

How to Read the Bible

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Regular Bible reading is important for Christians, for in blessing our reading the Holy Spirit deepens our knowledge of God and of ourselves. This twofold knowledge is, as John Calvin famously began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, our ‘true and substantial wisdom’.

It is one thing, however, to heed God’s call to read His Word, it is quite another to know how to do so. This is understandable. The Bible is a veritable library (66 books). Knowing which ones to begin with, how to relate those of the Old Testament to those of the New, and how to approach books with differing genres can be daunting. Nonetheless, the matter is important. The apostle Peter observed in his own day that, ‘the ignorant and unstable twist [Scripture] to their own destruction’ (2 Pet. 3:16). Let’s consider then some principles whereby we can read the Scriptures aright, and benefit most from what should be for the Christian an habitual spiritual exercise.

Our Approach to the Bible

We approach Scripture prayerfully. Before reading it we seek the Lord for His help. We need Him to show us what the given passage means and what is to be learned from it. By this prayer, sincerely uttered, we manifest a reliance on God for the enlightenment we need. We also evince a readiness to submit to the Bible’s teaching. This submission arises out of love for God (the Bible’s ultimate author); from realisation that scriptural matters require spiritual discernment that only God grants (1 Cor. 2:14); and in view of the fact that biblical truths are not naturally palatable. Left to ourselves we are likely to reject anything in Scripture we deem not to our taste. Faithful believers, however, are those that seek sincerely to discern its meaning and to embrace it in the outworking of our faith and our conduct. Thus, we neither add to Scripture, subtract from it (Rev. 22:18-19), nor twist it (see above).

Our Introduction to the Bible

The Bible is no ordinary book, and need not necessarily be read like other books (i.e. from the beginning). When sharing the gospel, for instance, it is often best to point first-time readers to the Gospels. While the gospel was known of in Old Testament times (Jn 5:39), the progression of its revelation reached a climax in the ministry of the Lord (Jn 1:14, 17-18). Thus, we encourage new readers of Scripture to study first Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We commend to them the practice of asking themselves, as they read,

questions such as: Who was Jesus? Why is His gospel good news? What has this good news to say to me? Once readers are familiar with the salient features of the gospel they will find it easier to branch out into the Old Testament’s promise of the gospel and the New Testament epistles’ unpacking of it. That said, certain Old Testament books like Ecclesiastes are more accessible and immediately relevant to the unconverted, and to the non-churched in particular.

Our Use of the Bible

As Christians we must utilise the whole of Scripture. Writes Paul: ‘*All Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.’ (2 Tim. 3:16 [italics inserted]). The apostle’s emphasis challenges a longstanding misconception that if a matter is not found addressed in the Gospels it is not important.

Whereas the Gospel authors narrate the work of the person of the Messiah, the apostles, as witnesses of Jesus from his baptism onwards (Acts 1:21-22), function as heralds of the Messiah. While the form of their writings differs ~ in that they wrote practical epistles rather than historical records ~ the apostles nevertheless preached the same gospel. Although Paul was not called until a short time after Jesus’ death, the same is true of him. Indeed, had Paul come forth with a different proclamation of the Christ he would have got into deep water with the apostles. Rather, we find the apostle Peter putting Paul’s writings *en par* with Scripture (see 2 Pet. 3:16). Not only do Paul’s writings give central place to Jesus the Christ, they clearly set Christian doctrine against the backdrop of the Old Testament. We refuse the claim then, that Paul established himself as a second founder of Christianity. To pit his teaching against Jesus’ is a fallacy. All Scripture equips us!

Our Application of the Bible

To apply Scripture to our lives correctly there are certain questions we ought to ask ourselves: (1) Have we understood the text or passage aright in its given historical and grammatical context? Bible commentaries may help us here. (2) Does the text or passage speak to those who are, or who are not, the people of God? For instance, Amos 4:12 and Revelation 3:20 are often used in reference to non-Christians when they clearly have primary reference to the people of God. (3) Has the principle at the heart of the text or passage at hand been repealed or modified within Scripture? E.g. Old Testament principles continue unless clearly repealed or revised in the New Testament; there is evidence within the New Testament that the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit had served their purpose by the end of the apostolic era (Heb. 2:3-4). In other words, our

application of Scripture must correspond to what Scripture actually teaches.
What matters then, is not only a high view of Scripture, but a high use of it.