

Knowing Your Bible

Bible publishing and readership are at an all-time high, but how many really know their Bible? Some practical tips for making sense of the greatest story ever told. **by Steve Kurtright**

Jesus loves me! this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong,
They are weak, but He is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so.*

This, folks, is the simple, sweet sound of a strong biblical theology. Eugene H. Peterson's paraphrase *The Message* makes the same point in John 5:39: "You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about *me!*"

Lots of us have our heads in the Bible, some more than others. The Barna Research Group found that nearly half (45 percent) of believers read the Bible in an average week, and 12 percent read it daily.

But do we believe what we read? Are we missing the point of Scripture? According to Barna, 47 percent of American adults believe the Bible is totally accurate.¹ So we not only

* "Jesus Loves Me" by William B. Bradbury

read the Bible, but also believe what it says.

Bible boom

This is not at all what the French unbeliever Voltaire thought would happen. In the last half of the eighteenth century,

he predicted that within one hundred years, the Bible and all Christianity would be completely forgotten.

Since Voltaire's death in 1778, the Bible has flourished. It remains the bestselling and most distributed book of all time. In fact, Bible publishing is an over \$400 million-a-year retail market in the United States (*Religion BookLine*, November 1, 1996). If we can believe the research, at least nine out of ten of you reading this have one copy of the Bible in your home, and eight out of ten have more than one copy. The success of the Holy Scriptures flies in the face of Voltaire's prediction.

In the midst of the greatest Bible boom in history, we must be careful not to fall into the trap Jesus mentioned of reading the Scripture yet missing its core theme. How then can we know the Bible?

Styles and genres

One way is to recognize that the Holy Scriptures contain a diversity of styles and genres. In them are oracles, laws, prophets, dreams, interpretations



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of dreams, wisdom, history, stories, psalms, letters, and so on. The Bible is a whole library. The word *Bible* means, after all, “the little books.”²

What makes the Bible the Bible is the canon (39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament). These books are bound by stories of historical acts of God recognized in the communities of faith that exist even in the present.

One story

Knowing your Bible also means understanding that the whole Bible — from Genesis to Revelation — tells one story of God’s work in history: sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to die for the sins of the world. Through Jesus’ life and ministry, God proved that He is personal, knowable, immeasurable, and good. Nothing is more important than knowing these truths.

Those who follow and believe the story line of the Bible’s 66 books conclude that Jesus Christ

is the Bible’s central character and theme. What was written before He was born into the world looks forward to Him; what was written after His ascension looks back to Him. The Bible predicts Jesus’ coming, tells the story of His life, describes the power of His message, traces His impact on His followers, and promises His return.

The value of Scripture, therefore, is in its witness to the coming of Jesus as Christ.³ The Old Testament was highly regarded by New Testament writers as an inspired witness of Christ’s coming and significance. The New Testament Scriptures give witness to the same, a view that Paul made clear when he announced his aim: simply, to proclaim Christ as Lord and to be nothing more than a servant to that cause (2 Corinthians 4:5).

The role of the Bible, then, is to present the story of God and His coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Inspiration

Another key in knowing your Bible is understanding its inspiration.

As believers, we share a belief that Scripture is unique and plays a significant role in our faith. We also believe that God speaks to us through His story recorded in the Bible. What makes Scripture unique and significant, what makes it a vehicle for God’s voice, is inspiration.

The simplest means of verifying the inspiration of Scripture is to read what the Bible says about itself. The most notable verse, 2 Timothy 3:16, claims that all Scripture is God-inspired, or “God-breathed,” and is useful for various purposes. But where does inspiration lie? In the authors or in the words they wrote?

I suggest that rather than spend our time on this debate, we explore the inspiration of Scripture’s content — the thoughts the authors sought to convey in the words they chose. This allows us the freedom to not place inspiration exclusively with the authors (though they shared in inspiration) nor solely with the words written (though they too were affected by the power of the Spirit).

Understanding inspiration in this broader sense, we need not mistrust the entire Bible if we come across an uncertain word in a passage because of damage to an ancient manuscript or a word blatantly mistranslated, such as *easter* in the King James translation of Acts 12:4.

Knowing your Bible means acknowledging that the inspiration and reliability of Scripture



Who reads the Bible?

- Those age 65 and older read it most, while those between the ages of 18 and 25 read it least.
- Women are more likely to read the Bible than men; married adults are more likely than single adults; residents in rural areas are more likely than urban or suburban adults to open the Bible in a given week; and people living in the Midwest and South are more likely to read Scripture than those living in other regions of the country.

Who believes the Bible?

The more successful people are by the world’s standards (those making \$60,000 per year and college graduates), the more likely they are to reject the Bible as the totally accurate Word of God.

— Barna Research Group

are found in its content, in the reality to which it points, rather than in the form (literal words we read) it takes. The proof of Scripture's inspiration is in its effects on mankind in general and within the community of faith in particular as a result of our reliance on Scripture.

The most certain way to be sure that the Bible is inspired is to accept the Lord to whom the Scripture points. Paul J. Achtemeier captures the essence of inspiration: "Understanding the Bible as inspired means that this collection of writings stands in a unique relationship to the community of faith which God called into existence and which he continues to sustain."⁴

Study Methods

Once you know the unique place the Scriptures have in your life, is there a best way to become acquainted with their content?

You won't be able to approach reading and/or studying the Bible in a completely objective way. Most of us come to the Bible with questions, issues, experiences, and preconceptions. That is reason alone to read with the leading of the Holy Spirit. Ask the Spirit to open your eyes and heart to the substance and core of the Bible's meaning. Also, read the Bible in the context of the community of faith. Don't be a lone ranger in your interpretation.

With the Spirit's guidance and the support of other believers, consider the following Bible study principles:

- **Look for the author's intended meaning.** A verse can never mean what it never meant.

Recommended for Bible study

The most valuable tool for your study is a readable and accurate translation. For serious study, avoid paraphrases, one-man translations, or denominational translations, such as the *Jehovah Witnesses New World* translation. Choose one that's true to the oldest manuscripts available and free from archaic language. Suggestions include *New International Version* and *New American Standard Bible*.

You'll need a good concordance, such as Strong's or Young's. Commentaries are helpful, as are books on how to study and read the Bible. Suggestions include:

- *Living by the Book* by Howard G. and William D. Hendricks (Chicago: Moody, 1991).
- *The Complete Bible Study Tool Kit* by Stuart Briscoe (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991).
- *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

More serious students might consider *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* by Dr. William W. Klein, Dr. Craig L. Blomberg, and Dr. Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. (Word, 1993).

And if you're on the Net, check out these Bible sites: Bible Gateway (www.gospelcom.net/bible/); Online Study Library (goshen.net/losll/); Institute for Christian Leadership (www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/christian-books.html#bibles). — Steve Kurtright

To help you determine intent, explore who the author was writing to originally and place yourself in the time and situation he was addressing. A simple way to do this is to ask of the text five questions: who, what, when, where, and why. The historical and cultural background will add a great deal to your understanding.

- **Know the type of literature you're reading.**

Remember, there's poetry, history, prophecy, proverbs, parables, letters, and revelation in the Bible. Unless you know what type of literature you're reading, you won't know the meaning of a particular passage.

For example, you wouldn't understand and/or interpret the teaching of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark in the same way

you'd understand a statement from the book of Revelation. While Jesus' teaching about moral behavior may be taken literally, the description of a ten-horned beast must be viewed as symbolic rather than literal. The reason? Revelation is a different type of literature from the Gospels.

Nor would you interpret Psalms or Proverbs the same as you would the prophetic books, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. While the prophets used poetry, prophetic passages are a different type of biblical literature and demand different interpretive lenses.

- **Notice the grammar and structure within a passage.**

Watch for connectors, such as *therefore*, *and*, *for*, and *but*. These words link thoughts,



The Word for the world

At the present rate of translation, it will take more than 100 years to get some of the Bible into all the 6,000-plus languages of the earth. The American Bible Society and its international partners are chipping away at the problem. According to the 1996 *Scripture Language Report*, the total number of languages into which at least one book of the Bible has been translated now stands at 2,167. Scripture publications in 39 more languages were registered at either the American Bible Society Library in New York City or at the British and Foreign Bible Society in Cambridge, England last year. Forty-two languages were reported to have received first-time New Testaments in 1996. The whole Bible was completed for six language groups that have not previously had access to the Bible in their language.

paragraphs, and chapters that give a text meaning and clarity.

Watching for these connectors will keep you from straying from the author's thoughts. Also, it will help you understand the application of the texts you're reading.

• **Read a biblical passage in light of the whole Bible.** In other words, don't study a verse in isolation from the rest of Scripture. Let the Scripture interpret itself. Because the Bible is a story, many of its points build on each other. Have a grasp of the entire story, and don't isolate one text from another. Understand it in light of the big picture.

For example, why did God command Israel to kill the various inhabitants of Cana and at the same time command them not to murder? Understanding the big picture provides the answer.

Similarly, never base doctrine or a moral/ethical teaching on one obscure passage. To illustrate, read Psalm 147:10 and ask yourself, "Is the psalmist teach-

ing that men should not wear walking shorts? Or is there a more accurate understanding?"

Consider Deuteronomy 22:5. Is this a command extending to our time, that women should not wear slacks or pant suits? What's the story behind the passage?

Determine the meaning of an unclear verse by examining the clear teachings on the subject elsewhere in the Bible. Avoid reading snippets of Scripture. Read entire books or sections dealing with a particular subject. When you do read a short passage, do so with an understanding of the whole book in mind.

• **Listen with your heart.** There is often more to reading the Scriptures than just reading to see what it says or means. Simply doing responsible study is not enough, as revealing as that can be. Come to the text asking yourself, What is this asking of me? What should I hear? What is this text teaching me? More important, have I experienced God in my reading?

Conclusion

In the opening chapter of *Tom Sawyer*, Tom tries to persuade Huck Finn to join him in his plans to form a band of robbers and to take captives as pirates used to do. Huck asks Tom what pirates do with captives. Tom answers, "Ransom them."

"Ransom? What's that?" asks Huck.

"I don't know. But that's what they do. I seen it in books; and so of course that's what we got to do," explains Tom. "Do you want to go doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?"

Jesus encountered people like Tom: They were always quoting and repeating things they had found in a Book, but their words had been separated from the spirit of the author's original intent.⁵ When we quote the Bible, our words should reflect that we know the Bible. Just as important, our *lives* need to reflect that we know the Bible and thus that we understand its meaning and message. When we know the Bible, we aren't so likely to get things "all muddled up."

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¹ George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1991).

² Krister Stendahl, "The Bible As a Classic and the Bible As Holy Scripture," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (March 1984): 6.

³ Norman L. Geisler, William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 75.

⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 162.

⁵ "Quote, Misquote," *Our Daily Bread* (September 1997).