

Effective Bible Study – An Urgent Need For Everyone

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Article Description

If the church of today was a more studious body, she would not be plagued with as many problems as she now encounters. Knowledge is a powerful antidote to error. Let us return to the thrilling adventures within the Word of God.

It was never the will of God that direct, supernatural communication – from heaven to earth – be a perpetual phenomenon throughout this planet’s history. Rather, “the things of God” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:11) were to be committed to a series of inspired documents, collectively known as the Bible. The Holy Scriptures were designed to provide men with all things pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3), and to furnish devout students completely unto every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

It is scarcely possible to exaggerate the value of the Bible to the human family. The most brilliant minds of history have praised the “Book of books.” Our second president, John Adams, called the Bible “the best Book in the world.” Lincoln characterized the Scriptures as “the best gift God ever gave man.” Sir Isaac Newton thought the Bible to be “the most sublime philosophy” known to humanity. The list of laudatory testimony is almost endless.

The Value Of Bible Study

There are multiple values inherent in a study of the sacred Scriptures. Meditate upon the following.

1. The Bible is the only source of valid knowledge as to the origin of the human family. The baseless theory of evolution is so riddled with such a vast variety of factual inaccuracies that it assaults the analytical ability of any thinking person (see Mastropaolo). Darwinism stands in bold contrast to the sublime Genesis record of human commencement.
2. The Scriptures provide the only explanation for man’s purpose upon the planet. David Hume, the Scottish skeptical philosopher, wrote:

“Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence and to what condition shall I return? . . . I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty” (Smith, 553).
3. Aside from the illumination of the Bible, man’s future would be but a dark, terrifying enigma. When Pierre Curie was killed in a tragic accident, his wife, the renowned Madame Marie Curie, who had abandoned her earlier faith, exclaimed: “Pierre is sleeping his last sleep beneath the earth; it is the end of everything, everything, everything” (Curie, 249). When the Sadducees denied the resurrection of the body, the Lord informed them that their problem, in part at least, was their ignorance of the Scriptures (Mt. 22:29). It is only through the gospel of Christ that “life and immortality” have been fully revealed (2 Tim. 1:10).

4. Without a knowledge of the Bible, human beings are bereft of any religious or moral compass to direct the affairs of life. Evolutionist George G. Simpson of Harvard wrote:

“Discovery that the universe apart from man or before his coming lacks and lacked any purpose or plan has the inevitable corollary that the workings of the universe cannot provide any automatic, universal, eternal, or absolutely ethical criteria of right and wrong” (Simpson, 180).

If there is no absolute moral code, every man becomes his own “god,” and may write his own ethical rules. In that event, chaos prevails, because every man entertains a “way” within himself that “seems right” to him (Prov. 14:12).

5. Without an objective code of conduct, that stands apart from our own conscience, we do not have the sufficient *motivation* for exalted living. David stored the word of God in his heart that he might not sin against his Maker (Psa. 119:11), because, as Jeremiah observed, “it is not in man that walks to direct his own steps” (Jer. 10:24). Moreover, without adequate information concerning “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), we become the victims of religious confusion.

Some Procedures For Effective Bible Study

Effective Bible study is not a random process; rather, it is a science. The following suggestions are made for those whose goal is efficiency in their investigation of God’s Word.

1. Sometimes it can be helpful to know something of the *author* of a biblical book or passage. While this is not always necessary (Hebrews was left anonymous purposely), such information can be beneficial. For instance, the most extended discussion of the virginal birth of Jesus is in Luke’s Gospel record (2:27ff). Since a “virgin” birth had never occurred before, it is comforting to know that Luke, a very careful historian (1:1-4), was also a *physician* (Col. 4:14). If a scientist could be convinced by clear evidence that the virgin birth of the Lord really occurred, one may have firm confidence in the reliability historical narrative.
2. Frequently it is imperative that the student know something of the *background* of a particular book or passage with which he is dealing, if he is to appreciate the full impact of the text. Unless one understands, for example, that Jeremiah was attempting to prevent Judah from having to suffer the Babylonian Captivity, or that Ezekiel was warning his people against the false hope of an early return from Chaldea, he scarcely appreciates the thrust of these inspired documents. In studying Psalm 51, which is saturated with tears of penitence, it is helpful to know the background story about David’s adulterous relationship with the provocative Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12).
3. One needs to have some familiarity with the *nature* of the book he is studying. Is the document historical narrative (Genesis)? Is it poetical in form (Psalms)? Is it largely characterized by prophecy (Isaiah)? Is it highly charged with symbolism

(Revelation)? A host of errors have resulted from a failure to distinguish between the different styles of biblical writings.

Some, in order to accommodate evolution, have viewed Genesis 1 as poetry; others have attempted to literalize the figures in Revelation (e.g., the 1,000 years in chapter 20). Such approaches have been responsible for significant confusion in the religious community.

4. One of the most important factors in Bible study is a consideration of the *context*. Without a knowledge of context, the student can be in a maze of confusion. For example, why does Paul advise *against* marriage in First Corinthians, chapter 7 (see verses 8, 27, 38, 40), when elsewhere the Scriptures teach that it is “not good” to be alone (Gen. 2:18), and that marriage is desirable (1 Tim. 5:14)? One must understand that the apostolic counsel provided in the Corinthian narrative was in view of an *impending distress* (an era of persecution; see vv. 26, 29, 32, 35, 38, 40). The inspired advice was never intended to apply with equal force, in every place, and at all times. Here is another example. A consideration of the data in Acts 10 and 11, and the unique circumstances associated with the conversion of Cornelius (and the introduction of the first Gentiles into the church), would correct the common error that “Holy Spirit baptism” is a divine gift to be experienced throughout the entire Christian age. Context makes a world of difference in such a case.
5. One of the crucial principles of sound Bible study is that of scriptural *harmony*. The Bible, as the verbally inspired revelation from God, will be consistent in all its instruction. Thus, the sacred narrative must be studied synthetically, i.e., the teaching of the Scriptures on any given subject must be brought together. Various contexts dealing with a particular theme can provide the fullness often required to understand a subject more completely. For instance it requires a consideration of *several* contexts to discover that the Lord’s supper involves: (a) the eating of bread and fruit of the vine; (b) on Sunday of every week; (c) in memory of the body and blood of the Savior; (d) as a pledge of the Lord’s final return (cf. Mt. 26:26ff; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:23ff, etc.).

If one does not understand something of the principles of methodical study, he cannot gain the maximum benefit from his endeavors.

Practical Habits For Bible Study

In addition to the “mechanics” of effective study, it is helpful to think also along the lines of study habits. I would like to offer some suggestions that have been helpful to me across the years.

1. If at all possible, create for yourself a special “study” in your home. In a spare room, the attic, the basement, etc. – find yourself a “study nook” that can be yours. Furnish it with a comfortable chair, a desk, good lighting, and some book shelves. Make it your *special place* and plan to visit it regularly on certain days of the week (e.g., an hour each morning before work time). Early morning is really the most ideal time for study. Discipline yourself to get in the habit of *regular* study. This is a difficult chore. If one is not preaching, teaching a class, or engaged in some activity that demands research, it is hard to carve out the time – particularly if it is a labor, rather than a love. But if one gets

into the study mode, virtually every day, it will pay rich dividends – not only in his personal life, but in qualifying him to help others.

In addition to devotional reading in the Bible itself, for example, one might select a popular (as opposed to technical) commentary that he will read through in the coming year. I try to keep a good book handy to read whenever I have a spare moment away from regular duties. For instance, if I know I am going to have to spend time in the doctor's waiting room, rather than browsing magazines, I may take a book with me.

2. Every Christian should build at least a modest library of good books. Handy tools, such as a complete concordance, a Bible atlas, some biblical dictionaries or encyclopedias, a few good commentaries, some volumes on Christian evidences, church history, etc., are vital for a well-rounded range of knowledge. One should subscribe to at least a couple good brotherhood periodicals – those that *teach* (as opposed to merely haranguing).

3. Study the Scriptures from several different vantage points. Survey biblical books. Galatians falls into three natural divisions:

Personal - A Defense of Paul's Credibility (1-2);

Doctrinal - Justification through the Gospel (3-4);

Practical - Walking by the Spirit (5-6).

Explore the biographical data of great Bible characters. Articles in Bible dictionaries (e.g., **The Wycliffe Bible Dictionary**) on Abraham, Joseph, Jesus, and Paul will enrich your life. Learn to do "word studies." Words are the vehicles of intelligent communication. Even the non-specialist can learn something of the treasures of the original languages of the Bible.

4. In this day of mobility, a good student can take advantage of good Bible lectureships by listening to tapes as he drives about from place-to-place. It is important to utilize every possible opportunity to learn God's word. The Christian who is ever learning will become a valuable resource to the congregation of which he or she is a member.

The Preacher and Study

Perhaps we could conclude this discussion with a comment relative to the preacher and his study habits. The man who stands before the congregation to preach to lost souls and to edify his kinsmen in the Lord, should overflow with the riches of Sacred Scripture.

Unfortunately it is the case today that too many preachers desire (or are strongly encouraged) to become proficient in everything but the Bible. They are office efficiency experts, church flunkies, visitation specialists, counselors, education directors, errand-boys for the elders, etc. Some (or all) of these chores may be quite necessary in their place, but they are not the work of a gospel preacher.

Every preacher must engage in his own spiritual activities (e.g., as visiting the sick, helping those in need, etc.), but that is not his principal area of emphasis. As Johnny Ramsey is fond of saying, "The work of the preacher is threefold: to preach, to preach, and to preach." I would add to that: "To study and preach, to study and preach, to study and preach!"

Elders should encourage their preachers to spend more time in seclusion, studying and storing up great segments of information so that when they mount the pulpit, they are able to draw vast resources from the library of their minds. In such cases, the audience becomes excited about the beauty and value of God's written truth. I have, on occasion, spent hours digging out a golden nugget of truth (which may take only a minute or so to present) in the hope that it will challenge my brethren to deeper study. This is what results when teaching the Mind of God becomes a *passion* rather than a *profession*. When the preaching and teaching are stagnant, attendance will eventually decline. Moreover, a studious preacher provides the sort of example that inspires greater Bible study within the congregation.

Conclusion

We cannot but mention that if the church of today was a more studious body, she would not be plagued with as many problems as she now encounters. Knowledge is a powerful antidote to error. Let us encourage one another to return to the thrilling adventures within the Word of God.