

HOW TO STUDY AND INTERPRET THE BIBLE

We begin a new study tonight that will take us several weeks to complete. About 35 years ago, Mr. Miles asked me to put together a 10 week study on this subject and teach it in his church in Wayland on Friday night, which I did. I was first taught these things back in 1980 and for the past 42 years I have been honing my skills and it has changed my life.

Ever since then I have been thinking that this might be a good study to teach in the church. It is not technically a book study. It is not technically a doctrinal study. But I think we can establish it is a legitimate Biblical study.

What we would like to do in the next weeks is present to you a system that will enable one to carefully study, understand and interpret the Bible in a way that is accurate and true. We will cover many important subjects and examine many passages of Scripture in the next weeks.

Now this study is not typically presented to a congregation of a local church. This study is typically a series of multiple courses offered in a theological institution. It is usually presented to those who are preparing for ministry. Specific courses like Hermeneutics, Bible Study Methods and Exegesis are typically part of a curriculum at a theological school. This study will be a combination of all three. In fact, we think a new word should be invented to cover a study like this—"Hermegesis Bible Study Methodology."

I have always thought that things taught in theological schools should be taught in the church. When we were taught doctrine and systematic theology or Bible book studies, I remember sitting in class and thinking why aren't these things being taught in the church. This is what should be taught to people in the church.

We think there is tremendous value for this study for everyone in the church because it will enable everyone in the church to have the skill set and tools to spot those who are not interpreting the Bible accurately. Accurate Bible interpretation is critical to our faith. Even if a person doesn't himself/herself use the systematic study skills that will be presented, it will enable him/her to be solid in his/her understanding of whether or not God's word is being handled accurately.

Years ago, in High School we were required to take a class called "Shop Class." It was a class designed to teach us how to do woodworking and other mechanical things. I was no good at it. I made a knife holder and was thrilled I got a B minus. I enjoyed the class but I was not skilled at being a carpenter. There was one guy in our class who was skilled and built a beautiful gun cabinet. That class never made me a great carpenter, but it gave me skills to recognize who good carpenters are and it enabled me to recognize quality workmanship when I see it. This study will enable God's people to be able to spot quality workmanship in handling God's word and, by God's grace, will enable one to examine God's word and say that is what that text says.

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The truth is most people know how to read the Bible but most don't know how to study to properly interpret the Bible. Most people who go to church know what a pastor or teacher has said about the Bible. Now there is nothing wrong with that because that is a key part of growth and God does give different gifts to the church and one is Pastor/Teacher. But what if the Pastor isn't teaching what is right? He is using his Bible to preach, but what if it isn't right teaching? How would the average person know whether or not they have been taught truth?

Years ago, a man came to me who was paranoid that he had committed the unpardonable sin based on something a minister proclaimed from a passage like **Matthew 12:31-32**. This man lived in fear that he had committed that sin. We turned to that passage and when he saw the first word of verse 31 was "Therefore," which points back to something previous (**v. 24**), he saw what it really meant and was set free. He spent years living with a fear because he had never been taught how to study and interpret God's word.

We think there is tremendous value in having this study for the people of God.

We will handle this study in question answer fashion. In fact, we start with this question:

QUESTION #1 – Is there a legitimate Biblical precedence for teaching a course on how to study and interpret the Bible?

We are not interested in wasting time studying something at church for which there is no Biblical basis. We do not want to waste your time nor my time. So this is a very good question to ask. We think the Biblical answer to this question is yes. There is a Biblical precedence for this study. We offer six Biblical evidences:

Evidence #1 - The Bible is God's word and that would make knowledge of how to study it the most valuable knowledge of the most important book ever written.

Michael Heiser, who has written a good book called "*Brief Insights on Mastering Bible Study*" has titled a chapter which makes a powerful point: "**Ignorance is not a gift of the Spirit**" (p. 45). The Apostle Peter teaches that one of the qualities we are to pursue and add to our character so we may have an abundant entrance into heaven is "knowledge" (**I Pet. 1:5-11**). Having accurate knowledge of God's word is one of the most valuable things we may have.

All of the data pertaining to the Bible being God's word is very carefully taught in Mr. Tim Kelly's doctrine study of "Bibliology," so I am not going to repeat that here. But one thing we will point out here is that from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible says it is God's word. All 66 books from Genesis to Revelation are God's word. Every bit of it is inspired by God. The Bible is a living, God-breathed book. The Bible is actually called a "book" in many passages. In fact, the Bible ends with a warning not to add or subtract any words from this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

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Every course studied requires numerous textbooks. **In this case our textbook is inspired by God and contains 66 books. So the point of Bible study is to know as much accurate truth as we can from all 66 books.** That will not happen by day dreaming.

Keep in mind that the Bible is a book in which God reveals to us things we cannot learn ourselves without it. This is God's written word and it needs to be treated as in inspired textbook about God.

Now a textbook must be studied. Since this is God's textbook, it must be carefully studied. So knowing how to study this book would be the most valuable knowledge one could have.

Evidence #2 - The inspired historical story found in **Acts 8:25-35**.

This is an extremely important story to a study like this. There was an Ethiopian eunuch who was traveling back to Ethiopia from Jerusalem in his chariot and he was reading the book of Isaiah. The Holy Spirit directed Philip to go up to the chariot and Philip said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" What we learn from this is very important. **It is one thing to read the Bible; it is quite another to understand the Bible. Just because one reads the Bible does not mean one really understands the Bible.** Some method is needed and some teacher is needed.

There is a big difference between reading and studying; reading and understanding. Reading is primarily low intensity and low energy. Studying is just the opposite. It is high-intensity and high-focused energy.

Evidence #3 - The inspired historical story found in **Acts 18:24-27**.

Another passage that is of significance to this study is here. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, Egypt who went to Ephesus. He was a believer. He was an eloquent speaker. He was mighty in his knowledge of Scripture. He had a passion to preach and teach and communicate truth. He would go into synagogues and refute Jews. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him they realized he wasn't quite accurate in his teaching. So they took him aside and "explained to him the way of God more accurately." **The principle to see here is this: just because someone has known the Lord for years and has read the Bible and has great knowledge of the Bible does not mean he is able to accurately interpret the Bible or accurately communicate it.**

The Bible is relatively easy to read, but it is not so easy to understand. Just because one loves the Lord and the word does not mean one may accurately interpret the Bible. **Bible study is not just after knowledge, it is after true knowledge.**

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Evidence #4 - The Pauline assignment given to Timothy in **II Timothy 2:15**.

Now it is true that this text was addressed to a minister who had a gift, but we will build a case for application to all of God's people (**Psalm 1:1-3**). In these verses, God's people are not only challenged to not walk in the way of sinners, but to delight in the word and meditate on it day and night. To do that demands an accurate understanding of God's word.

In **II Timothy 2:15**, Paul challenged Timothy to study to show himself approved unto God and be very diligent in his "accurate handling of the word of truth" so that he would be an "unashamed workman." **Through very prayerful and careful study of God's word, it is possible to understand it and handle a text accurately. Through very prayerful and careful study of God's word, it is possible to study it and interpret it in a right way that leaves one unashamed in the way he handled God's word.**

Now to actually do this will require more than just reading. It will require serious study and carefully thinking about words and truth. It will require systematic analysis and it will take a system whereby one may skillfully study to come to the true "rightly divided" interpretation. Unfortunately, that is not how most people think when it comes to the Bible. **But the truth is serious Bible study means serious thinking and serious thinking is hard work.**

Evidence #5 - The statement concerning what is in the Bible in **Hebrews 10:7**.

Jesus Christ Himself testifies to the importance of the written word of God. There are several things brought out in this one verse. The Bible is a book. The Bible is written. The Bible contains written things about Jesus Christ. The Bible contains knowledge of God's will.

If ever there is a Biblical precedence for instruction on how to study and interpret the Bible, there can't be one much weightier than this.

So our conclusion is there is a legitimate Biblical precedence for such a study as this in the church.

Evidence #6 - The inspired historical record found in **Nehemiah 8:1-9**.

Nehemiah, who was a Biblical scribe and scholar and priest, brought the people together, along with other leaders, to read the word of God.

He read from early morning to midday. He read in front of men and women and "those who could understand and all the people were attentive to the book of the law." So what that means is that all the people who could understand the words that were being read listened. **But in verse 8** we read "They read from the book, from the law, translating to give the sense so they understood the reading."

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What we learn from this is that it is not enough to listen to the word of God, but it is critical that sense is made of the words that are read so that God's people can understand it.

To accurately understand the Bible requires serious systematic reading and study.

Based on these evidences, we conclude that there is a legitimate Biblical precedence for this type of study in the Church.

QUESTION #2 – Is there a legitimate need for a course on how to accurately study, interpret and understand the Bible?

We think there is not only a need for a course like this, but this is the greatest need in today's church. We are not trying to be overly dramatic on this point, but this is probably the greatest need God's people have, even though most don't know it.

For most people in the United States, having a Bible or owning a Bible is not a problem. There are 20 million Bibles sold every year in the United States. Every home has an average of 4.3 Bibles and 85% of all American homes have Bibles in them. So the need, it would seem, is not the need for more Bibles. **The need is to be able to study, accurately interpret and accurately understand the Bible.**

Dr. Donald K. Campbell, in his Foreward to Dr. Roy Zuck's book, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, made a very important observation when he wrote: "...the Bible may well be the most abused book in the world" (p. 7). He is absolutely correct. People use the Bible in many ways to support many different beliefs. Denominations, Cults, Religions and Religious rituals all use the Bible.

We believe there is a tremendous need for this kind of study for at least six reasons:

Reason #1 - Because of the condition of the churches today.

If you asked most people what the greatest need of the church is today, very few would say **accurate knowledge of God's word**. The truth is Paul warned that as the Church Age nears its conclusion, it will depart from this focus on God's word and doctrines (II Timothy 4:3).

Paul specifically told Timothy that he was to "give attention to the public reading of Scriptures, to exhortation and teaching" (I Tim. 4:13). This is not happening in most churches today. Most churches have lost this focus.

In fact, the vast majority of churches have gone in a different direction. Generally speaking, the church has been influenced by four different major movements:

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(Movement #1) - The Evangelistic Movement.

This movement stresses evangelism and neglects proper Biblical instruction and doctrine and it neglects feeding the flock. There is certainly nothing wrong with wanting to evangelize the lost. But if that is the focus of the church, it is neglecting its primary responsibility which is to equip those already saved and to build up the body of Christ in the faith so they will not be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:11-14).

(Movement #2) - The Church Renewal Movement.

This movement stresses fellowship groups and subdivides people to make them all feel important. The point is we are going a new direction designed to focus on people, not the word of God. In this movement, serious, solid Biblical instruction is neglected.

(Movement #3) - The Church Growth Movement.

This movement stresses doing whatever it takes to increase numbers. This kind of church features entertainment, bands, gimmicks, movies and all kinds of other marketing strategies designed to cause numerical growth at the church. It neglects true, sound, systematic exposition of God's word.

(Movement #4) - The Charismatic Movement.

This movement stresses spiritual gifts and spiritual and emotional experiences at the expense of careful analysis of God's word.

The common denominator of each of these movements is something in the church has a higher priority than a careful understanding of God's word. There is a great need for a study like this because the churches are Biblically anemic and have lost their way.

Reason #2 - Because we are in a Satanic war and the key to our survival is to accurately know God's word.

Satan wants people ignorant of the truth of God and he does his greatest work in religious talk and twisting Scripture (**II Cor. 11:13-15**). This is how he tripped up Eve (**Gen. 3:1-6**). She wasn't quite sure what God's word said. **Satan does his finest work on Sunday in pulpits.** He wants people going to church and he wants people ignorant and confused about what the Bible does and does not actually say. He wants people religious, but ignorant. A key to survival in this dark, twisted world is knowing God's word accurately. **Psalm 119:105 says God's word is a lamp for our development in a dark world.**

Satan doesn't care if people hear some of the words of the Bible, but he does not want people knowing all the word of God and he does not want people understanding Truth accurately.

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It is no coincidence that Paul stressed the importance of knowing the truth and word of God as being part of the armor of God against Satan (Ephesians 6:14, 15, 17). In fact, he said, “the sword of the spirit is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17).

When Jesus was tempted by Satan, He defeated him with this statement: “It is written, ‘man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Matt. 4:4).

To carefully and accurately understand every word that proceeds from God is a daunting challenge and it will not come by some quick discipleship course, weekend retreat or even daily reading. It will require a careful system of study.

Reason #3 - Because this world is filled with religious people who adulterate the Word of God.
II Corinthians 4:2

That word “adulterate” (dolow) is one that means to use the word of God in a deceptive and corrupt way that is designed to ensnare people (G Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 120).

If one does not have some system and way of being able to study to actually arrive at the truth, one may fall prey for false religious teachers, denominations and viewpoints of those who are using God’s word in a deceptive way.

People can take the Bible and make it say what they want it to say by taking things out of context and twisting words. Brigham Young justified his having more than 30 wives by pointing out things from the Bible. The Mormon practice of being baptized for the dead is based on a Bible verse taken from I Corinthians 15:29. The concept of bringing rattlesnakes into a church service or drinking strychnine poison comes from one Bible verse in Mark 16:18.

We submit that most people who believe various things in their churches typically do so not based on a very careful study and analysis of God’s word. Most believe what they believe not even knowing whether it is Biblically true or not. Those who don’t know how to study the Bible to accurately interpret it are ripe for these Bible teaching predators, which are out to promote their own views and agendas by adulterating the word of God.

Reason #4 - This world is filled with untaught and unstable people who distort God’s word to their own destruction. **II Pet. 3:16**

Notice carefully that Peter specifically brings up the subject of the “untaught” and “unstable” in the context of not handling the Scriptures right. Often people will say, “he/she really knows the Bible.” Usually when you dig a little deeper, that person doesn’t know much of anything.

There are some people who boast about the fact that they are self-taught. Biblically speaking, there is no such thing. In Scripture someone is to teach so others can learn. This is true in the O.T. and in the N.T.

Now the words “untaught” and “unstable” are given in the specific context of misinterpreting the Bible. The word “untaught” (amaqeic) refers to one who has not been trained so one is ignorant of what the Bible actually says. This is a very rare Greek word that stresses one is unlearned interpreting the Bible (*Ibid.*, p. 23). **Clearly there is a real need to be taught.**

The word “unstable” (asthriktoi) refers to one who is unsettled and unstable in understanding Scripture (*Ibid.*, p. 65). This person is very superficial in the ability to properly handle the Scriptures.

Now what these kinds of people do is “distort” (streblov) the word of God. What that means is they twist, torture and pervert grammar, language and grammatical contexts and theology (*Ibid.*, p. 420). They really believe in what they are doing, but they are doing this to their own destruction.

There are many of these kinds of people who are leading Bible studies. Frankly, they are doing far more damage than good. This is why it is necessary to have some sort of instruction on how to study and interpret the Bible. **What we are after is a true interpretation of God’s word, not inaccurate distortion of it.**

It is not only possible to distort a passage, but all of Scripture because one is untaught as to how to properly interpret it. In **Titus 1:10-11** we learn that there are people distorting God’s word who must be stopped. These people need to be silenced. To do that requires accurate knowledge of God’s word and that requires study.

Reason #5 - This world is filled with religious teachers who use Bibles but very few expound them accurately or even know how to do it. **II Timothy 4:1-2**

Many years ago, I had the privilege of meeting, hearing and actually studying the works of Dr. Haddon Robinson. Back in 1980, he wrote this: “During two decades in the classroom I have evaluated nearly six thousand sermons. My friends marvel that after listening to hundreds of fledgling preachers stumble through their first sermons, I am not an atheist” (*Biblical Preaching*, p. 10). The problem was not number of messages preached that he heard; it was that the messages did not accurately communicate what was in the text.

The truth is most preachers are not known for the one thing for which they should be known—serious, careful Bible expositors. Most ministers are known for anything but that, yet that is their God-given charge.

Many ministers today spend more time visiting, golfing, planning, and organizing than they do studying. Yet as the Church Age began, the Apostles said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables” (**Acts 6:2**).

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In **John 21:15-17**, after Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, and when He met with the Apostle Peter, He specifically told him that he had a responsibility to “feed His sheep.” The word “tend” (boskw) is the word for feed. This word is used pertaining to a shepherd’s responsibility to see to it that the flock is well fed and feeding on nutritious food (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 84).

We may observe from this passage that in **verse 15** the object of the feeding are “lambs” (young sheep) and in **verse 17**, the object of the verb is “sheep” (older sheep). What Jesus is teaching here is that both groups of believers, young and old, need solid feeding. Jesus does not tell Peter to entertain the sheep; He tells him to feed the sheep. This is what God’s sheep need to grow. The job of the minister is to see to it that God’s flock is well-fed.

Frankly, systematic exposition of O.T. and N.T. books is declining in the pulpits and the flock is malnourished in the pews. Michael Heiser wrote that he had many Christians tell him that they could not remember the last time their pastor went through an Old Testament book. Then he went on to say, “Ignorance of the Old Testament is a serious issue. I’d call it a hermeneutical crime” (*Brief Insights On Mastering Bible Study*, pp. 73-74).

When God’s flock goes to church, they should go expecting to be fed the Word of God. That should be the expectation.

The fact is, most people are going to churches where the word of God is being neglected. Most don’t recognize this or know it. **When the word of God is neglected and when study is neglected, then the minister and the church lose the authority of God and they actually may lose the blessings of God because they are not growing to a maturity level that God will bless.** God’s word is the authority and when God’s word is not accurately handled, authority is lost and so is growth.

How is it that churches are in the condition they are in? Why are people more concerned with programs, bands, social groups, and other things other than a serious grasp of truth? Ministers have lost their way and are not carefully expounding God’s word.

So then the church becomes a place of entertainment and symposiums on this subject or that subject. Vain philosophies, religious viewpoints and worldly ideas and so-called scientific theories and lectures begin to take over.

If more of God’s people know how to study and interpret and accurately understand the Bible, they will be able to spot these guys quicker and realize they do not know what they are talking about.

God’s people are in a Satanic warfare and one of the key Satanic weapons he uses is ignorance of God’s truth. This is why it is so important that we are able to truly spot what is actually true, which is part of our armor. Eph. 6:14, 15, 17

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Reason #6 - A believer's maturity and growth are at stake which is contingent upon an accurate understanding of God's word.

Every believer should strive to carefully and accurately understand the Scriptures because their entire spirituality and growth is contingent on this very point.

I Peter 2:2 teaches us that we are to long for "the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation." Being fed the pure, true milk of the word of God is vital for this.

II Timothy 3:16-17 teaches us that the key to us becoming a mature, thoroughly furnished, completely equipped believer is an understanding of "All Scripture." This is a daunting challenge.

Philippians 1:9-11 teaches that we are to grow in "real knowledge and all discernment" that leads to us being filled with the righteousness of God. We have much at stake in accurately understanding the Bible.

The fact is if our interpretations aren't right, then our spirituality is not right. One may read the Bible and have a warm, fuzzy feeling, but no spiritual depth that pleases God.

QUESTION #3 – What is the goal of this study?

The goal of this study is not to replace the need for church or for gifted men who can teach the Scriptures because nothing will replace that. There are some goals of this study:

Goal #1 - To Glorify God. **I Cor. 10:31; Ps. 138:2**

In I Corinthians 10:31 we read, "whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." In Psalm 138:2 we read, "For you have magnified Your word according to all Your name."

So the word of God is the most majestic thing on this earth and when we are learning how to study to accurately understand it, we are doing something to the glory of God.

Goal #2 - To gain true, deep knowledge of God. **Eph. 1:16-17**

When we read a prayer like Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers in Ephesians 1:16-17, it is clear that God wants His people to have a "knowledge-upon-knowledge" level or deep knowledge of Him. To have that knowledge one must be wise and knowledgeable of the written Scriptures. In Paul's armor against Satan, he said the "the sword of the Spirit" is the "word of God." Eph. 6:17

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Goal #3 - To actually transform our minds. **Roman. 12:2**

There is nothing on this earth that can and will transform a mind and renew a mind like careful study to come to an accurate understanding of God's word. **A true course on how to study and interpret the Bible should cause a believer to be a very careful thinker.**

Goal #4 - To give God's people the tools necessary so that there is a measure of Spirit-produced independence in being able to see God's truth and know it is God's truth in what is being studied, taught or preached.

Just having the skills to study and interpret the Bible does not mean we may eliminate those who have special gifts of God to be able to teach the Scriptures (**Eph. 4:11**). God still gives gifted men to the church and those men are needed to preach and teach the Scriptures. These gifts are still needed and will always be needed for the equipping of the saints.

But we do see in **I Corinthians 14:29** that Paul expected the people in the church to be able to listen carefully to what was being said in order to be able to pass some sort of judgment as to whether or not it was right and true. **This kind of ability requires thinking and not just reading, memorizing or feeling.**

When Paul and Silas went to Berea and opened up the word of God, we learn that they were "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." (**Acts 17:11**)

So the goal of this study is to present God's people with some of the skills necessary to come to a proper understanding and right interpretation of the word of God.

QUESTION #4 – How do people actually read the Bible?

Whenever anyone picks up a Bible, he/she has made some personal, intentional decision to attempt to read it. We don't necessarily know the reason or motive for reading it, but some decision has been made to read it. In fact, we believe the Bible is the best book one can read.

But there are at least seven different ways one may read the Bible.

Way #1 - One may read the Bible skeptically.

A skeptic may read the Bible, but he does so with the goal of questioning everything and not ascertaining truth or changing his mind about anything. Skeptics do read the Bible, but they are suspicious of it and very critical of it. Their goal for even reading it is sinister. They read it looking for supposed contradictions or mistakes. They are not after truth and they are not interested in coming to accurate conclusions.