

Biblical Bible Study

The Biblical Approach

It has been said, “You can prove anything by the Bible”. This statement is true if we approach study of the Bible in an arbitrary manner. However, if Scripture is studied and taught according to the methods set forth within its pages, it no longer becomes a proof text for any belief but rather God’s specific and trustworthy standard for truth.

How then does one study the Bible biblically? In a nutshell, Paul, the apostle, tells Timothy how when he says, “Until I come give attention to reading, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). This verse actually contains a lot of information. By taking a closer look at what it says, we can grasp what God intends for us to learn from it.

The nouns translated “reading”, “exhortation”, and “teaching” are *activities of communication* believers are supposed to employ in relation to the Scripture. In this context, Paul is making specific reference to the part of the Bible revealed to him by our risen Lord which will *nourish* Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6), help him to become *godly* (4:7-8), assist him to *advance* in the faith (4:15), and *save* him from the power of sin (4:16; see also: 1 Tim. 1:10-11, 4:6-16). This same impact from the Word is just as true for all believers today as it was for Timothy. Also, the tense of the verb translated “give attention to” (προσεχε) is important in regard to helping Timothy understand how he is to approach his study and teaching. Since this word is in the *present tense*, it indicates he is to *constantly* and *unceasingly* pay attention to the reading, exhortation, and teaching of the Scripture.

How can Timothy continually do these three things at once? The answer to this question is when he personally studied or publically taught the Word, he was to *put to use all three tools* of reading, exhortation, and teaching *in conjunction with one another*. Practicing these three things concurrently *creates a formula* for the simplistic, yet immeasurably effective method set forth in Scripture as the basis for *Biblical Bible Study*.

The Biblical Approach Defined

To better understand the manner in which Timothy could effectively make use of reading, exhortation, and teaching in his ministry; let us take a brief look at each of these words and how they function in relation to one another.

The Greek word used for “reading” (αναγνωσει) comes from combining the preposition “ανα”, having the idea of *repetition*, with the verb “γινωσκω”, which

means *to know*. This word portrays the idea of *knowing again*, therefore, for the mind to *recognize, realize, and comprehend* what someone else has previously written. Contained within itself, this word implies the mind should form its understanding of what is read *only by what it observes written*. And, since fragmented thoughts mean little or nothing by themselves, *biblical “reading”* requires the use of an *in-context* study method.

The word translated “exhortation” (παρακλησει) combines the preposition “παρα”, with the idea of *beside*, with the verb “καλεω”, meaning *to call*. Commonly used throughout the New Testament, it means to *call someone to your side* for the purpose of sharing something. When it is used in reference to biblical truth, the Holy Spirit will use what is said to *exhort, encourage, or comfort* those hearing (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; Heb. 3:13).

Finally, the word for “teaching” (διδασκαλία) refers to *instruction, the delivery of information, or the communication of facts*. We derive our English word “didactic” from this Greek word, and rightly so as it refers to *simply the facts*.

These three tools combined form Paul’s prescribed pattern of Bible study for Timothy – or us, for that matter. Initially, a passage of Scripture one chooses to study must be read, *observing exactly what is written in context*. At the same time, he or she needs to ascertain what the passage actually means in light of the *facts of grammar, context and historical setting*, which forms the foundation for personal instruction. Then, exhortation can occur as the Spirit of God *applies truth which is understood* to the brother or sister based on what was read and studied (1 Cor. 2:4-5; 12-14). These same principles can be used for preparation needed to create the groundwork for teaching and exhorting others from the Word.

The Biblical Approach seen in the Old Testament

Having taken a skeletal view of the Bible’s self-proclaimed pattern of Bible study, now observe how these methods have been implemented throughout biblical history.

The entire Nation of Israel had been deprived of the record of God’s written Law for 70 years or more during the Babylonian Captivity. When the Jews returned to the Promised Land, they again hungered to know and obey God’s will. For, at this time, they only knew and could rely on oral traditions which had survived during their captivity. In the following passages, note how Ezra, the priest, used the same methods which Paul presented to Timothy to once again get a handle on the will of God as he studied the Law. This account is recorded in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

After returning to Jerusalem and rediscovering the Book of the Law, “Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments” (Ezra 7:10). Subsequently, he brought the Law before the congregation and “read therein . . . from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand” (Neh. 8:2-3). Then, all the Levites joined him and “they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading” (8:8). In verse 9, this is described as *teaching*. Finally, in verse 12, we see the people’s joy because “they had understood the words that were declared unto them”.

What caused this joy in the people? What drew their attention to the message of the Law (Neh. 8:3)? It was simply a result of the straightforward, verse by verse teaching they had received from the Law. Ezra and the other priests had initially prepared themselves to teach by studying the Law, that is, by *seeking and finding out what it, in itself, said* (Ezra 7:10; Neh. 8:14). Having done this, they were ready to teach and exhort the people. The priests accomplished this by *reading to the people distinctly from the text of the Law while giving its sense and causing them to understand its meaning*.

The priests’ method of approaching both the study and teaching of the Law was limited to *observing and reading what was actually written*. Then, they shared with the Jewish people what they had learned from the Law in a fashion which followed the context. They knew this was the way in which God had given the Law to them and how He had intended for it to be read and taught.

In Summary, the Levitical priests *inductively* studied the Law – they drew God’s intended meaning from its text by means of simply observing what it said within itself. By accurately *reading* the Law with *concurrent explanation and application*, its message resulted in joyful obedience from its hearers. By this process, the Jews successfully regained a full understanding of God’s will, which had been partially lost during the Babylonian Captivity.

This is by no means an isolated incident representing how one group of men was engaged in the study of and instruction from the Law. In the Book of Acts, this method of study – synchronizing the reading, exhortation, and teaching of the Law – was normally practiced each Sabbath day in every Jewish synagogue (Acts 13:15, 27). James gives us a succinct explanation of what commonly took place when he said, “For, in each city from generations of old, Moses, while being read, has those preaching him each Sabbath in the synagogues” (Acts 15:21).

The Greek participles translated “while being read” and “preaching” are both in the *present tense* which indicates the proclamation of truth from the Law was

simultaneously and continually being given in conjunction with its reading. Any astute Bible student knows the Jews were dead serious about knowing and obeying exactly what God told them to do (Exod. 19:4-8). In keeping with their devotion to submit to God's will, the best way they *could* do this, and the way they *did* do this, was by studying and teaching the Law in an inductive manner. Their endeavor was to assess and adhere to the meaning they were able to discover from the flow of each context.

The Biblical Approach demonstrated in the Gospel Accounts

Jesus used these same principles in reference to His own teaching as well as regarding the Law. In Matthew 24:15, He says, "Let the one reading understand", indicating one can grasp truth from *simply reading*. In many other places He infers the same thing: comprehending Scripture comes from *just reading it* (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:42).

On one occasion, Jesus asked a lawyer how he personally "read" from the Law in order to motivate this man to answer his own question which he had just posed to our Lord. In response, this man quoted a portion of the Law as a correct answer to the question he had asked Jesus (Luke 10:26-27). Similarly, when Jesus was in a synagogue, He read a passage from Isaiah, and those who heard clearly knew what He was intending to portray (Luke 4:17-21). So, we see Jesus' stamp of approval on the fourteen hundred year old Jewish practice of simultaneous reading, exhortation and teaching of the Law.

The Biblical Approach found in the Epistles

Now, consider the Epistles in regard to what they state about studying themselves. In Colossians 4:16, Paul says his letter should be *read* to the believers at Colossae. Then, they should exchange letters with the Laodiceans, resulting in each letter being *read* in both locations. Also, in First Thessalonians 5:27, Paul actually binds them with an oath to make sure all the brethren will have the Epistle *read* to them. In light of Paul's general emphasis in his Epistles, those evaluating the above statements would have understood this *Scripture reading* was also to be accompanied by *teaching* and *exhortation* (Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 4:18; 1 Tim. 4:6, 16; 2 Tim. 4:2; see also: Heb. 3:13; 10:25).

More specifically, in Ephesians 3:4, Paul says "while reading" (αναγινωσκοντες) "you are able" (δυνασθε) "to comprehend my understanding in the mystery of Christ." Both of these Greek words are in the *present tense* which signifies *while one reads* there will be a *concurrent and continuous ability* "to comprehend" Paul's insight in the mystery of Christ. The word translated "understanding" (συνεσιν), is a

combination of the verb “ἵημι”, meaning *to send*, with the preposition “συν”, which means *together*. This noun indicates we have an ability to comprehend *the placing together* of knowledge. The idea being portrayed in this verse is when we read, we can develop *a mental perception and grasp* of God’s revealed truth.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, none of us should ever allow anyone to tell us we are incapable of understanding the Word of God! God has given each of His children the Holy Spirit “that we might know the things having been freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). Therefore, *we can personally understand divine truth* based on the simple act of reading. Then, as we meditate on what we read, the Holy Spirit can give us insight and apply these truths to our minds, hearts and lives (Col. 3:1-2).

Misinterpretations Compromise this Biblical Approach

Since we have taken a brief look at each major section of the Bible and observed *all of it consistently affirms the same approach of studying and teaching Scripture*, the question arises: Why do so many persist in usually teaching by means of a topic or subject approach? And, why does this technique habitually govern their practice of sharing the Word? Furthermore, what about the verses used to support such a method? Although it is not practical to exhaust every passage, please consider the following three passages often cited to support the common use of a subject/topic manner of teaching God’s Word.

Isaiah 28:9-13

In this passage, God desires to “teach knowledge” so His people can “understand doctrine”. This He will do “precept upon precept; line upon line . . .; here a little, and there a little” (v. 10). Some have used the phrase, “here a little, and there a little”, as a license to jump all over the Bible and to systematize theological teaching. However, the verses which follow make it clear God is speaking about using different *means* to instruct the Jews (v. 11) and to His *persistence* in teaching them (vv. 12-13). As with many other passages already covered, *the Law was constantly and typically taught while being read in-context*.

First Corinthians 2:13 – 3:1

What about “comparing Scripture with Scripture”? Do you realize *this is not a quote from the Bible*? The context referred to by this phrase is First Corinthians 2:13, where it says, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual”. The word translated “spiritual things” (πνευματικας) is a neuter, plural noun and can only refer to the revealed truth in the above context described as “wisdom” and “the deep things of

God”, which God revealed to us by the Spirit (vv. 7, 10-12). However, the noun translated “spiritual” (πνευματικοῖς) by form could be either neuter plural, meaning *spiritual things*, or masculine plural, which would specify *spiritual men*.

Proper analysis depends on which of the above two grammatical options God envisioned in this context. Since the grammar does not answer this question, the only way we can determine this phrase’s intended sense is to consider the *immediate context* surrounding it. The context supports the latter idea of *spiritual men*. For, the following verse indicates the things of the Spirit are “spiritually” (πνευματικῶς – adverb form) discerned by *spiritual men* (believers) and cannot be discerned by “natural men” (unbelievers – v. 14). Then, verse 15 speaks of a “spiritual man” (πνευματικός - a believer) discerning all things. Finally, the first verse of the next chapter uses the same word “spiritual men” (πνευματικοῖς) regarding mature believers in contrast with carnal Christians (3:1).

Because of this contextual evidence, the preferred interpretation of First Corinthians 2:13 is: Paul’s normal ministry to believers involved *constantly speaking* (present tense) the “teachings of the Spirit”, which is the same as the “spiritual things”, to “spiritual men”. He was persistently “comparing” (συγκρίνοντες – present tense) or endeavoring *to judge* (κρίνω) how the lives of the spiritual ones (mature believers – v. 6) aligned *with* (συν) the truth. This passage says nothing about a method of presenting the Word, and it easily complies with the previously noted biblical technique of reading, exhortation and teaching.

Second Timothy 2:15

Last of all, this verse is properly cited to support that we should “be diligent to present” ourselves “approved to God as unashamed workmen”. However, some have interpreted the phrase which follows, “rightly dividing the word of truth”, to indicate we should spend time conducting various topical studies using the entire Bible in order to show differences between dispensations of truth. Although it is correct that truth which was given for the Nation of Israel contains differences when it is compared with the administration of Grace for the Church, a study of the Greek text will show God is not directing us to either compare subjects or focus on the whole Bible in this passage.

The word translated “rightly dividing” (ορθοτομουντα) comes from “ορθος”, meaning *straight*, and “τομεω”, which indicates *to cut*. This word is found only here in the New Testament, but it appears twice in the Septuagint – a Greek Translation of the Old Testament (Prov. 3:6; 11:5). Both occurrences support rendering this word with the idea that Timothy is to *direct his path* or to *hold a straight course* in the

“word of truth”. The manner in which this word is commonly used in extra-biblical Greek also supports this translation.

In addition, based on the other times Paul uses the phrase “word of truth”, Timothy is being told *to hold a straight course in the distinct message of truth God has given for the Church*. For, in Ephesians 1:13, this phrase is used to describe the gospel by which believers are saved today. And, in Colossians 1:5, it is used to define truth which contains the hope of glory Christians have in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 6:7). How could Timothy hold a straight course in the Word of truth given to the Church? He accomplished this while being personally nourished by and teaching others the things he received from Paul, who in turn obtained them by revelation from our risen Lord (Gal. 1:11-12; 1 Tim. 1:10-11; 4:6; 2 Tim. 2:2; 4:2-3).

Summarizing, Timothy is being told to *habitually focus on* (present tense) “holding a straight course” in the message of Grace which he received from Paul so he will be an approved and unashamed workman for his Lord. As a result, he will know what is right and wrong, what is true and false, and how to live pleasing to God in this present program for the Church, the Body of Christ (Acts 20:20, 24, 27). This passage says nothing which points toward the use of a topical approach to study and teach the Word. Nor is it directed toward concentrating on the entire Scriptures, but specifically on the truth of Grace. And, when we follow this meaning, it fully conforms to the routine of simultaneous reading, exhortation and teaching which was defined earlier.

Rethinking the Basis of our Teaching Method

Those who base their subject method of Bible study on the three passages just touched upon should reconsider why this approach is followed. For, it is not consistent with the methods which we have briefly examined and which are openly recorded in God’s Word. In reality, to the degree which the topic/subject technique *is used to take the place of* the biblical method of in-context study, it can cause the believer to get off track from the way God intended His Word to be followed. Continual focus on a limited range of biblical issues can have a negative effect on the balance and accuracy of both the lifestyle and teaching of those who regularly use this method.

Certainly, it is not always possible to use a verse by verse method, yet in one’s *typical teaching ministry* this approach should be predominant. On the other hand, there are times when the subject approach is valid. Some situations in which topical Bible study is effective include: individual study of the Word; casual or group theological discussions; counseling sessions; periodic messages or series given on essential subjects; speaking engagements; or written articles, which do

not allow adequate time or space necessary for a profitable impact to result from in-context exposition. Also, a topical method of studying the Word is profitable when considering biblical subjects which are too broad to be explained by any one passage. Finally, this kind of study has a positive influence and includes safeguards when the hearer is provided with biblical references which can later be analyzed in order to understand and test the accuracy of what was taught.

While recognizing topical teaching has its place, it should be kept in mind that the one who habitually teaches the Word in a Book-by-Book manner personally gains a more precise comprehension of passages within their greater contexts. Therefore, this approach becomes *the checks and balances of Biblical understanding* as it either confirms the theology a person presently embraces or requires revision of one's beliefs. With this method, we can progressively "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ" which will enable us to develop a more solid basis for accurate obedience and spiritual maturity (2 Pet. 3:18; see also Eph. 5:15-21).

The resultant fruits of using the verse by verse method are many. First, *we become more accurate teachers* while being restricted to the greatest possible extent by a framework produced by the Word. This routine leaves less room for interjecting personal biases. Second, when need arises for a topical study, the chance of interpreting passages outside of their context is vastly diminished when a foundation of in-context study and teaching governs one's customary practice.

Third, when one learns to study the Bible by following good examples of verse by verse teachers, he develops a better pattern to personally search the Word in time of need. This Word-formed independence often enables him to answer his own questions and solve his own problems. As a result, he has less need for outside counsel to assist him in order to stand in the faith. And, he obtains a firm spiritual footing upon which he can enjoy the reality of a victorious Christian life, controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, as a person who is exposed to in-context teaching progressively learns to maneuver in the Word, he benefits by the increased capability to discern what he hears taught. In general, all of the above scenarios result in the potential of a better, well-adjusted Christian lifestyle based on a greater understanding of the truth God intends for us to know.

Now, it must be said, verse by verse teaching is not a complete solution by itself. For, it is very tempting to proceed through the Word in-context while focusing on topics and disregarding the flow of thought which contains much of the truth God expects for us to see. Also, many Bible teachers, while proceeding through the

Word Book-by-Book, use various phrases or teachings as a springboard to jump off and major on giving their own opinions or philosophies. It takes a great deal of effort and discipline to limit oneself to an exclusive study of the text with the goal of determining God's proposed meaning. We should always make it a practice to seriously focus on the words God carefully selected which are able to enlighten His children in regard to both His reality and will.

When the entire Word is understood, taught and applied according to its literal meaning gained from in-context study, believers will have a more solid basis to move toward the *unity* God desires for the Body of Christ. As we utilize the "one faith" (our *beliefs* recorded in the Word) which we have to "maintain the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3-6), we activate part of God's provision for this unity to become a reality. And, as the gifts of believers are promoted with humility and gentleness to edify the whole Body, all can become prepared to serve our Lord. Christians make progress toward this goal when we all "attain unto the unity of the faith and the full knowledge of the Son of God, resulting in a mature man, resulting in the measure of the stature associated with the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:1-2, 7-16).

Conclusion

Even though God has presented much of His Word in topics within the biblical text, it is overwhelmingly taught that *we should commonly study these topics and truths within the contexts God gave them*. The Bible's stated and demonstrated methods of studying itself are those directly intended by God, Himself. If we do not follow the patterns of study and teaching which He has given, we can easily fall into lopsided emphases and be subject to false-out-of-context doctrine. As we have seen, God used men to write what He has revealed in order to give us understanding. And, He made His Word known to us in the configuration He chose. How can we improve on God's divine patent of perfection?

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Old Testament quotes are from the KJV.

New Testament quotes are original translations by the author from the Greek text.