

The Goal of Bible Study

It is imperative to have some idea of the goal of our study of the Bible. Otherwise our motivation fades and we fail to be serious about our interpretive efforts. The most encouraging article I have ever read in this regard is the serious but keenly humorous piece written by Bernard Ramm. *

BUT IT ISN'T BIBLE STUDY

By Bernard Ramm

Scene I

I hurried to the morning hour hungry of soul. It would be the "Bible" hour. Amidst the high-pressure appeals of the conference for personal witnessing, world missions, and consecration, this would be one glad hour in which we would shut out the appeals of man and contemplate the inexhaustible word of God. The Scriptures were opened and read. My soul now drew near, eager for the exposition of the word of God. But down my open throat was stuffed another sermon! It was a good and proper sermon, but it wasn't Bible study. The speaker wheeled back and forth like an eagle over the text, but he never came to rest upon it. I left the hall as hungry as I came and quite sure that the speaker could not distinguish between a sermon and a Bible study. *Sermonizing is not Bible study.*

Scene II

The honorable reverend stood before the audience and announced that he had the responsibility for the Bible study and would we all turn to a certain passage in the Old Testament. I thanked the Lord for a man who took his Bible study seriously, and eagerly anticipated a fruitful 45 minutes of real Bible exposition. After the text was read there issued a torrent of words exhorting us to five different things. God knows that we needed at least ten exhortations, but God also knows that the relationship of the text to the exhortations was completely accidental. Although I left the auditorium completely equipped with exhortations my added insight into the text was zero. *Whipping up three or four good exhortations from a text is not Bible study.*

Scene III

I crouched low in the pew. It was eventide Bible hour and I was praying for grace to endure another sermon or a fist full of miscellaneous exhortations falsely known as "Bible" study. The first paragraph of the speaker brought me snappily out of my crouch. I was not going to get various and divers exhortations but real, honest, undiluted Bible study! He opened the Bible and went after the text!

But at the third paragraph I was dismayed. From Bible study we slipped into exegesis. "The jussive means this" was followed by "the aorist participle means that." The housewives present did not know the difference between the jussive and lemon juice and their blank faces were rather faithful counterparts of their minds at this moment. For the first time in their lives the laymen heard the word "aorist" and surmised it was one of the pagan gods of the Hittites. Next we were hurriedly pulled past the opinions of Robertson, Denney, Cullmann and Broadus. By this time most of the little group was wool-gathering or day-dreaming or thinking how to damn with faint praise in the post-benediction chit-chat. *Academic exegesis is not Bible study.*

Scene IV

I mingled with a crowd of university students as we retreated from the hot sun into the cool auditorium. Certainly this crowd would put the speaker on the spot and force him to give out with good Bible study. The reputation of the Bible teacher preceded him like the runners preceded the ancient chariots. Away from the warm southern sun I sat smugly in my seat and said to myself, "This is it--real Bible study"!

The great Bible teacher strode across the platform like a great musician and putting his Bible upon the pulpit waited for the audience to quiet down before he played the first note. The concert began. Like the fingers of the pianist race up and down the keyboard, so his fingers raced through the Bible finding relevant verses. Plunk, ping, plunk! It did not take long before I realized that we were not having Bible study but a party line. The Bible was the keyboard and the teacher was playing his own tune upon it. The melody was not that of the Scripture but one imposed upon it by the Bible teacher. When the last embellishments were over, and when we were assured with a certainty the papacy could envy that we had the truth we were dismissed.

I did not feel blessed nor fed nor led deeper into the Scriptures. I felt brain-washed. I felt my share in the priesthood of the believers as it pertained to Bible study had been violated by the arrogant dogmatism of a party line. *Propagandizing is not Bible study.*

Scene V

Every church has its Bible study time at the prayer service. Here there is no urgency to evangelize or exhort. The pastor may unhurriedly open the Sacred Text and feed the flock from its riches.

But as I watched the good man I almost cried. He announced his passage for the study and went to work--but what work! In his attempt to explain the text he was like a chicken with defective pecking aim. The poor hen pecks all around the corn but never hits it. She squints with her beady eye, she cocks her head, and then she pecks--and misses. She over-shoots or under-shoots.

So the poor man of God does everything but explain the text. I got 30 minutes of various and divers unrelated and uninspiring pious observations. Each observation was a worthy one. But the passage itself remained untouched. We had been all around the text but never in it. *Pious observations are not Bible study.*

The tragedy is that Bible study is so simple, yet so elusive. It is unfortunate that there is so much stamping around the scriptures with no real Bible study. Let me set down a few principles of what I believe constitutes real study of the Bible.

REAL BIBLE STUDY

First, *Bible study is in the language of the people, and in a fairly common translation.* Bible study intends to acquaint Christians with the contents of the Bible in their language, and in the Bible they read. An expert Bible teacher will know his Hebrew and Greek and will have consulted the authoritative works of reference. But when he stands before his class all this must be veiled or cloaked. The bones of basic research must not protrude. He must translate all his learning into the common language. Some reference to the original languages is not objectionable but the main burden of the study must rest upon the English language and a common translation.

If Bible study is to have staying power it must be in the common language and in a common text. The people will grasp the content of Scripture only as it is taught to them in the language in which they converse, pray, read and sing.

Exegesis is for the scholars and Bible study is no substitute for scholarly exegesis. But academic exegesis is not for the popular platform. Here God's people must be fed in their mother tongue.

Secondly, *the actual goal of Bible study is to convey the meaning to the people of a set number of verses.* Unless a manageable length is determined in advance the Bible study will be frustrating. Too much will have to be said in too short a time. Care must be taken to limit the scope of the study unless the teacher is giving some

sort of general survey.

Next, the Bible teacher must attempt to convey the essential meaning of the text or passage. This is by far the most difficult task in Bible study--this is Bible study! Here is where the men are separated from the boys. Here is where fuzzy thinking is unfortunately put upon public display; or where real skill in handling the Word of God blesses the audience.

It is the presupposition of all interpretation of documents that the authors of these documents intended to set down a meaning in writing. *Therefore, if* sufficient pains are taken, the meaning of the author may be recovered. All interpretation *of documents* -- be it a fragment of the pre-Socratic philosophers or a page from some medieval mystic--*has as its goal the recovery of the meaning of the author.*

Bible exegesis is the recovery of the meaning of the writers of Holy Writ; Bible study has the same goal only is less technical and less scholarly, and more popular and more devotional *The heart of Bible Study must always be the matter of meaning* The first question of Bible study is not: "What is devotional here?" nor "What is of practical importance here?" nor "What is inspirational here." but "*What does this passage mean?*"

If the Bible teacher has no sensitivity to the question of meaning, there will be no real Bible study, but only a series of pious observations or a quiver full of exhortations or some interesting but pointless story-telling. *The one trait all great teachers of Scripture have had in common is their sensitivity to the meaning of the text.*

Sensitivity

This means sensitivity to *words*. The good interpreter never looks at a word without a question mark in his mind: He may consult his Greek lexicon, or his Webster's, or a commentary; or a concordance. But he fusses around among his books till the word upon which he has fixed his attention begins to glow with meaning.

An experienced doctor has a wonderful sensitivity in his fingers. He has spent a lifetime feeling lumps, swellings, growths, tumors, and wens. He knows their textures, their shapes and their peculiarities. Where our fingers tell us two things, a doctor's finger might tell him a dozen things. Just as a doctor's fingers have a feel for lumps and growths, so a Bible teacher must have feel for words. He must pass the fingers of his mind over their shapes, textures, and peculiarities.

This means sensitivity to *phrases, clauses, paragraphs, and idioms*. A good Bible teacher is restless; he takes nothing for granted. He is the detective whose victim is *the meaning* and the words in their various combinations of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs are the clues. Out of the various configurations of the words he delves for the meaning. He looks for the train of thought (i.e., the sequence *in meaning*) and tries to follow it throughout the passage. He works, digs, meditates, ruminates, and studies until the meaning of the text shines through.

It is right at this point where the poor teacher fails. He is content with his efforts even though his thoughts are vague, and his impressions are indistinct. As soon as he gets a good exhortation or practical application he is content and rests at that point. He does not sit with a restless mind and dig and sweat till he has achieved the meaning of the text. He does not reconstruct the brief of the Biblical text so that he can recite it to his audience. Failing to recover the essential meaning of the text, all he can do is offer a series of religious observations or a sermon in the place of a Bible study.

The good teacher, to the contrary, *keeps up a running flow of questions about meanings*. What does this word mean? What is the import of this phrase? Is this expression an idiom? What figure of speech is this? What is the connection of this verse with those before and after it? Who is this man? Where is this city? What Jewish custom is behind this practice? Where else in Scripture is this person or this theme treated? And certainly the good teacher will surround himself with those books which can answer these kind of questions.

Thirdly; Bible study always includes the relevant application of the text to the lives and times of the hearers. The Scriptures are the milk for babes in Christ, and strong food for the men in Christ. Bible study is feeding the people of God. But this feeding looks in two directions: (1) it looks to the truth of Scripture as it is in itself;

and (2) it looks to the actual concrete situation of the listening audience. *The meaning of Scripture must be meaningfully applied to the lives of the Christians if Bible study is to be a meaningful activity.*

A good Bible teacher will make the proper doctrinal application. He may call attention to *the doctrinal importance* of a passage. If, for example, he is discussing II Corinthians 5 he can readily explain the great doctrines of reconciliation and atonement found in the chapter. Or, he may show how a cult or a sect abuses the doctrinal content of a passage; or he may indicate how the passage rebuts some view of a cult or sect.

A good Bible teacher explains the *correctives* for our spiritual life or Christian work found within the passage. If the selection is about prayer he will point out how our present practice of prayer needs the correction of this passage.

A good Bible teacher calls attention to the *comfort* and *encouragement* for God's people found in the text. It may be the invitation to prayer; or the certainty of the divine hearing. It may be the power of the intercessory work of Christ, or the enabling of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, or the consolation of the providence

Finally, a good Bible teacher calls attention to the *devotional* elements of the text. He shows wherein we should love God, or why we must follow Christ. He dwells upon the wonders of God's love, or Christ's death, or the Spirit's ministry to the saints. He attempts to excite our love and adoration, and seeks to lead us to a deeper spirit of consecration.

I feel that I have experienced a good session of Bible study:

- when I felt that the teacher took me right into the text and not around it.
- when I felt we interacted with the text itself and not with the party-line beliefs of the teacher.
- when I felt that I had a better understanding of the text than when I came into the session.
- when I felt that the time was basically spent in meanings and not in a miscellany of religious platitudes.
- and when I have felt challenged, comforted, encouraged, and practically instructed.

* From *Eternity Magazine*, February 1960 and used by permission of the publishers, the Evangelical Foundation Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.

Conclusion

This is such a good explanation of what really constitutes Bible study that I find myself rereading it periodically to renew my own approach to study and teaching.

Before we leave this consideration, I'd like to highlight two pertinent points:

- (1) the good Bible student seeks to develop a *sensitivity to words*, including grammatical and idiomatic usage, and
- (2) *he keeps up a running flow of questions about meanings.*

Whether we study for our own personal profit and growth or to teach the truth to others, the objective is the same--to get at the real meaning and significance of the text.

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