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How Should We Read the Bible?

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How Should We Read the Bible?

Abstract

"Embrace the fact that passages have a range of valid interpretations."

Posting about ways to read the Bible from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/how-should-we-read-the-bible/>?

Keywords

In All Things, Bible, hermeneutics, learning, intention

Disciplines

Christianity | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

How Should We Read the Bible?

 [inallthings.org/how-should-we-read-the-bible/](https://allinallthings.org/how-should-we-read-the-bible/)

Benjamin Lappenga

This question (“How should we read the Bible?”) is deeply important to me, both as a professional biblical scholar and as a Christian seeking to hear the voice of God in Scripture. There are many other ways the question can and should be approached, but here are seven bits that I find myself talking about frequently:

1. Make peace with the fact that we do indeed need to *learn* how to read the Bible. Sometimes our Reformation emphasis on putting the Bible in the hands of everyone (a good impulse!) leads to the false conclusion that the Bible requires no interpretation (“the Bible says it, I believe it, and that’s the end of it”). Although the Bible is unique, it is also a book (actually a library of books), and as Todd Billings reminds us, “the Bible does not teach us how to read books.”¹ So seek help, take a class, learn from others. The Ethiopian eunuch had it right when asked if he understood the Bible: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31).

2. Be intentional about reading the Bible *as a Christian*. Since the Bible requires interpretation, the meaning we find in the Bible is in part determined by *who we are* and *how we have been formed*. Dale Martin is right that “taking the Bible to be nothing more than a historical artifact will produce different readings of it than if one takes it to be divine communication.”² *Theological interpretation* is the name we give to interpreting the text of the Bible *as Scripture*. Importantly, this is not a “method” but a way of approaching the Bible with eyes of faith.

3. Read the Bible in community with other believers, past and present. Theological interpretation requires that we read the Bible *within the community of faith*. This includes reading with our local church communities, but it also means seeking God’s word along with Christians from *other traditions*, from *other parts of the world*, and from *other periods of history* (especially interpreters and from the early centuries of the faith).³

4. Embrace the fact that passages have a range of valid interpretations. If we read with Christians from other times and places, we encounter a range of interpretations — and this is good! Historic, orthodox Christianity has always believed that passages have multiple meanings — it was not until the rise of the historical-critical method in the late 17th century that interpreters began to look for a single meaning (usually defined as the meaning intended by a book’s original author, despite the fact that we do not possess access to the minds of these authors).⁴ We might find some readings strange, but no doubt Irenaeus or Augustine or Calvin would find many of our “plain sense” interpretations equally puzzling, and we gain valuable lessons in humility when we generously engage the readings of others.

5. Recognize that Christian readings of Scripture will be subject to criteria that won’t apply to all readers. The flip side to admitting multiple interpretations is that not all interpretations are equally valid for Christians. You should think deeply and carefully about these, but the categories I have found helpful for determining valid readings are those set out by Joel Green:⁵ we read the text in its final form, we read the text as a whole, we read the text according to the general rules of language, we recognize that the language is socially and historically embedded, we recognize that the text is now part of the canon of Scripture, and we accept readings that cohere with the ecumenical creeds of the church.⁶

6. Our readings of Scripture must be put into play in our lives. A final criterion for determining a

Christian reading of Scripture is that it must *matter*.⁷ We do well to heed Søren Kierkegaard's warnings about keeping the Bible at arm's length (especially so for people in my profession!): "The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world?... Christian scholarship is the Church's prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament."⁸

7. *Tolle lege* ("pick up and read")! If you are reading this column, perhaps you are past the point of needing to be encouraged to read the Bible. In my experience, however, we are incredibly (and diabolically) skilled at avoiding reading the text itself, not least for the reasons Kierkegaard gives. Even when we "study the text," our assumption that we know what it *should* say prevents us from noticing what it actually *does* say. Put your trusty study Bible down for a while (do you find yourself more engrossed by the notes than the text itself?). Get a new translation or two (try the NRSV alongside *The Message*). Read a version without the chapters and verses marked.⁹ Whatever you do, read, and read with expectation. *This is the word of the Lord!* But watch out: "some things are hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16), and the text might not be what you think it is.

Footnotes

1. J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 36. [↩](#)
2. Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 21. [↩](#)
3. For a helpful discussion of the value of premodern exegesis, see Billings, *The Word of God*, 180-83. One place to start for learning how non-Western readers approach Scripture is Tokunboh Adeyemo, Solomon Andria, Kwame Bediako, Isabel Apawo Phiri, and Yusufu Turaki, eds., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). [↩](#)
4. Augustine says a number of things that are sometimes equated with the modern notion of "authorial intent," but Augustine insisted that any reading of a text that does not embrace "love of God and love of neighbor" is not a valid reading; see, e.g., *Confessions* 12.16.23; 12.23.32-25.34; 13.29.44; *Christian Instruction* 2.6.8; 3.27.38. [↩](#)
5. See, e.g., Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible As Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007). [↩](#)
6. [That is](#), the [Nicene Creed](#), the Athanasian Creed, and the Apostles Creed. Notice that this is not the same thing as saying that later confessions or catechisms contain the only valid readings. [↩](#)
7. As I wrote about biblical interpretations on this website earlier this year: "Christians should remember that our beliefs are only genuine if our lives are carried out within the community of God's people and are marked by the transformative power of the Spirit. If our beliefs result in retreat from

the world, hatred toward human beings, neglect of the marginalized, or the desecration of the earth, something has gone awry, no matter how long a tradition has been around or how sound our exegesis seems to be.” ↩

8. Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard Kierkegaard* (ed. Charles E. Moore; Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1999), 193. ↩
9. An intriguing (if expensive!) version recently exploded on Kickstarter and will be [available soon](#). ↩