

LESSON 1

The Value of Bible Study

“Can’t I just pick it up and read it?” Perhaps you asked yourself this question in consideration of attending a class on ‘How to Read the Bible.’ After all, reading is a basic activity of our modern education system and wider culture, and most people with any level of education have the ability to read on varying levels. But reading is not the same as reading *well*, which requires that we acknowledge the more complex elements of what we read, and work to process them. Our intentions for this class are to help create better readers of the Bible – not just people who read it more (though that is important), but people who study it with more skill and insight.

THE NEED FOR BIBLE STUDENTS

Every independent study of self-professed Christians in the last two decades or more shows that ‘biblical literacy’ is in decline. In short, Christians themselves don’t know their own Scriptures. For instance, according to the Barna Research Group:

- More than 40% can’t identify more than two of Jesus’ disciples.
- Less than 50% of Christian adults can name the four gospels
- More than 60% of Americans can’t name 5 of the 10 Commandments

“No wonder people break the Ten Commandments all the time,” says George Barna, president of the firm. “They don’t know what they are.” That statement is both funny and sad. But more distressing is Barna’s conclusion that “the Christian body in America is immersed in a crisis of biblical illiteracy.” And worse yet, is that in reality, being able to name facts from the Bible isn’t actually an indication of true knowledge of the Bible. That’s because knowing the Bible is so much more.

In fact, knowing the Bible is more like being fluent in a language. Even if I know all of the vocabulary of a language, that doesn’t mean I know or understand the language. That’s because a language isn’t just a collection of words, its words *plus* a system of how to use them – what we call grammar. When a person understands the vocabulary and the grammar of a language, they can not only read or hear the language, they can actually speak it fluently, using all of its unique rhetorical functions to good effect. Speakers will find that being able to communicate is an art, not a science. Being a good Bible student is much the same. Once you immerse yourself in the practice of reading Scripture, you will not just know facts about the Bible, but will be able to understand the Word of the Living God.

So where does this growing trend of Christian Biblical illiteracy come from? While some of it is the influence of the modern anti-religious culture, unfortunately many churches today don’t engage with scripture in ways that promote healthy reading and study habits. David Nienhuis, in his book [A Concise Guide to Reading the New Testament](#), says that many students in his college New Testament classes struggle with biblical material “because they

have been trained to be Bible quoters, not Bible readers.” By this he means that many pastors and churches implicitly train congregants to know individual verses of Scripture only as a defense to a doctrinal claim, or for emotional support when life gets hard. But believing in the Bible for only those purposes doesn’t achieve the kind of engagement with the whole text of Scripture that is needed to really shape the life and faith of Christians. We need not just people who profess belief in the Bible, but who know how to read it, too.

And knowing the Bible is part of the task of God’s church (in both a universal and local sense). In the modern world where the Bible is in decline, it’s survival depends not on a select few men who preach sermons and defend doctrines, but on the ability of every day Christians to devote themselves to an *informed* understanding of the texts that they hold sacred, and then bring that to bear in the variety of church activities and ministries for the good of the whole church. This is a crucial point, and one to return to in a bit. But to appreciate this requires a bit of history lesson.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIBLE ACCESS

A key point that helps put the benefit of Bible reading into perspective is the recognition of just how unique our modern access to the Bible is in the scope of history. Consider these summary points:

- The majority of people living in the 1st century were illiterate and could not read.
- For the ancient Israelites and the earliest of Christians, there was no such thing as a ‘personal’ copy of the complete Old Testament. Scrolls or books of Scripture were only owned by the very wealthy, and even then, were almost certainly never complete sets.
- Multiple times in the first few centuries of Christianity, owning copies of the Scriptures was illegal under Roman law and punishable by death.
- After the New Testament was formally recognized in the 300s AD, the Roman Catholic church actually discouraged reading of the Scriptures, citing the need for the clergy to properly interpret the text.
- For over 1,000 years, from the 400s to the mid-1500s, virtually the only Scriptures that a person encountered were during the Catholic mass, and read in Latin, which most people did not speak.
- Eventually in the 1400s-1500s, possessing and reading the Bible other than the Latin version approved by the Catholic church, was condemned, and men attempting to translate the Bible into more common languages were deemed heretics, and punished by death.

It was not until the mid-1500s, when church reformers like Martin Luther came along, that the notion of the common Christian having access to the Bible in his/her own language became acceptable. With advancements in theological conviction as well as technology, individuals were able to read and interpret the Bible on their own. In our time, the Bible has become the most popular and most read book in the world, but within the context of Christian history, the convenience of personal reading of the Bible is a unique blessing. We should appreciate and honor that blessing in our reading of the Bible.

But is there a risk to personal access to the Bible? Looking back, the reason why the Catholic church was so restrictive of the Bible to the common person was out of a devotion to 'orthodoxy,' the need to ensure that church doctrine was uniform and believed by all those who would be saved through the teaching of the church. Allowing anyone and everyone to read the Bible would mean differing interpretations, and would thus destroy the unity (or 'catholicity') of the universal church. As it turns out, those fears were not unfounded. Since the time of the Protestant Reformation with its insistence in making Scripture available to all, professing Christians have divided into innumerable factions and denominations based on those differing interpretations. And now today, every person across the globe has access to the Bible in multiple translations and formats in print or digitally. The latest research suggests that the average American household – not just Christians, but all Americans – owns 3 copies of the Bible! Access has never been broader or easier, and so everyone is their own interpreter of Scripture. Now, anyone with their own YouTube channel can be an expert on the Bible, and this has led to a state of affairs in which the collective truth of the faith is watered down by Bible teaching which is misinformed, or downright false.

READING AS A WORK OF THE CHURCH

Are we left to choose between these two options? Must we decide between giving the text to a select few to maintain unity and orthodoxy on the one hand, and allowing free reign and expression to every individual on the other? I think not... The Bible is a public document which decrees public truth – truth that speaks to who God really is and how the world really works. God could have conveyed his word to only a limited few, meaning that truth is only accessible to the 'chosen ones.' He also could have conveyed his word to everyone on an individual level, through some direct infusion of knowledge. But Christianity is neither a cult, nor is it a mystical experience. Rather, it is an announcement. It is God's declaration, in human language, that He has called sinners to repentance and to be his people. And these people gain their identity when they devote themselves to the difficult and confusing, but ultimately inspiring task of reading the Book (Acts 17:11).

This is where reading *as a church* becomes so significant. In the context of a local (autonomous!) congregation where all members are Bible readers, no single person can claim authority for themselves. And conversely, the collective reading of the community where all are responsible readers means that every interpretation is held in check by the interpretations of others, so that the church comes to a collective consciousness about the meaning of Scripture, and is able to identify and reject readings which run contrary to the sound teaching of the Gospel. It is as if we are all individual threads making up a single strong cord. All of this is guided by church leaders of course, most especially Elders, but the reading of Scripture – through bible studies, sermons, and even hymns (which are reflections on Scripture) – becomes an activity in which the whole church participates.

If this is a proper way to think about the task of reading Scripture, it not only gives support to God's design for the local church, but it makes for the type of unity and humility which signals to others that following the Bible is a new and different way of overcoming the divisions of our world.

QUESTIONS:

1. What are some of the blessings we have for Bible study given where we are in history?
2. What is it about the Bible that makes it hard to read sometimes? Conversely, what is it about discovering something in Bible study that is so encouraging?
3. What do you feel are some weaknesses in your Bible reading/study? Are there weaknesses beyond just how much time you spend doing it? For instance, do you find particular books of the Bible challenging? Do you wish you understood connections across the Bible more?