



Three Approaches to Reading the Bible

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Reading for Information

Consider the following questions in regarding a Biblical passage: What are the moral or ethical questions? What are the legal questions? What are the personal questions? What are the political questions? What are theological or religious questions?

A matter of information affects the answers to all the above questions. Without the information one struggles to make sense of a Biblical passage. One method to discover information from a Biblical text is to use seven principles of Bible study (by Tremper Longman).

1. Look for the biblical author's intended meaning. The meaning of the text does not change, and this should be determined before one starts making applications to one's own life.
2. Read the Bible passage in context. Is the text you are studying a transition, introduction, summary, or is it the second point of three the author is making on a broader theme?
3. Identify the type of passage you are reading (i.e., Phil. 2:6-11 is a hymn; Micah 3:9-12 is a doom saying). The type of literature makes a difference.
4. Consider the historical and cultural setting. The Naboth story illustrates the importance of this.
5. Consider the grammar and structure within the passage. If you run into a therefore see what it is there for.
6. Interpret experience in the light of Scripture, not Scripture in the light of experience. Otherwise, you are likely to be reading your own ideas into the Bible.

Reading for Information (cont'd)

7. Always seek the full counsel of Scripture. If a passage you are considering seems obscure or unclear, check out what the rest of the Bible has to say on this theme. Bible concordances, dictionaries, and commentaries are helpful in this and in many other ways.

Ponder these questions:

- In what ways does this information affect your understanding, teaching, and devotional use, of the passage?
- In what ways does it shed light on your previous understanding and feelings about this biblical event?

Reading for Transformation

Lectio divina is Latin for divine reading. Today it is called spiritual reading or reading for holiness. You come to lectio (pronounced lexio) divina with an open heart. You are not trying to master history, win a doctrinal argument, justify your past behavior, or get today's chapter read. You are simply presenting your open mind and heart to the Lord.

Lectio literally means reading. It signifies a different kind of reading than we often engage when reading a newspaper or a text. This reading is reflective, gentle paced, one-bite-at-a-time. It means reading if you had a love letter in hand. The question behind our reading is God and asking what are you saying to me?

For centuries, Christians have found that lectio divina cleanses the soul; thus the label, reading for holiness. Try this exercise:

- Read by giving emphases to different words—let them soak into your soul.
- As led by the Spirit, offer a meditation or prayer—written, spoken, or wordless.
- Notice that Bible study and prayer merge and blend and flow from one to the other.

Formative Reading

Formative Bible study, embraces both informational and transformational concerns and practices.

Informational reading is linear. The reader covers as much material as possible. It has, according to Robert Mulholland, a problem-solving mentality that drives us to be judgmental and analytical.

Formational reading, however, is reading in depth to capture the dynamic of the message. Speed is not nearly as important as openness to the mystery of God in the Word. The approach is humble, detached, willing, and loving. It is a relational rather than a functional approach. As in transformational reading, we invite the text to master us rather than trying to master the text. Another way of saying this is we invite the Bible to read us as we read the Bible.

The informational and formational aspects work to keep us from imbalance. The devotional life is subjective by nature. Add to that our cultural intoxication with individualism that says truth is different for each of us and you have a lot of private and improper interpretation of Scripture. Bible study that begins with me and my felt needs is not legitimate. We must first establish what the text says and what it means. The meaning does not change just because you have a new temptation, your child has rebelled, or you lost your job in the downsizing craze.

First, get the meaning of the passage. How it applies to you will change as you change. We are not free to make the Bible say whatever we need to hear. Though our felt needs are urgent—and the Bible does often speak to them—the Bible does not exist primarily to help you feel better, reduce stress, and find joy, peace, or self-actualization.

The Bible is the revelation of God in Christ and the Gospel Jesus came to demonstrate. To reduce Bible study to self-motivation, mental hygiene, or to psychological up cheering is to trivialize both the Bible and the spiritual life. What It Means to Me, Walt Russell, Discover the Word, 83-90

Formative Reading (cont'd)

METHODS OF FORMATIVE BIBLE STUDY

Explorer's Method of Bible Study

1. Observation: Notice every word. Use the shifting emphasis method. Notice what happens as you emphasize different words as you read it aloud.
2. Interpretation: What does the Bible text mean? What does the context contribute to the meaning? Step into the shoes of the Bible characters in the text and view the issues from their point of view.
3. Correlation: What have others said about this text? Compare what you have gotten out of the passage with the interpretation of others. Check your study Bible or a concordance to see what other Bible passages speak to this same issue. Check a reputable Bible commentary.
4. Evaluation: Ask questions like these: "What part of this passage is particularly valuable to me right now? Why am I glad I read this passage today?"
5. Application: "Lord, what do You want me to do with what I have read?"

Asking the Text Questions

1. What does this passage tell me about God?
2. What does this passage tell me about Jesus Christ?
3. What does this passage tell me about the Holy Spirit?
4. Is there a sin to avoid?
5. Is there a command to be obeyed?
6. Is there a prayer to make my own?
7. Is there a promise to claim?
8. What does this passage teach me about myself?
9. What does this passage say about Christian service?
10. Is there something here I should memorize?
11. Is there something here I should share?
12. Is there an example to follow or avoid?

Closing Thoughts

When world-renowned theologian Karl Barth, the father of neoorthodoxy, made his last visit to America, a Chicago reporter asked him publicly, "Dr. Barth, what is the most important truth you have discovered in a lifetime of study?" Barth replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." From *Discover the Word*, Everett Leedingham, ed. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1997), 121.

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