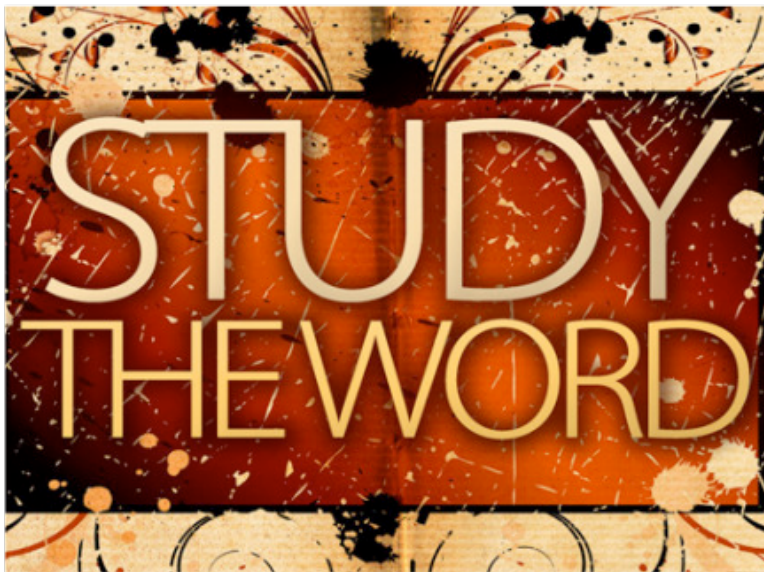




BIBLE STUDY METHODS MANUAL

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***The Bible is the word of God given in the words of men in history.
– George Eldon Ladd***

This manual is for students of Scripture who are serious about their faith. It assumes that the reader is familiar with the basics of Christianity such as how to get saved, the value of prayer, and the importance of reading the Bible. Christians who read their Bible and wonder the meaning of certain passages, but do not have a clear idea of how to gain more understanding, as well as, Christians who wonder how to learn more about what the Bible teaches will find this manual to be a practical resource. It is not a commentary, nor does it contain “all the answers” to questions about the Bible. Rather, it is a guide to learning, so the student of the Bible can learn how to answer many of the questions that may come up as he or she reads the Bible.

It is important to have the proper perspective about the Bible and to understand why we study it. In these modern times, individualism is highly esteemed. As a result, it has become fashionable for people to read the Bible and ask, “What does this mean to me?” While that question is valid, there is one much more important: “What is God saying?” To answer the first question, “What does this mean to me?” does not require any study of the Bible, for any passage of Scripture can mean any number of things to the person reading it.

No one, including God, likes to be misunderstood. When we write a letter to someone, we want him to know what we meant, not just what he thought we meant. The Bible is God’s letter to mankind, and it is important we understand what He means. The heart of Bible study, then, is to find out what God says and what He means so His directions can be followed.

Consider 2 Timothy 2:15, “*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*” “Correctly handles” is translated from the Greek compound verb, *orthotomeo*, which is built from the Greek root-words, *ortho* (straight) and *temno* (to cut). The idea is that there is a “straight cutting,” correct handling (NIV), or right dividing (KJV), of the Word of God. There is a way to rightly divide God’s Word so that we get out of it what He intends, and not just our opinions. “Do your best” and “workman” imply that we need to be diligent and work hard to get to the truth of the Word. This requires focus, precision, and discipline. Our responsibility as God’s children is to correctly handle the Word.

The love of God is the best motivation for the believer to follow Christ. This love comes from knowing God. We can only know Him from His Word, which is the Bible. This is the power of the expository method of Bible study. This method teaches the pure Word of God as the Holy Spirit guides, inspires and nourishes us as we study.

The emphasis of expository Bible study is in verse by verse examination of the Word of God. By using this method, after your study is complete, the correct interpretation and application of the verses will become clearer. You will be less likely to impose YOUR meaning on the Scripture or a meaning that is not correct. You will be letting God interpret His Word and you will understand what God truly said and meant.

As you read this material - pray, ask God for strength, and for wisdom. Then make a personal commitment to put the amount of time and dedication into this study that will allow God to shape you into a more useful servant. This method is not easy or quick. It will require time. Some Christians have the privilege to teach from pulpits;

some in classes such as Sunday School and in Bible Study classes; some to campers in a camp setting. No matter where you are teaching, this method will help to you. We all should be students of the Bible, and hone our skills in the Word of God that we might be better equipped to reach others for Christ.

Key Interpretation Principles

BECAUSE THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD

- We must assume that the Bible has an inner coherence. It will not contradict itself.
- We must understand that the Bible is an organic whole, whose parts harmoniously fit together. Therefore, we can use Scripture to interpret itself with those more clear parts used to illuminate unclear parts.
- We should expect the message and data of the Bible to unfold progressively as God's relationship with his people also unfolds across time.

BECAUSE THE BIBLE WAS GIVEN IN THE WORDS OF MEN

- We should read the content of a biblical passage in an effort first to determine the straightforward, normal meanings of its words, phrases, and sentences.
- We should read and analyze whole sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books rather than seeking to understand isolated verses apart from their contexts.
- We should interpret the words of a passage within their literary genres and literary contexts.
- We should seek to determine the author's intended meaning for his original audience.
- We should interpret passages in light of what we know about the types of literature in which they were written (narrative, poetry, etc.).

BECAUSE THE BIBLE WAS GIVEN IN HISTORY

- We should seek to ascertain as much as we can about the original settings of the authors, recipients, circumstances, and events of the text.
- We should interpret passages in keeping with their context in the rest of scripture and the rest of biblical history.

First things First...Choosing a Good Translation.

The common question of which Bible translation to use is very important. It concerns the most important words ever spoken, the words of God the Creator. It's crucial to understand at the outset that behind each version is a fundamental philosophy of Bible translation. You want to make sure the version you use faithfully reproduces what God actually said but does this in your own language.

A translation needs to be faithful to the original or source language (The language from which one is translating; for the Bible -- Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and it needs to be clear in the receptor or target language (The language into which one is translating target language).

FORMAL EQUIVALENT OR LITERAL TRANSLATION

- The focus is upon the original language; seeks to reflect vocabulary and sentence structure of the original as much as the target language will allow.
- Tends to translate original language grammatical structures with the equivalent structures in the receptor language.
- Will sacrifice clarity, beauty, or readability in the receptor language in order to reflect the source language.
- A "word for word" translation.
- Examples = New American Standard Bible (NASB); English Standard Version (ESV)

FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENT OR DYNAMIC EQUIVALENT

- Focus moves farther away from the original language and toward more emphasis on the receptor language.
- Will produce a translation that reflects more natural readings in the target language; usually exhibits more simple sentence structure.
- A “phrase for phrase” or “thought for thought” translation.
- Examples = Good News Bible (GNB); Contemporary English Version (CEV) The New International Version (NIV) is a sort of half-way house between a formal equivalent and dynamic equivalent translation.

PARAPHRASE

- The emphasis is even farther away from the original languages than in functional equivalent translations; some paraphrase writers may not even consult the original languages.
- Writers put the biblical text “in their own words”.
- An “idea for idea” rendering.
- Examples = Living Bible (LB) or The Message (MSG)

FACTORS IN SELECTING A TRANSLATION

1. The purpose for which the translation will be used?

- Personal study
- Teaching a Sunday School class or children’s group
- Family devotions
- Teaching groups with limited English or reading skills

2. The translation's faithful use of the original

- Read the introduction to the translation to discover its goals, the underlying translation theory (type of translation), and the background of translators
- Read reviews of the translation in Christian journals
- Consider reviews by trusted individuals

3. The translation's readability and meaningfulness for the intended audience

4. The translation's access to and use of safeguards

- Is there indication of alternate translation possibilities?
- Is there indication of alternate manuscript readings?

Using Commentaries

A commentary is someone's effort to explain or interpret a biblical passage. For example, the commentary might give explanation on a single chapter or series of chapters in a biblical book, an entire book or sequence of books, the Old Testament or New Testament, or the entire Bible. Not all address the same audience nor do they all have the same purpose. Not all reflect the same theological presuppositions.

While some commentaries have inherent weaknesses and strengths emerging from the type of commentary they are, one should remember that all commentaries are the thoughts of men about the Word of God. The writers' comments are neither inspired nor are they as reliable as the words of Scripture themselves. Readers should not accept the words of the commentary writer without their own reflection and investigation. A commentary writer may be wrong or ill-informed about any number of things. The reader should, therefore, analyze what the commentator asserts. Does the

writer's line of argument make sense? Does what he or she says follow the evidence? Are there things in the biblical text or biblical context that the writer did not notice or did not examine sufficiently? Reading more than one commentary may help the reader to clarify issues, to consider alternate explanations, to compare the evidence for competing explanations, or to buttress views already encountered.

An even more basic consideration is the need to study the biblical passage before referring to the commentary. Many Bible students err by turning too quickly to the commentators' words. This haste has, at least, three unfortunate results. First, it deprives the student of the joy of self-discovery. Readers better retain and more ably communicate what they discover on their own. Second, without prior reading and study of the biblical passage, the reader may be unable to comprehend or to appreciate adequately a writer's comments nor be able to critique sufficiently those comments. A third, unfortunate result, relates to the very purpose of the commentary. The real value of the commentary is not in supplying quick, readymade answers. The commentary is designed to help the reader think more deeply about the passage. The writer's comments are not the sole factor in this happening; the reader must ask his or her own questions of the text and must form a working hypothesis about the text before dialoguing with the commentator.

Using Concordances

A Bible concordance is an alphabetical listing of every word found in the Bible with every verse in which it is used is listed. If you know only one word of a verse you can use a concordance to find the reference you are looking for. An exhaustive

concordance has every occurrence of a word in the Bible listed. Condensed concordances have only limited use as they do not list every occurrence of a word in Scripture. Strong's is probably the most popular concordance. In addition to being a concordance, it includes a Hebrew and Greek dictionary of Bible word. Strong has assigned each Hebrew and Greek word in the Bible with a number. This numbering system is used by most other reference books making Strong's Concordance a must for Bible students.

Using Bible Handbooks

A Bible Handbook is arranged by the Books and Chapters of the Bible. It contains a wealth of information about the Bible. Halley's Bible Handbook states that it includes, "A General View of the Bible, Heart thoughts of the Bible, Remarkable Archaeological Discoveries, Notes on Each of The Bible Books, Miscellaneous Bible Information, Notes on Obscure Passages, Related Historical Data, An Epitome of Church History, Suggestion on Church-Going." This information is invaluable in understanding the historical situation of the Scripture you are investigating.

Using Bible Dictionaries

A Bible Dictionary is an alphabetical listing of the all the major words found in the Bible with their meanings. A Bible Dictionary is more like an encyclopedia than just a simple word dictionary. For example: it will list all the proper names found in the Bible, with not only its pronunciation and meaning, but also will give information about the various persons in the Bible that had that name with related Scripture references. A

Bible Dictionary will furnish information relating to money, tools, customs, geography, cities, towns and countries. It will list each Book of the Bible with an outline and historical data such as the author, date, addressee, subject and content.

Using Study Bibles

A Study Bible is one in which an author has written explanatory notes in the margins. Study Bibles will have much information that aid in understanding the Bible. Modern words are given for antiquated words. Cross references are included to guide the reader to other places in Scripture where the subject of the verse is found or to parallel passages. Some contain abbreviated Bible dictionaries and concordances that can be very useful.

Using Technology

One of the many advantages of new technology is accessibility. Mobile technology like cell phones are often always with us and can provide instant access to the Scriptures wherever you go, including worship or church meetings, as well as, throughout the week. Study tools like maps, commentaries, dictionaries and original language translations, that not long ago required several shelves in a library, are also available electronically. Most of these electronic versions provide powerful search engines, reducing the time it takes to find related information. This also allows the average person access to a deeper level of study and a specialized library he or she can utilize without more specialized training and expense. Software can even aid exegesis and exposition of Scripture. Digital Technology provides a breadth and depth

of information available for instant retrieval that allows for insights into Bible study that is immediate and accessible to the layperson, as well as, the pastor or ministry leader. Technology as a tool cannot ponder the living word for you, but rather it provides instant access to the Bible as you seek time to expose your heart to the truth of the gospel of Jesus. Regardless of the format or technology used, the truth of God revealed in Scripture remains the same. Be careful to remember the warnings given while discussing commentaries. Technology presents the thoughts of men about the Word of God. The writers' comments are neither inspired nor are they as reliable as the words of Scripture themselves. Readers should not accept the words on a display screen without their own reflection and investigation.

Discovering Historical-Cultural Context

We must consider the historical background of the portion of Scripture we are interpreting. This, along with any relevant customs and geography, provides the proper backdrop to add to our understanding of the passage. Ask the question, “What did this passage mean to the people of that time and culture?”

The historical setting includes the situation of the author and his purpose for writing the book or epistle. Who wrote it? When was it written? What was the occasion? What are the historical references in the book? Who were the recipients? Who are the main characters?

The cultural setting includes information about manners and customs of Bible lands that would help our understanding of the meaning of a passage. Biblical and extra biblical sources provide us with information about such things as ceremonial cleansing, idolatrous practices, wedding customs, oriental and hospitality. A knowledge of the historical, physical, and cultural settings will give a better picture of what a passage meant to the people to whom it was written.

Exercise: How does Acts 13-15 aid your understanding of the epistle to the Galatians?

Defining Words In Their Context

The meaning of each verse of Scripture is communicated by the words in that verse, so if we are going to properly understand the Bible, we must properly understand the words in each verse. The meaning of each word is determined by many things, including the vocabulary itself, the context, and the literary structure of the verse. A

proper understanding of the vocabulary in the verse, the context, and the literary structure of the passage we are studying is vital to properly understanding the meaning of the verse.

The Word of God is made up of the words of God. The words in the Bible can be challenging to understand for a number of reasons. One possible reason is we may not be familiar with the word itself. For example, “sanctification,” is not a word we commonly use, and it may not be understood by someone new to reading the Bible. Likewise, for words relating to specific practices that are not part of the modern culture. Also, depending on the version one is reading, words that meant one thing when the translation was made may have become obsolete or even changed in meaning. When a student of the Bible comes to an English word he does not understand or thinks he might misunderstand, the best practice is to check a dictionary, lexicon, or Bible dictionary.

Discerning How a Text Fits in God’s Big Picture

We must treat the Bible as a complete book, since it is unity in diversity. We should seek to relate each book we study to the central theme of Scripture: God’s loving plan to redeem and restore imperfect people through the perfect work of His Son. The better we grasp the big picture, the better we will be able to see the details in proper perspective.

The New Testament builds upon the Old, and requires a familiarity with the history and imagery of the Old Testament. Many New Testament passages would be extremely difficult to understand without this enriching background.

The Bible is a unified book, but as we study its pages, we should also remember that it is a progressive revelation. During the fifteen or more centuries in which it was written, its portrait of God and His redemptive program was gradually enriched and clarified. St. Augustine said, "The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed." This is not to say that the religion or ethical standards of the Bible evolved from a primitive to a sophisticated level. Rather, it means that the revelation of the person and character of God has become clearer through the course of biblical history (see Heb. 1:1-2).

Exercise: How would you answer the charge that the God of the Old Testament is wrathful and judgmental, whereas the God of the New Testament is loving and merciful?

Deciphering Literary Forms

Take the text at face value and interpret it in its normal or literal sense. Do not interpret it in a symbolic or allegorical way unless the context tells you that parables, symbols, or other figures of speech are being used. It is always better to identify the plain and natural sense of a passage instead of looking for hidden meaning. It cannot be literal and figurative at the same time. Only when the literal meaning does not fit the context, as in poetic or parabolic language, should we interpret a passage figuratively.

Similes

A simile is simply an expressed comparison: it typically uses the words *like* or *as*. The emphasis is on some point of similarity between two ideas, groups or actions. The subject and the thing with which it is being compared are kept separate. For example, a simile would be “The kingdom of heaven is like...” A simile is not, “The kingdom of heaven is...”

Metaphors

A metaphor is an unexpressed comparison: it does not use the words *like* or *as*. The subject and the thing with which it is being compared are intertwined rather than kept separate. Jesus used metaphors when He said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35) and “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Although the subject and its comparison are identified as one, the author does not intend his words to be taken literally.

Allegories

An allegory is an extended metaphor. An allegory generally includes several points of comparison, not necessarily centered on one focal point. For example, in the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32) the purpose is to show the spread of the Gospel from a tiny band of believers (Mustard seed) to a worldwide body of believers (Full grown tree). In the allegory of the Christian's armor (Ephesians 6) each part of the armor is significant and is necessary for the Christian to be fully armed.

Principles for interpreting allegories (by Henry Virkler):

1. Use historical-cultural, contextual, lexical-syntactical, and theological analysis as with other types of prose.
2. Determine the multiple points of comparison intended by the author by studying the context and the points that he emphasized.

Parables

When working with parables, try to determine the one principal truth rather than getting caught up in analyzing the details. Normally, a parable has one major point of comparison. The purpose of the parable of the soils, for example, was to illustrate the basic responses to the proclamation of the Word. If we attempt to examine the meaning behind each of the elements, we will get mired in speculation. Instead, each of the details should be related to the main point of the parable.

Another rule is to see how much of the parable is explained by the Lord (Matthew 13:18-23; 25:13), and to use the context for any other interpretive clues (Luke 15:1-3).

Exercise: What is the central point in the three parables in Luke 15?

Proverbs

Many people view proverbs as nice sayings. Few recognize the tremendous beauty and wisdom often contained in these sayings. Walter Kaiser, Jr. says this of proverbs, "...they are terse, brief, have a little kick to them, and a bit of salt as well."

It is important to recognize that proverbs usually have a single point of comparison or principle of truth to convey. Proverbs are not promises or guarantees. They are often hopeful dictums that present the best case scenario of certain actions.

Exercise: Read Proverbs 22:6. Should this proverb be used to comfort Godly parents who have children living in rebellion? Should this verse be used to promise the definite return to the Lord in their children's lifetime?

Prophecy

As with other Scripture, we should interpret prophecy in a literal way unless the context or its use in the New Testament indicates that the language is figurative (Malachi 4:5-6 compared with Matthew 11:13-14; 17:10-13). When interpreting prophecy, give attention to the historical background and the context in which it appears. Try to correlate your passage with similar prophecies (Day of the Lord and the restoration of Israel).

A number of prophecies were completely fulfilled soon after they were made (Destruction of Assyria in Isaiah 10:5-19). Other prophecies were partially fulfilled in the days of the Old Testament, with the remainder fulfilled in the New Testament (Isaiah 7:14). From the perspective of the prophet, one event appeared to be right after the

other, since he did not see the valley between the first and second mountain ranges. It is helpful in interpreting prophecy to be aware of these distinctions.

Exercise: Compare Luke 4:17-21 with Isaiah 61:1-2. What part did Christ leave out, and why?

Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic is a word derived from the Greek “*apokalypsis*”, which means “uncovering” or “revelation”. Apocalyptic literature’s primary focus is the revelation of what has been hidden, particularly with regard to the end times.

When interpreting Apocalyptic literature, as in other types of biblical literature, one should compare their work with that of others. The complexity of the topic makes it imperative to draw from the wealth of knowledge of scholars who have studied this area in depth.

Exercise: Read Matthew 24:34. Was Christ mistaken regarding the time of His second coming because this verse seems to indicate that He would return within one generation? Are there other legitimate ways of understanding this verse?

The Task of Proper Application

The end goal of all Bible study is application. In this final step of the inductive Bible study method, the readers ask, "What should I do about this text?" They look for appropriate responses to the text, implications the text has for them, and for situations in which they can practice the truth of the text. These applications must be built upon correct observation of the text, accurate interpretation of the text's meaning, and discernment of how the text's principles relate to the readers' life situation.

After you determine what God did or said, you now determine what action you should take. This is then put into the form of a sentence that will become your application. Ask the question? "What is this passage telling me to do?" How should this truth be applied to your life and the lives of those to whom you may teach this Scripture? This is why God gave us His Word.

God's Word should become a part of us and change our lives. Applying these Scriptures to our lives will mature us and make us more Christ like. Asking questions like; "Why is God saying this to me?" or "What does God want me to do?" will help you determine what God would have you apply to your life.

When teaching a biblical application point, make your statement short, one sentence, and to the point. Have only one major application to a lesson or sermon. Concentrate the entire message on developing that one point.

The application is taking the passage of Scripture and putting it in practical terms. It is telling us to DO something. The application is a simple statement of what the verse is telling us to do. Truth can be taught in great detail and depth, and yet not help the student of the Bible change his life. We must understand what action the Scripture is

compelling us to take. The application of a Scripture passage is making the truth simple and practical so it will be effective in our lives.

One of the major reasons why people have different ideas concerning what the Bible says is because they use different rules or standards for interpreting it. I believe that the following summary is the essential principles to understand and apply if Christians are to arrive at a correct understanding of the Bible.

STUDY THE SETTING - How does the history, geography, and culture of the biblical world relate to this passage?

CONSIDER THE LITERARY CONTEXT - What do the words that precede and follow this passage say, and how do they affect how I should understand this passage?

STUDY THE WORDS - What do the important words (English, Hebrew, Greek) in this passage mean?

ANALYZE THE GRAMMAR - How are the words in this passage used? How does sentence and paragraph structure affect how I should understand this passage?

UNDERSTAND THE AUTHOR'S INTENT - What does the author appear to be trying to accomplish with the words of this passage? What does he want his original audience to know, to think, or to do?

CONSIDER THE GENRE - What kind of literature is this (narrative, poetry, teaching, law, parable, etc.)? What literary features does this text use, and how do they affect the way in which I am to read and understand the text's content and message?

INTERPRET SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE - What other passages of Scripture help me to understand and explain this passage? How should I read and understand this passage in the light of those other passages?

MAKE PROPER APPLICATIONS BASED ON A GOOD INTERPRETATION - The application of Scripture is determined from its scope, as well as our reason, logic, and wisdom. It is also important for us to realize that just as there is both a proper interpretation of Scripture and an erroneous interpretation, so there is both the proper application of Scripture and the improper application. Just as much good comes from the proper application of Scripture, so much harm has come into Christendom from the misapplication of Scripture. Christians must be diligent not only to properly understand the interpretation of a text, but to properly apply it as well.