



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Studying the Word of God
(*Scripture*, pp. 29-38)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Urgency of Inspiration
(*Scripture*, pp. 64-65)
- 📖 Why Bother with the Bible?
(*Scripture*, pp. 78-80)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Studying the Word of God

When we think of “studying” Scripture, we envision a process of gathering information. Scripture, like everything else in modern life, becomes a commodity. The classical Christian approach starts from an altogether different perspective: that in the Bible God still speaks to humans.

Responsive Prayer

Lord, your word is both a wound for us and a balm.

With it you pierce our pride and our illusions of self-sufficiency.

You reprove our selfishness, you strip away our condescension, and we know that not one of us has yet arrived.

Forgive us our sins, and heal us with a word from you.

We confess that we have read your Word selfishly in order to justify our own thoughts.

We have failed to read it prayerfully, seeking guidance and wisdom from above.

We have used your words to serve our own ends, lording ourselves over others and rebelling against your teachings.

Heal us with a word from you, so that we may be whole. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:10-11

Reflection

“Praying and studying Scripture were once considered two complementary modes of communication with God: in prayer humans speak to God; in Scripture God speaks to humans,” Stephen Chapman observes. “It is this sense of being *addressed* that characterizes the reality of Scripture within Christian tradition.”

Yet we often dodge this holy conversation by studying the Bible as though it were “just another book” that we can mine for useful information about exotic cultures, the history of ancient Israel, the ‘real’ historical Jesus, the folkways of the first Christian groups, and so on. Or, if we think the Bible has something to say regarding our lives, we prefer to read the study Bible notes that can point us to the information we want “in short, streamlined delivery with reduced investment of time and effort.”

How can we escape such historical touring and opportunistic trawling when we read the Bible? Chapman has some ideas.

- ▶ *Repurpose historical study to critically discern what God is saying today.* “Scripture requires study [of history]...because God has chosen to speak in an ongoing way through words recorded long ago,” Chapman notes. But this study must be “critical” in two ways: on the one hand, we need “detailed knowledge of the whole Bible and profound intellectual wrestling with the substance of faith”; on the other, we must cultivate the proper dispositions and affections. Knowledge and ethics are intertwined; to hear God speaking to our communities, we need attuned minds and obedient hearts.

Though we do learn much from non-Christians and heterodox Christians about the theological meaning of Scripture, this does not refute “the early church’s basic insight: to study the Bible well means to stake one’s entire life on it, to be a disciple as well as a reader.” Of course, due to “individual human limitations and



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personal frailty, this insight means in turn that biblical interpretation will be most reliable and robust in authentic Christian community, where scriptural interpreters can complement each other's strengths ... and all are committed to the path of communal discipleship."

- ▶ *Focus on the central questions:* "What is God saying to us today through this text?" and "If our church took this scriptural word with utmost seriousness, what would we do differently this week in our local community?" and "How is God using this part of the Bible to show us what it means to be disciples of Jesus right now, right here?" One useful guide to staying focused, Chapman suggests, is what the biblical text *says*, rather than trying to fill in the silences. "While there is much to be gained from more creative approaches to the Bible, speculating about the psychology of biblical characters invariably leads away from serious reflection on the ways of God. Speculating about history ('maybe back then...') not only leaves the text behind but winds up in a cul-de-sac of undecidability ('maybe...I just don't know')."
- ▶ *Read with literary sensitivity.* The Bible is not a "pious tract"; it employs the same rhetorical strategies and effects that we might find in novels or poems. Biblical narratives not only have a "story" or plot, but a "discourse" or manner of telling their story. Therefore, Chapman says, "Perceptive readers pay loving attention to how the biblical story is told because they understand that the Bible's meaning also lies in that *how*, that the Bible does not only wish to report things that happened but also convey a point of view about them."
- ▶ *Learn to read the Bible as a two-testament document.* Chapman extends the idea of "discourse" to the Bible as a whole. When the Old Testament was not enough for them, the early Christians kept it and did not edit it to harmonize with Christian realities. They learned to read the testaments together, because "The gospel proclaims Jesus as the messiah of the Jews, and not only the redeemer of the Gentiles." Reading the Old Testament "prospectively," they peered ahead through its stories to the divine act in Christ that exceeds its boundaries; reading it "retrospectively," they re-read its events and figures with new insight as gesturing toward Christ.

Study Questions

1. How have you been tempted to read the Bible as "just another book"? Evaluate your Bible study with Stephen Chapman's four recommendations.
2. Discuss Chapman's idea that we should rename Bible study groups either "Bible action groups" or "Bible implementation squads" to show "what is at stake in consulting the Bible is not only what we are to know but how we are to live."
3. In what two major ways does Bible study matter in our lives, according to Bill Ireland? Do these match your experience?
4. How is Matthew, as he is depicted in Caravaggio's *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, a model of the faithful reader of Scripture?

Departing Hymn: "Many Books, One Holy Canon"

Studying the Word of God

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on how Bible study should matter in our lives.
2. To check whether our approach to Bible study has become (in Stephen Chapman's words) "too distanced, too cerebral, too individualistic."
3. To consider Chapman's four concrete suggestions to help us resist historical touring and opportunistic trawling when we study the Bible.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Scripture (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

Are the pace of our lives and the rise of information technologies changing (and deforming) how we read Scripture? Stephen Chapman thinks so. He writes, "When people think of 'studying' Scripture today, they often envision a process of gathering information. After all, the twenty-first century is the age of Google and Wikipedia. Information is produced and gathered constantly. Internet search engines are so much a part of daily life that families access them at the dinner table. Cell phones are magic-like portals to universal knowledge. News reports rocket around the globe, minute by minute, 24/7. Even though this communications technology is a great gift, attempting to monitor the overwhelming flow of information is like trying to take a drink of water from a fire hydrant.

"Faced with this challenge, the act of reading focuses more and more on expediency and becomes fundamentally opportunistic. 'What can I get out of this text?' is the driving question. 'How can I find the information I need as quickly and efficiently as possible?' 'How can I zero in on what is important for me and use it to my best advantage?' Reading takes place so that information can be consumed, and 'studying' is just one more way for consumers to locate the right product. Scripture, like everything else in modern life, has become a commodity." (*Scripture*, 29)

If we are willing to resist this trend, Chapman has some concrete guidance to offer for our Bible study.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:10-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Stephen Chapman's worry that much of our Bible study today has become "too distanced, too cerebral, too individualistic" is certainly in line with the concerns raised in the previous two study guides in this series,

“A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture” and “The Journey of Reading Scripture.” This study focuses on Chapman’s four practical recommendations to resist these trends and return to the classic Christian expectation that God may speak to us in life-altering ways as we prayerfully study Scripture. Use this opportunity to evaluate your own approach to Bible study individually and in church study groups.

Study Questions

1. Stephen Chapman notes two trends of treating the Bible as “just another book.” One treats the Bible as an aid to meet our felt needs and seeks to locate the most useful passages efficiently. A plethora of specialized study Bibles, tailored lessons, and need-based sermons encourage this approach. “If this part of the Bible is not speaking to me,” we learn to say, “then it is simply not the part to which I need to pay attention.” The second uses the Bible as a sourcebook on ancient times. “Scripture is an artifact, a transcript that relates history: what God once did and how our forebears in the faith responded.” Members may identify more with one or the other of the trends, but both are temptations for every Bible study group.

Form four small groups to answer these questions: “How ‘critical’ is our Bible study in the two ways Chapman describes?” “How can we keep our focus on the central questions?” “How well are we reading the Bible with sensitivity to its literary forms?” and “How well do we read and relate the two testaments in our Bible study?”

2. Maybe Chapman is being a bit facetious, but his point is clear. The word “study” now connotes dispassionate research that separates gaining new knowledge from changing our lives. Such research pushes us to reexamine our starting points, yet the “endless modern debates about the Bible’s relation to history and science, not to mention the critical debates in academic scholarship over the history of the Bible’s literary formation, have all too conveniently served to deflect attention away from the gospel’s call for transformed lives.”

Use this opportunity to perform a spiritual checkup on your Bible study group. Has it become “too distanced, too cerebral, too individualistic”? If it has, why did it move that direction and how will you respond? Perhaps in your congregation there is a division of labor: some groups study the Bible in a scholarly way, while other groups implement the changes or programs of service that God is calling the congregation to do. If you think that is the case, how are the groups in regular communication to check and balance each other’s work?

3. Bill Ireland says that Bible study teaches us to look beneath the surface of our lives and see God at work in every situation. That is because “Time and again, people [in the Bible] discovered God working behind the scenes during difficult circumstances or revealing the hidden potential of ordinary things.” Also, Bible study challenges the cultural messages about how we should live; it gives us critical distance from the “five hundred channels on television, radio programs designed exclusively for our demographic, magazines in print and on-line that are devoted to exclusive interests and tastes” telling us what to love and how to act.

Invite members to share their experiences (in personal or group Bible study) of coming to see God at work in ordinary events or gaining a Godly critical perspective on their lives.

4. In *Inspiration of St. Matthew* (on the cover), “Caravaggio conveys urgency in Matthew, who is not seated as a scribe deep in thought, but is rushing back to the table to write down the inspiration sent from God via the angel,” Heidi Hornik writes. “Matthew becomes an example of the faithful reader of Scripture: captured by the immediacy of the experience and intent on remembering that moment of inspiration.”

How can we remember moments of divine inspiration and direction that come to us through Bible study? Perhaps members make action notes, keep a personal journal, share their experiences with a spiritual friend, or so on. Are there ways of concluding your group study that would help members respond with their lives to what they have learned?

Departing Hymn

“Many Books, One Holy Canon” is on pp. 55-57 of Scripture. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.