

How to Read the Bible

~12 Simple Guidelines

Doctrine

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How to interpret the Bible is one of the most divisive issues among Christians around the world today. Therefore, one of the most important needs facing the Church is to practice a way of reading the Bible and living the Christian life that is authentic to the Gospel's content and meaning for our time. In order to achieve this it helps to be mindful of a few basic guidelines. And for as much as we always need to appreciate interpretive principles concerning Bible reading, what we really need today are not new and more intellectual techniques, but reliable and fresh commitments to both God and God's Word. Here then are some suggested guidelines that we might truly enter into the biblical message and that it might truly enter into all of us, particularly to those who have been excluded from the faith of the Bible by the misuse of the Bible (Gomes).

1. What is the Bible?

Although a good many people in modern society do not read the Bible today, scores of people are strangely familiar with some aspects of its content. This is because this unique book like no other has deeply effected our world with its ethical and religious principles. Ideas and statements made thousands of years ago in the Bible continue to be passionately debated today. For these reasons no one can afford to ignore its significance and message. Written over a period of more than a thousand years the Bible is a collection, or a library, of many small books. Christians divide this God-given collection of Hebrew and Greek writings into two sections - the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament. Most Protestant Bibles contain 66 books (39 from the Hebrew Bible and 27 from the N. T.). Roman Catholics, and most Eastern Orthodox churches include additional books from a Greek edition of the Hebrew Bible called the Apocrypha. As unique as the Bible is, it does not seek to draw attention to itself. Its purpose and authority lies in its inspired power to bring us into a new relationship with the living God through faith in Jesus Christ and enable us to live in right relationship with other people and with the world around us (Snattmann).

2. Read the Bible - it is Reliable!

Understand that you will never in a complete way come to know what God has got to say to you, to the Church and to the world if you don't read the Bible. When it comes to reading the Bible don't let what you can't understand stop you from believing and practicing the truth of what you can understand. Your growth as a Christian, as a disciple of Jesus, is tied to the regularity and commitment of your reading of the Bible. There is wisdom in the saying: "This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book!" Many church people are ill informed about real faith because they don't read and study God's Word as their "base source". The Bible is God's Word because it carries and contains the saving message of Jesus who is the crucified and risen Lord, the true revelation of the Word of God. Thus, the Bible is not optional for Christian discipleship as if it were some "other book" among many books of inspiration - it is authoritative and normative for true Christian faith and life (Schneiders).

3. Read with a Prayerful Heart.

Remember that the Bible contains God's saving message to humanity. Because it is God's Word, we need to be prayerfully attentive to its message in order that we may be attuned to the Holy Spirit's word to us and not some alien word of our own or the world System's devising. The particular character and promise of the Bible, in that it is God's revelation of Christ to the world, means that it needs to be read and honoured in the context of faith and prayer. For those searching for faith's meaning, the Bible will not give up its truth if it is viewed simply as a book of interpretation or some ethical instruction manual. It is a book of transformation, a book that when lived out can change our hearts and indeed the whole world.

4. Read the Bible in the Community of the Church.

God has not only given the Bible to the world, God has also given the Church - as the witnessing community of Christ to the world. One of the important functions of the Church is to be part of the interpretive community of God's nonviolent love and purpose. So, although it is good to read scripture individually, it becomes problematic when we continue to just interpret it on our own, according to our point of view. Because we all tend to absolutize our positions, and become proud in our individualistic interpretations, it is always helpful and necessary to read the Bible in a committed study group in the community of the Church and its scholars. And as we do this, to always be sure to read the Bible and the newspaper together - so that we come to know what the Word of God has to say to the world of God (Barth).

5. Be aware of Bias

Understand that reading is affected by your own point of view (your own subjectivity). Our own personal and religious cultural history always effects the way that we as individuals understand the biblical text. Because it is impossible to take the interpreter out of the interpretation there is no such thing as a "plain reading of the text" (Brueggemann). The reality is that no one comes to the Bible in neutral and no knowledge is ever value-free. All truth-saying carries the values of the truth-sayer. So, in order to lean over against our personal biases it is always important to read the Bible in the company of good scholarly commentaries with an awareness of the tradition of the Church – and in this process to read widely.

6. Infallibility, Inspiration and Authority

When the term "infallibility" is used in reference to the Bible what is being said is that it is "utterly reliable for healing" - in other words, what it says about salvation and redemption in life is genuine – it really works! The Bible's authority is from God who in Jesus Christ brings liberation and reconciliation. Within its texts there is a radical criticism of any ideology of domination that seeks to legitimate national interests, patriarchy, the sacrifice of critical enquiry and any other depletion of human welfare. The Bible as the revelation of God's saving purposes in Christ must never be an endorsement of oppression or violence, including any versions of injustice or violence that take shape in some passages within the biblical text. Wherever the Bible is used to sanction systems of oppression or violence it is being made to function in a way that is contradictory to its central message of life and freedom. A scriptural life lived in obedience to Jesus as Lord will reject all attempts at twisting the text towards human violence of any sort. The Bible's efficacy and meanings - its inspiration and authority - is impelled by the work of the Holy Spirit who works in and through the writers of Scripture to illuminate and confirm God's Word in the life of believers. Within the world's religions the Bible is authoritative because for those who look to Jesus as God's most clear conversation with humanity, it can be trusted to reliably lead to God's redeeming and liberative purposes. Infallibility does not mean that the Bible is literally true at all points. The fact is that it does have errors of measurement and geography in it. But with regard to doctrine (the facts of faith and life) the Bible as God's inspired Word, can be trusted because it contains the healing salvific story of salvation for you and me and the whole world. For those who trust in its liberating message of the crucified and risen Jesus, the Bible is not imperialistic or despotic but rather a source of redeeming comfort, freedom and joy (Migliore).

7. Interpretation and the Bible

Because the Bible is an ancient text it contains many cultural, political and theological ideas that need to be interpreted for our time. Reading the Bible always involves the reader in a process of “interpretation” or what is called “Hermeneutics”. No one reads the Bible in neutral. Because we live in a different time to the Bible’s formulation we all come to the text with a particular reading strategy, with a set of preunderstandings or a set of biases. No one can read any text – not even the Newspaper - without reading it through a process of interpretation. Biblical interpretation or hermeneutics is concerned with the process of understanding God’s Word in our present so that we should know how to live. The goal of biblical hermeneutics is to help us look into the three essential levels of interpretation – what the biblical scholar Ricoeur has called “the Behind of the text, the Within, and the Infront of the text.”

8. Moving from the “Then and There” to the “Here and Now”

Understanding a biblical text or passage as it was originally intended and then coming to understand its meaning for our time involves the reader in the task of “Exegesis.” Basically, exegesis has to do with interpreting the text or passage as it was without reading anything foreign into it. Good interpretation will always start with honouring the integrity of the text; by not reading anything into it that does not fit the intention or thrust of the passage. This does not mean that the “then and there” has no relationship to the “here and now.” Because of its surplus of meaning, usually the intention and thrust of the text quite remarkably carries over into our private and political contemporary situations. A “fusing of horizons” occurs and we are encountered by its meaning in our time. Poor interpretation often occurs when a person reads into the text some preferred bias that is alien to the Bible passage’s intention. This form of scripture twisting is known as “Eisegesis.” One sure test of good interpretative method is to check and see if the text is being interpreted in its “Context”. Where the text is removed from its context, chances are that what is liable to emerge is a “Pretext”. Text without Context is simply Pretext. And this always brings about a false reading of the Bible.

9. The Behind, the Within and the Infront of the Biblical Text

Any consideration of the Bible's message that is to reach a place of theological clarity must always reflect on three methods of understanding – “the Behind”, “the Within” and “the Infront” of the text. A consideration of “the Behind” of the biblical text refers to an appreciation of the cultural, religious and sociopolitical issues that sit within and are operating with the history of the text. Appreciating “the Within” of the text involves understanding the cultural, the political and the other historical issues that were at work and operating within the world of the writer and hearers at the time in which the text was written. Coming to grips with “the Infront” of the text is essentially important because this methodology relates to the meaning of God's Word in the life to the believer and the Church today. This third hermeneutical guideline has to do with the “so what” in our time. It is not enough to be aware of what was the history of the text, of remembering what the issues were when the text was written, we need to be aware of what God's word wants us to live by here and now, and what from the “infront” of the text we are to pray and work for. These three methods of interpretation taken together, are the necessary ingredients for an informed basis of biblical understanding. Proper Bible reading will be hindered without them. All good biblical interpretation is inclusive of them.

10. The Interpretive Guideline (“the” Hermeneutical Key)

In order to know the conversional meaning of the Bible it is always necessary to ask of our interpretations and those of others, “How does this interpretation or that interpretation, match the life and the Spirit of the crucified and risen One?” The theology of the “Crucified God” and Jesus' life-alignment among the poor and outcast is a central interpretive guideline. Applying this hermeneutical key cannot be overstressed. It addresses the most decisive element in our interpretation of scripture. Whenever you hear someone propose a biblical position or “the” biblical position, always check the proposed interpretation with this interpretive guideline. Before you are persuaded one way or another: ask yourself, does this or that particular interpretation reflect the inclusive love and graciousness of God's grace as revealed in Jesus' self-giving on the cross? This is the overriding interpretive guideline of the New Testament writers. It is the fail-safe way Bible-believing Christians can judge the worth of any interpretation of theology or the Christian life.

11. Don't Just Read it - Do It!

All the reading and interpretative study of texts and passages will amount to nothing if readers of the Bible in the company of the Church do not live out its truth in acts of believing obedience. We constantly need to place ourselves under the lived-out authority of the biblical texts. Bengel's words are helpful here: "Apply yourself closely to the text: apply the text closely to yourself." And we can best do this as we live out the Bible's meaning in the world both personally and politically. One faithful act of obedience is worth a hundred speculations. The Bible tells us about the searching, saving acts of God. It is the record of what the triune God has done and is doing to redeem the world. A Christian life based on scripture ought therefore to be about the joyful response of a believer to God's liberative act in Jesus the Lord. We will never know what we do not do (Kierkegaard).

12. Bible Reading and Discipleship

For Christians, and for the Church, the relationship between God and the world finds its fullest expression in Jesus Christ. There is no "hidden meaning" to the Bible, no "secret code". Its message is clear and open. Central to its purpose is the saving message of Jesus as Lord. It is a transforming message about salvation and justice that calls for a personal response from us. Through saving grace and trusting faith, in the giving of our lives to Christ we are called to turn away from sin – from disobedience - and obey God. From beginning to end the Bible is a conversion narrative. For believers and nonbelievers alike the conversion that it calls for is both personal and political. What becomes essential in understanding the Bible is the living out of both private and public discipleship. It is in the following of Christ – the crucified and risen One - that a person comes to know saving faith; what it means to be a Christian, and the meaning, and the truth of the biblical record. Only those who read the Bible in the life-long process of following Jesus in the company of God's people, will know its true meaning and live by its purpose.

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