

How To 'Study' The Bible

In the last issue of *Diakrisis* (July/August/2006) we looked at how we as Christians *think* when interpreting Scripture. For doctrine, it is imperative our thoughts be filtered *objectively* through a mindset of 'Sola Scriptura', the all sufficiency of Scripture (2Tim.3:16-17).

To ensure that we '**rightly divide the word of truth**' we need to be involved in serious Bible 'STUDY'. The falling away of the church, the lack of apologetics and objective thinking is largely because, as modern Christians, we lack the discipline to 'study' scripture. In this ministry we read and reply to much correspondence within which we view Christian thinking on various Scriptures. Too many of the letters show we simply do not read what the text actually says because we lack sound study methods to correctly interpret the passage.

Today there is a need to teach people how to 'study' the Bible. If one were to ask 100 Christians what they understand about doctrines such as Justification, Sanctification, Redemption, etc. - the results would shock! Many may be aware of these doctrines but are hard pressed to explain what these terms actually mean. There is a need to teach 'study' methods of correctly interpreting Scripture.

There is often a difficulty in understanding the term 'study'. Many Christians equate 'study' with simply reading the bible in 'devotions' every day. However, studying the Bible should be more than just a daily reading of selected passages. The difference between selective *reading* and *studying* the Bible is like the difference between drifting aimlessly in a boat and moving in a boat to a destination.

This article explores various methods for Bible Study:

First, An Imperative To Any Bible Study System!...

Coupled with any study method, it is imperative that Christians have read, and have a habit of *constantly* reading, the Bible *from cover to cover*. It is the author's strong conviction that anyone who has not read the Bible from cover to cover could not have a full orb'd view of God's salvation plan for mankind and is more than likely to have at least a truncated view of many important doctrines, as well as being susceptible to extra-biblical teaching. Many heresies and extremes can often be traced to a lack of teaching of the Bible *as a whole*.

The plan of salvation flows through both the Old and New Testaments. *The seedbed of all doctrine is in the book of Genesis* and then elucidated throughout both Testaments. In the Old Testament the themes of salvation, holiness, God's sovereignty, all have their foundation. Doctrines such as Separation and Election are first found in the Old Testament. The 'blueprint' for the doctrine of *Separation* can be seen in Leviticus 20:23 '**And ye shall not walk in the manners of the nation...I am the Lord your God, which have separated you from other people. 25 Ye shall therefore put difference between clean beasts and unclean...fowls...creepeth on the ground...26 And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the Lord am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.**' Although given to Israel this is also the foundation for much New Testament Scripture on Separation/Holiness!

So too with such doctrines as Divine Election. *The foundation for 'Election' is seen in God's election of Israel out from among all other nations:* Deut.7:6-8, '**For thou art**

a holy people unto the lord thy God, the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all the people that are on the face of the earth...'; Deut. 10:15, '**Only the Lord had a delight in thy fathers to love them, he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day.**'; Isaiah 45:4, '**For Jacob my servants sake and Israel's mine elect, I have called thee by thy name.**'

Thus, when we read the same phraseology in the New Testament in 1Peter 2:9 we are already grounded from the foundation of the history of Israel: '**But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.**'

Another very important theme is *The Law*. The Law is foundationally best taught from the Old Testament. The Law first came to Israel. *How God dealt with Israel is thus very important in understanding the Law in the New Testament*. The Law then becomes a crucial doctrine in evangelism. The Bible teaches the Law gives the knowledge of sin (Rom.7:7), shows the depth of sin (Rom.7:13) and its consequences. Thus, '**the law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ**', (Gal.3:24). When the Bible says to give 'Law to the proud and Grace to the humble' (1Pet.55), this is best understood and demonstrated by God's expansive dealings with either a proud or a humbled Israel. This is then crucial to any understanding as to *why* salvation is needed - many have never judged themselves by the perfection and holiness of God as shown in the Law.

The very Nature and Character of God is also first seen in God's dealings with Israel. With this in mind, *the OT is the introduction and the very foundation for the necessity of Christ*. The Bible is holistically one story and plan for the salvation of man.

One of the best ways to show that we must read our Bibles *from cover to cover* is found in the example of Jesus who taught two disciples in Luke 24:27: '**And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself**'. These '*Scriptures*' were in fact entirely the Old Testament as we know it today! In addition, Romans 15:4 adds this: '**For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope**'.

At the risk of over-emphasising the importance of reading the Bible in its entirety *before*, and *with* any systematic Bible study method, I would venture: *it is doubtful if anyone can truly understand the New Testament without at least a basic knowledge of Israel's origin, development and history from the Old Testament*. God reveals himself through his acts in history. Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost and Stephen's sermon before his martyrdom show how important it is to know the *foundations* of our doctrines from the Old Testament and then in the Bible *as a whole*.

I have laboured on this 'pre-requisite' to Bible study because to read and re-read the Bible as a whole is to give *balance* and *discernment* to any topical Bible study!

Bible Study Methods:

Firstly, *observe the Text*. What does the text *objectively* say? What are the *objective facts*? Read and re-read carefully and prayerfully. Notice what is there and what is not. Too

many today see what is not in the text and reach the wrong conclusions. Following is an example of finding *only the objective facts* in a text: John 3:16 **'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life'**. Objectively, the text states: 1. God loved the world (his creation) 2. He gave His only son 3. Those that truly believe in him would not perish but have everlasting life.

Recently I had a reader commenting on Jn.1:12,13 **'But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: 13 Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God'**. The reader wrote: *'This text reveals two things. First, receiving him is up to us (free will) and 'as many' reveals that God knew that not all would accept his call to repent and believe'*. However, the text in fact mentions nothing about 'free will'; or that it is 'up to us'; or that God foresaw who would 'accept'. Although these thoughts may be deduced or found elsewhere, it is simply *not in this text*. In fact, an exegesis will show the opposite! The text actually goes on to say that the **'them'** in the text were born again entirely of God - the text in fact proves this by three clauses in the negative (**'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man'**).

Another example of poor 'study' technique is found in the way many 'read' Romans 8:29-30: **'For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son...'** The 'foreknow' is today commonly interpreted that 'God foreknows who will accept or reject him in the future' and thus his 'predestination' is based on that ability or 'free will' within man. But a study of the text shows no such interpretation is possible.

Ask the right questions - Who is talking?; or who is it talking about? *What is the context?*; what is the subject? Where is the event?; when is the activity in time?

Why is the passage written? What is the atmosphere? - joy, anger, correction, majesty?...For example 1Corinthians 14 was written (as was most of 1Corinthians) to *correct* problems and abuses in the Corinthian church. The Corinthians had an 'unknown tongue' that Paul speaks *against* and wishes to *correct*.

Much of Bible 'Study' is doing 'WORD STUDIES'. I have found this to be the most enriching and stimulating form of Bible 'study'. Look at the *key words* and then where they are used *elsewhere* in scripture and their *context*. Study what these key words mean in Greek by use of 'Strong's' indexed numbers. Be aware that one English word may be translated from several different Greek words. For example, the English word 'love' has several different Greek words, all defining accurately what type of love it is.

When the word we are studying has been searched out within Scripture, then look at *synonyms and antonyms*. The synonyms are words *similar* and antonyms are words *opposite*. For example, the word 'Justification' (δικαίωσις) has synonyms translated as 'redemption', 'remission', 'propitiation'. Similarly, the antonyms are 'judgement', 'condemnation'. By looking closely at the synonyms and antonyms we build a 'picture' of what the word actually means in the original languages. From then on when we read the word elsewhere in Scripture *we have already built up a foundation* as to what the original writers understood the word to mean.

There are excellent 'tools' now available to do such word

studies. (A resource I personally use is *'The Complete Word Study Bible'* by AMG Publishers - on CD and available from this ministry).

In determining key words - *verbs* and *nouns* are important. Conjunctions ('*therefore*'; '*but*') also *connect phrases*. For example, 1Corinthians 14 has a series of phrases that must be linked together to understand the *contrast* Paul is making between the 'unknown tongue' and the true 'tongues' and 'prophesy': 1Cor.14:4 **'He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; BUT he that prophesieth edifieth the church'**. The '*but*' shows a contrast - the first part of the verse is negative ('*retorical*'); the second is '*positive*'. This same contrast is then shown throughout the entire chapter. *Verses or part of verses must never be isolated when they should be connected*. The book of Romans is another example of many thoughts that are all connected.

What is the literary form? - narrative, poetical, (Psalms, Proverbs), rhetorical (Corinthians), literal, doctrinal (Romans), figurative, (Jn.10:6-9) or prophetic (Isaiah, Daniel, Revelation). *Always interpret the Bible literally unless it is obviously figurative or symbolic; if figurative or symbolic then look for the literal truth behind the figurative*. For example, Jesus used the bread and wine as *symbols* when He said that they were His body and blood. [In scripture Jesus also said, **I am the door**, (Jn.10:7-9 - not a piece of wood); **I am the way**, (not a road men walk on), and **I am the light of the world**, (not a light bulb)].

Look at the tense and 'voice'. The English tense is past present or future, (Greek adds other tenses). The '*voice*' denotes the action by the subject as *active* or *passive*. For example, Hebrews 1:1 speaks of prophets speaking in the *past* and Hebrews 2:3,4 speaks of the signs and wonders as in the *past*. Again, Romans 8:30 speaks of our Glorification as being in the *past*, something already done in the mind of God. In Ephesians 5:18 the '*filling*' by the Spirit is *passive* - meaning we are the recipients of an action performed by God. In Jude 3 the '*faith once delivered*' is *passive* - it was delivered *to men* by God. The work of Justification in salvation is *passive* on our part - the subject, God, renders all the action. In Ephesians 2:8 **'For by grace are ye saved through faith...'** The word '*saved*' in Greek is a *passive* participle. In Acts 13:48 The words '**were ordained**' is *past* and *passive* - it was done in eternity *past* by God to the people in question who were *passive* in the action.

It helps our motivation in Bible Study to realise a '*high view*' of Scripture - it is God-breathed, inspired, inerrant and infallible! The Bible never contradicts itself. Interpret unclear '*minority*' passages with clear '*majority*' passages.

Anyone who says they are not '*disciplined*' in Bible study is admitting to sin and to being '**ashamed**' (2Tim.2:15) - it's that serious! Learn to develop a quiet time and even to having a special place where if possible there are no interruptions. *Bible study is part of the work of our Sanctification by the Holy Spirit*. '*Working out our own salvation*' includes such work as studying the Word of God. *Bible Study is part of our very worship of God!* It is where we respond in praise, thanksgiving - subsequently applying what we learn to our lives. It is also where we develop intimacy with our Lord and Saviour.

'Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth', (2Tim.2:15).

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