotations from famous people in all walks of life to prove a thesis.

The problem, however, is that while it may seem that all the passages are talking about the same thing, they may not be.

Studying the Bible in context is the single most important rule for arriving at sound conclusions. And it's the one most often violated. Let's consider a simple example. In 2 Corinthians 9:7 the Bible says, "Each person should give as he has decided for himself; there should be no reluctance, no sense of compulsion; God loves a cheerful giver." NEB. It would be very easy to use this passage as a basis for rejection of any form of systematic giving. Isn't God telling us that we should give according to our feelings? However, when we look at the paragraphs before and after this statement, we see that the intent is to place our giving patterns on a surer foundation. The apostle argues that when we realize how much God has given to us, our hearts are touched and we give far more than we ever would have otherwise. Contrary to the "apparent" meaning of this passage (give whatever you please, whenever you are inclined), its true intent is to make us more committed and our giving more generous.

It is always important to grasp the flow of a section of Scripture and to see how one text leads naturally into the next. The books and letters of the Bible are generally not disjointed "sayings"; they are specific messages, organized according to a logical progression that we need to grasp if we're to arrive at a clear understanding. We would save ourselves a tremendous amount of confusion by applying this one principle to our general study of the Bible. It's not optional. It's essential.

Guideline 6: When in doubt over the meaning of a passage of Scripture, stick with the least exotic interpretation unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise.

Have you ever had anyone ask, "Why are you making it so complex? The meaning of that passage is obvious." If there is anything that is obvious in such a situation, it's that if the two of you are in disagreement, the meaning isn't obvious. So don't allow such tactics to deter you from careful study on your own.

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Still, it doesn't make sense to reject a simple explanation for the meaning of a passage of Scripture in preference for one that is highly complex and obscure. Some Bible teachers are so clever in the way they find meanings within meanings that the average person feels totally at a loss to figure out how he got what he got from a given passage. And with cause.

All during His ministry, both in parable and in explicit statements, Jesus warned His disciples that His was not an earthly kingdom and that He would be taken from them in the end, put to death, and then resurrected to establish an eternal kingdom. Yet when He was arrested, the disciples fled in confusion and betrayal. When He was crucified, they collapsed in despair. And when He rose, they refused to believe it. They thought all His words were to be taken in a "spiritual" sense. There wouldn't be any blood. There wouldn't be any cross. There wouldn't be any dirty, sweaty agony. Yet Jesus meant exactly what He said.

It's a good concept to keep in mind. Go for the simple before you resort to the exotic.

Of the several belief systems we'll be examining in succeeding chapters, many refer to the Bible or to Christian literature to support their ideas. Sometimes the most exotic ideas are drawn from passages of Scripture which seem to have nothing at all to do with what they are used to defend. Yet in the minds of those who use these passages, they seem very clear. At the root of this remarkable phenomenon is a basic misunderstanding of how to interpret the Bible. Whenever we quote Scripture out of context, we're in great danger of misusing it.

God's Word deserves better treatment.

Guideline 7: Be Christ-centered or gospel-centered in all your conclusions as to "the real meaning" of passages of Scripture.

As we've just seen, it is so easy to "use" the Bible rather than listen to it -to enforce on it our own objectives instead of allowing God to achieve His objectives. The Bible is the revelation of what God has done, is doing, and will do to save us. What God said to Moses on the mountain was said in light of Jesus. What He told the Israelites to do in building the temple was done in light of Jesus. What Paul wrote about Christian behavior was written in light of Jesus. What John outlined in the Revelation was outlined in light of Jesus.

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Any focus, other than a Christ-centered focus, distorts the true meaning of the Bible. It's very easy to allow our focus to slip -and it usually happens without our even realizing it has taken place!

Whether the section of Scripture you're studying is in the five books of Moses at the Bible's beginning, or the letters and books of the apostles at its end, you must keep in mind that God is more interested in your eternal salvation than in satisfying your curiosity concerning every aspect of His universe. The Bible isn't a textbook on history, politics, economics, cosmology, or geology. It's a guidebook on how lost men and women can find salvation.

Does this mean that anything the Bible says (or seems to say) about these other topics is incorrect or irrelevant? Not at all. Using guideline 6, in the previous section, we would argue that the preferred approach is the simplest approach -taking what the Scriptures say at face value.

However, if you're trying to use the Bible to argue issues in fields it was not specifically written to illuminate, you're in danger of missing the whole point -and in the process creating controversies you will never be able to resolve until you can sit down with God someday and ask Him about it. These controversies may be interesting and exciting, but they often confuse those listening in who have neither the background nor the spiritual maturity to make sense out of what is being said. Speculative ideas have their place in our lives, but we need to label them for what they are.

When scientists extrapolate far beyond what the data actually prove in order to support a theory, they are misusing their position as thought leaders. The same principle holds true for those handling the Scriptures. We need to know the difference between fact and opinion and be honest in acknowledging when we're speculating.

Guideline 8: Resist the temptation to use your newly won Bible knowledge to clobber others into agreeing with you or doing things your way.

Approaching Scripture with a Christ-centered focus also involves avoiding the temptation to club people over the head with the ideas about life and behavior you've gleaned from reading the Bible. There is an arrogance here that is wholly un-Christian. There's no such thing as a "gospel club." It's either not a club, or it's not the gospel. A mean-spirited Christian is a contradiction in terms.

When the apostle Paul told the Corinthians that a woman shouldn't go to church to pray or prophesy without a shawl over her head (see 1

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Corinthians 11:5), was he laying down a rule we should impose on all women in all Christian churches for all time -in short, a club to use against women who don't cover their heads? Few today would argue that this was Paul's intention. Why? Because we understand that Paul was applying the broad objectives of the gospel to a specific situation. In the society of his day, a woman was not considered respectable if she went to worship bareheaded. As a Christian, the woman could have exercised her freedom and gone bareheaded. But Paul didn't want her to hinder her witness by exercising this freedom. His point in this biblical counsel was that saving souls is more important than the clothes we wear or don't wear. He takes the club out of our hands by directing our attention to compassion. We can't use this specific application as an absolute rule because its intent is to make us more sensitive to the needs of others -a principle that requires varied applications in varied situations.

This fundamental concern for others is a concept we'd all do well to keep in mind -especially the next time we elect ourselves God's committee of one to "straighten out" someone who doesn't see things just the way we do. Love for people lies at the core of the gospel. If we're arriving at applications of Scripture which do not display compassion and generosity of spirit, we may be textually accurate, but we are contextually out in left field. Understanding the words of the Bible, but missing its message, is a personal tragedy of immense proportions.

As you use these simple, common-sense guidelines in your study of the Bible, keep in mind that the God who inspired the Scriptures is ever accessible to those who seek to understand. The Bible is not difficult to grasp -it's just that we're not always eager to hear what it is actually saying. A person with an open, teachable spirit, who approaches Bible study with intellectual humility and a desire to discover what God wants to say to him or her, will find the truths of Scripture easy to understand.

Thought Questions:

1. How do you feel about the suggestion that some of us read the Bible "selectively"? Have you ever been guilty of picking and choosing from biblical ideas, casting aside those that didn't fit your preconceived beliefs?

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2. In your opinion, what are some of the key factors in determining the best schedule for Bible study? Is there one best schedule for everyone?

3. Which translation of the Bible do you enjoy the most? Why?

4. What is your understanding of the recommendation to study the Bible “in context”? What are the dangers from not doing so? Do you think it really matters?

5. When someone disagrees with your understanding of what the Bible teaches, how does it make you feel? How do you react to people who don't see biblical matters as you do?