

How to Read the Bible

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A recent newspaper article cited a survey of young people in London that asked what they knew of the 10 Commandments. 10 per cent of those asked did not know of the Commandments and - perhaps more alarming - none of the respondents could name a single one.

We live in an age of rapidly declining 'biblical literacy' - both within and outside the church, people appear to be less and less familiar with the Bible and with the way it has been understood in our culture. This has huge implications for the way we share good news and the relationship between church and world. But it also has very significant implications for our life together. Not a few of the current differences within our churches are rooted in our different approaches to the Bible, or perhaps even in our inability to read the Bible together.

One question - many answers

The question 'How do you drive your car?' could elicit a range of responses. 'Every Sunday,' 'With my heart in my mouth,' and 'By unlocking the door and getting in' are three possible kinds of answer. There are likewise different ways to answer the question 'How do you read the Bible?'

Christianity is a 'revealed' religion, that is, we believe in a God who graciously chooses to make himself known, a God who speaks. And the words of this God bring life and light in a world where we are surrounded by death and darkness.

One of my favourite songs includes these words:

'This is my daily bread - your very words, spoken to me'... an echo of Jesus' quotation in Matthew 4.4 of Deuteronomy 8.3. The words of God, both in the sense of the times when we sense God speaking to us and in the sense of his written word to us, are something we should long for, depend on, spend time listening to and fashion our lives by. And we must be open to follow these words when we hear them, to have our lives changed as we listen - which is what listening is all about in the Bible (*Deuteronomy 6.6*). This is how we live life in all its fullness, how our lives are changed from one degree of glory to another (*2 Corinthians 3.18*). Ask God the Holy Spirit's help in this.

But none of this answers what we might call the 'technical' question of Bible reading. How do we, in practice, go about making sense of the text we have in front of us?

Starting out

When I first started reading the Bible for myself, I was taught to ask three sets of questions about a passage I am reading. They are a good starting point, but I have been amazed at how useful a framework they provide, and how they cover the whole range of what we are doing in reading the Bible.

1. What?

These are questions of *discovery* where we explore what the passage is actually saying. Asked in the wrong way, these questions can feel rather mundane. ('What does Paul say all have done in Romans 3.16?') But it is amazing how often popular - even scholarly - readings of the Bible simply do not pay attention to what the text actually says! (If you do not believe me, then read Matthew 24.39 and ask the question, who is being swept away - the lost or the saved? If you are not sure of the significance of this, go to your local Christian bookshop and look through the bestsellers list until you find the 'Left Behind' series!)

2. Why?

Once we have seen what a passage says, we then need to ask questions of *understanding* to see why it says what it does. Sometimes this can be answered from within the passage we are reading. Much ink has been spilled on the question of *what* Paul means by man being the head of woman in 1 Corinthians 11.3. But fewer go on to notice *why* Paul is considering it. The reason comes in verse 5 and again in verse 13 - the radical liberation of the gospel means that Paul wants to find a place for women fully to participate in the worshipping life of the congregation by praying and prophesying, but in a way that does not cause offence in that culture. At other times we will need to know some background information in order to make sense of what we are reading. For example, it is hard to make sense of Jesus' teaching about divorce without being aware of the debates in first-century Judaism to which he is contributing. In these cases we will need the help of those in the church who have been able to study these things, and who make them available in commentaries and background books.

3. How?

When we have understood something of what a passage is saying, and why it is saying it, we then need to ask questions of *application*, to consider how it relates to the contemporary world. This is the area where it is hardest to be systematic, for it requires a listening not only to the word, but also to our world and the worlds that those around us inhabit. There

may be a specific command that we are to obey, a promise to hold on to, a challenge to respond to. But the meeting point between word and world may take a different shape. There may be a parallel situation in our context that the context of the passage relates to, in which we will have to work out what is the parallel response. It may be that the assumptions of the passage challenge the assumptions we have about God, the church, and about what it means to be obedient to God. Indeed, a biblical passage may challenge our very perception of reality, inviting us to re-imagine our world in new ways.

Reading and belief

If you are familiar with these sorts of questions, they may seem obvious and perhaps even the only sensible way to approach it. But it is worth remembering that people do not always read text in this way, and those of other religions read their own scriptures in a very different way. How we read is closely related to what we believe about God.

We believe that God made himself known supremely in one human life in a particular time and place, which is why we take the questions of discovery seriously. But we also believe in a God who is creator of all, a father 'from whom all the families of the earth receive their name' (*Ephesians 3.15*) so that what he has revealed of himself in one time and place has relevance at all times in all places - which is why we take questions of understanding seriously. And we believe in a God who is at work in his world today, an empowering presence who leads and guides his people, so we take questions of application seriously. So we ask these three kinds of question of the Bible because we believe in a God who is Trinity.

Moving on

Frameworks are fine, but there can often come a time when our reading of and engaging with Scripture has got stale. How can our reading be refreshed? Are there new ways of approaching it?

One helpful way forward can be to think about the world *behind* the text - the historical events, contexts and people - the world *of* the text - the world 'created' by the text into which we enter as we read - and the world in *front* of the text - our own context and assumption as readers. In each of these areas there are new ways we can engage with what we are reading.

The world behind the text

The traditional way of engaging with the world behind the text, its original (historical) context, has been to read commentaries and other studies which give us facts and figures so we know some of the realities of the ancient world. For some, this can fire the imagination. But for others, it can seem like a rather dry exercise - especially if this kind of information finds its way into a sermon still in text-book format!

Why not use this information to engage in an imaginative reconstruction of a particular scene in Scripture? What might the people in the passage have been doing before the story in question? What might their daily lives have been like? What preoccupations would they have come with? A helpful way of engaging with such questions is to take different parts in a narrative, and think through the story from one character's perspective. Then read again taking another part. With some background information, this can be a very creative way of reading in a group, and can use the factual information from study and research to make the passage come alive. A particularly good example of this can be found in *The Lost Letters of Pergamum* by Bruce Longenecker.

With this sort of engagement, it is worth remembering that in preaching, unlike with school exams, your working does not need to be shown!

The world of the text

We are so overwhelmed by information and texts - printed or virtual - that in the rush to read as much as possible, we can sometimes miss what is in front of us. I have a book on my shelves called *How to Read More Slowly* and it is a skill we need to learn. Fortunately, there are lots of interesting ways to do this.

- Have a go at re-writing the passage you are considering. Read it in different versions and see how different emphases are brought out. What about trying to summarise a large section in a few hundred words? At St John's, we ask students to write the whole story of the Bible in, say 700 words. It is a very instructive exercise!
- Think about what kind of writing you are looking at - is it poetry, story, instruction, testimony, parable, or what? How do you know this? And how might this affect the way you read and interpret it - or even preach it? If a parable, should you tell a parable? Preaching on a blessing should bless people, on instructions should instruct, and so on.
- What is the structure of the passage? Lay it out yourself in such a way that the structure becomes clear; this is especially helpful with some of the 'denser' passages such as parts of Paul's letters. It is very interesting to lay out 1 Corinthians 12 so that all the repeated words and phrases ('different', 'same Spirit', 'to each') appear one above another - it really brings out what Paul is emphasising here.

- Look for hints, echoes and parallels to your passage in other parts of Scripture. It is very likely that the writer of your passage knew of earlier passages on the same theme, and was known by later writers. How does this affect the way we read this passage? Does it qualify it, or reinforce it - or something else?

The world in front of the text

A wonderful way to become aware of our own responses to a passage is to re-enact it. This is often done with narratives where there are different parts to play, perhaps with a narrator too. But it can also be very effective in monologues. I once 'acted' out Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, reciting it as if I was speaking it spontaneously. It got very uncomfortable when I sent those on the left of the central aisle into outer darkness, because the passage had really come alive for us!

Why not write your own psalm to God? Instructions on how to do this can be found in the Grove booklet *Refreshing Bible Study*, along with other ideas like the ones I have mentioned. What about reflecting on what message Jesus would send to your church if you were one of the seven churches (*Revelation 3-4*)? What would he commend you for, and what would he rebuke? What promise would be especially meaningful to you, individually and together?

In reading stories, it is often worth asking which character we identify with. When asked what we can learn from the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10*), a Christian from the developing world answered: 'When you're beaten up, you'll accept help from anyone!' He was clearly identifying not with the person with the power to help others, as we might, but with the victim in need of help. In reading the story of Zacchaeus, most of us have been taught to identify with the central character whom Jesus calls and saves. But it might be more appropriate (and challenging) for us to identify with those who marginalise someone who is different so that they nearly miss out on hearing good news because of their prejudice and resentment.

Conclusion

The Bible is greater in scope than *The Lord of the Rings*, has more adventure than *Master and Commander*, more romance than *Love Actually* and in terms of popularity and sales leaves the whole Harry Potter series in the shade! It's worth working hard at keeping our reading of the Bible fresh, so that we and those we minister to can receive all God has for them.

For further reading

Grove Biblical booklet B 31 *Refreshing Bible Study* (edited Ian Paul) contains more detail and more examples like the ones mentioned.

Grove Biblical booklet B 28 *How to Read the Book of Revelation* (by Ian Paul) explores the different aspects of reading the Book of Revelation in a way that is engaging and relevant.

Both £2.75 available post free from www.grovebooks.co.uk

The Lost Letters of Pergamum by Bruce Longenecker (Baker) is a really interesting way of opening up some issues of historical background in a creative way.

How to Read the Bible by John Goldingay (Triangle) is a short overview of all the books of the Bible and how to read them.

How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan) is a good introduction to the different kinds of literature in the Bible.

How to Read the Bible Wisely by Richard Briggs is another helpful introduction to the issues involved in Bible reading.

Exploring the New Testament and Old Testament is a series of introductions by SPCK which are accessible but will take you further in details. Six volumes altogether.