

## 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.

(2)

**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).

(3)

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.**

(4)

**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."

(5)

**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 Foreword 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: