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Reading the Bible Through Life

Wendell Willis

As one who has worked in Christian education, I believe that I have noticed a trend in the last two decades within churches about Bible study. Let me admit at the outset, that this is a personal observation. I have done no polling to check it out. If your experience is otherwise, I would be interested in hearing from you.

What I have witnessed is a trend away from Bible study in Sunday school classes, almost wholly to topical interests. I acknowledge that this may be a "straw man" in some ways, for topical studies can use the Bible a lot, just as ostensibly textual studies may use the Bible as a launching stage to get to the personal interests of the teacher. Still, even with this admission, I am curious about how we study the Bible, and why we seem to be shifting away from this--even in the specific time that churches set aside for this task.

One answer, of course, is that in a video culture, such as our own, all reading is problematic. In the university where I teach New Testament, I increasingly realize that it is not just that the students don't read *my* assignments, they simply do not read much at all. They are "post-literate."

Another explanation for the increasing disinterest in Bible study is that while familiarity may not breed contempt, it does sometimes breed disinterest. Adults who have spent a lifetime in Bible study, may feel that they have mastered the subject and its contents. That is one of the greatest challenges of teaching and of preaching--reaching the already converted. How often do we anticipate or expect, that anything at all will "happen" in our study? Are the ideas and approaches like comfortable old shoes?

I want to examine present Bible study in relationship to three questions as we begin. The first is the question of "how" we read the Bible, the mechanics if you will. The second is "why" we read the Bible. After all there are a large number of folks around us who regard Jesus as important for life, but who do not do Bible study. Third, what is the "goal" of reading the Bible? This is more than why we do it, since we can do a number of things which seem to have no real goal. I mean, if we decide to study the Bible, what goals must be fulfilled in order for us to deem our study successful?

How We Study the Bible

I see two major difficulties in Bible study in our churches: first, our tendency to dis-integrate the text and, second, to study the text against its grain--demand of it answers to questions that it does not ask. Let me elaborate on these.

By "dis-integrate" the text I mean the common practice of picking it to bits and pieces. We take what was written as a whole and so atomize and divide it as to make it impossible to appreciate it as a whole. How many Christians know that Paul and Mark did not write chapters and verses, but complete letters and a gospel? The practice of versification in most translations cannot but unconsciously give the impression that these writings are meant to be read in snatches, or at least in chapters. The result is that we may become experts on trees, but ignorant of forests. This is a procedure which is all the more problematic when we stretch out our studies over a long period of time (e.g. a two year class on Romans).

The best rebuke of this approach of "vivisecting" the writings of the Bible that I know is found in Juan Carlos Ortiz' little book *Disciple*.¹ This is put somewhat in caricature (but only slightly, I fear), and is thus humorous to a degree. But I suspect it may betray a gallows humor view of Bible study. What is lost in the

¹Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple* (Creation House, 1975) 107-109.

atomistic Bible study is the pulse that ties all the pieces together. It is as if we dissect the cadaver and are unable to appreciate what made it originally a "person"--its life center.

The second methodological problem is reading the Bible against the grain, contrary to its intent. Often it is not that the Bible doesn't give the answer we want, so much as it doesn't ask the questions we ask. One can ask questions that don't have answers precisely because of how you ask them. (How many free throws after a touchdown?)

To take a recent question of popular debate among Christians in some areas, to ask of the Bible an answer to the question of whether we are permitted to take part in a state lottery is to ask a question that it does not consider. We may find in the Bible principles to consider for guidance in this issue--but it is unfair to press the story of soldiers gambling for Jesus' seamless robe into a critique of gambling! Other examples are legion.

Let me make perfectly clear my concern here. *I am not denying that the Bible may teach us a lot about how we should be Christians today; I am stating that we do wrong seeking to wrest an answer from a letter that it never asked.*

Why Read the Bible?

I suspect that the initial reaction of many readers to this question is "How obvious! We study the Bible because God gave it to us, to reveal himself." That would certainly appear to be an adequate motivation for Bible study, but I am really asking when we do the studying that God expects of us--what do we expect this study to accomplish.

Perhaps you have seen pictures of Buddhist "prayer wheels" found around temples in the East. A passing worshipper gives it a spin and thus another prayer is offered. No one asks the passerby for his attitudes, or interests; he may not even be conscious of what he does. The prayer is effective by virtue of being done. I have often thought that much Bible study that I have been around is like this. The doing of it is effective and acceptable to

God. This is what I would regard as "thought-less" Bible study, in which those who study do not really concern themselves with reasons for doing what they do.

The motive of Bible study which I grew up with was really focused upon *the recovery of right doctrine*. We studied the Bible to learn right beliefs that God expected of us. In most every case, of course, we knew the belief before we opened the Bible, and only wanted to remind ourselves of our previous discoveries. That is why the biblical books we studied were so very predictable. Mostly it was the Acts of Apostles, or the letters of Paul. On rare occasions we might take up Revelation, either to answer mistaken views being peddled door to door, or because some teacher was foolish enough to ask what the class would prefer to study next.

It is perfectly obvious to all that the Bible contains and teaches doctrines--beliefs. However, to read the Bible just for beliefs is to pay attention only to the intellectual side of its teaching. One of the major difficulties with our reading the Bible just for its doctrines is that it is too intellectualizing and too rationalizing of the broader concerns of the Bible itself. Paul did not write his letters to be published as tracts, or even collected essays. Even less did he research his letters with index cards in the library of Antioch or Corinth. Just as it truncates a human being to reduce him/her to thoughts, so also it truncates the Bible to reduce it to doctrine.

Moreover, most often the doctrines we studied were usually selectively chosen as those where we came out right, and were studied for our interests. Let me illustrate this from my recent experience.

When we moved from central Texas to Springfield, Missouri, I made an interesting discovery about churches. In Springfield is located the national headquarters for the Assemblies of God. They are among the most prominent groups in the city, their members belonging to the influential citizenry of the town. This is a far-cry from the Assemblies of God that I grew up knowing about, a small minority living on the wrong side of the tracks.

Having moved to a stronghold for the "AG," I have learned something about their doctrinal interests. To my surprise I have found that their favorite portion of the Bible is also the book of Acts. However, while I grew up reading the book of Acts for instruction on baptism, Lord's supper, and church organization, the AG's read it for its emphasis upon the Holy Spirit. My point is that both we and they only read the book for those doctrines that we want to know about.

Twenty years ago I was introduced to yet another way of reading the Bible. *That is the reading of the Bible for historical content.* In fact, the first teacher who showed me that the study of the Bible could not only be fulfilling but intellectually stimulating, was a Bible teacher at Abilene Christian University. He introduced me to the wonders of the Greek language and to the historical backgrounds of the individual writings of the New Testament. I first read in the arcane works of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and tried to follow Philo in his meanderings. From this teacher I received not only great knowledge, but also that the desire to know more.

Again, I do not wish to be misunderstood--I do not regret that experience in any way. I may have even found a personal reason to be a Bible student in my admiration for that teacher and the wisdom he shared with me. But it is possible wrongly to regard this historical understanding as the basic motivation for Bible study.

But, beyond my own confessionals, I think that a number of Sunday School teachers have switched from the "doctrinal" to the "historical" approach for Bible classes. They share with their classes information about the meanings of Greek terms, the impact of Stoic philosophy, and other scarcely known historical footnotes. And the students are very often willing participants in such a venture, going forth at the end of each hour bemused and amused. They are grateful for being initiated into the ways of arcane biblical wisdoms, and tell the teacher in lauding terms, "I never knew that before." It would take a rare person not to regard his Bible teaching as successful in the face of such praise. (I suspect this is

why Barclay's commentaries have come to have such an honored place alongside the copy of Josephus in most church libraries.)

Yet another trend in Bible study that I take to be a motive for reading the Bible is more recent--in my experience. It is reading the Bible as illustrating contemporary wisdom. It used to be the case that teachers would occasionally refer to some famous author, or "Dear Abby" to illustrate a biblical truth. In recent years, this procedure seems to me to have reversed. Now more often the real "text" read for the Bible class is derived from counselors, psychologists, cultural analysis, and especially that new breed, "forecasters." I have seen some times when I thought this was done well, but most often it strikes me as something of an embarrassing admission for the biblical guild--that finding our own pantry bare for useful teachings, we are ready to raid our counselor neighbors for the main course and use the biblical texts for condiments.

Reading the Bible Through Life

How did the writings of the Bible, or let me restrict myself to the New Testament for this essay, come to be written? What motivated the various authors to write? Clearly in the case of Paul it is because of problems in life that he saw in the churches he addressed. But we are not accustomed to thinking of the life-situation dimension and it is often overlooked when we read the letters sifting them only for their "doctrine." This is a dimension, however, which I not only find necessary for accurate understanding of the original writings, but especially useful for our concern to see how life today intersects with the original intent of the Bible's writings. Think how much Paul's letters are concerned with how Christians should (or should not!) live. Philemon is the easiest example to see, for it really contains no "doctrines" (in the restricted sense of the word) at all. It is solely concerned about the relationship between two Christians, one a slave and the other his owner. But Philemon bristles with "theo-logy" in the ways in which Paul addresses this life problem.

Or take the example of I Corinthians. In it Paul addresses a collage of life-style catastrophes: lawsuits, marriage and re-marriage (and celibacy), incest, eating customs, how the Lord's Supper is observed, and the general way in which worship occurs in Corinth. Again, although Paul presumes and argues from doctrine (in the restricted sense) the letter is aimed at lifestyle issues. The Corinthians were not behaving as Christians. I could continue with Galatians (the question of what to do about keeping the Law for non-Jews), Philippians (minor internal squabbles among Christians), and so on.

Let me say a little about the theoretical base of the model for Bible reading which I am proposing. It is nothing really revolutionary and requires no unusual skills. It is more a matter of what questions we bring to the New Testament than anything else. It simply assumes that *life-style and doctrine (in the restricted sense) are integrally and reciprocally related*. We live how we believe and we believe how we live (Romans 6, for example, says that those who give their lives in service to Satan are Satan's slaves, regardless of what they profess). This relationship I take to be a circle, a loop. Like the chicken and egg question, there is no unambiguous answer to which comes first. We all encounter doctrine and life-styles together as a pair.

If we focus our reading of the Bible on life and seek to learn what life-style is described and/or proscribed in these writings, I think there is one immediate gain for Bible study. Reading the Bible in this manner enables us to "make contact" with the original intent of the writer. We may, or may not, share certain ideas found in his culture, but we are all engaged in trying to live as Christians.

One of the difficulties with the strict historical approach that I mentioned earlier (and which, I remind you, I still value), is that it often lacks the ability to bridge the time gap between the writing of the New Testament and our own day. This is especially the case when we use the historical approach to deal with ideas (doctrine) alone. This happens even if we are very clear about the

ideas themselves (often problematic for the historical reconstructions).

For example, if we are able to prove that the letters of John are addressed to the rise of the docetic doctrine that the Christ was not really a "flesh and blood" person, but only wore a "human suit" and in his essence remained fully divine--how do we bring that into our times? I've never met a single theoretical docetic Christian, who would argue that Jesus was not really fully human. (On the other hand, I have met a number of practicing docetics who regard Jesus as so fully divine that his human activities are unimportant for their understanding of his life's mission.)

I hope that I am being clear on this point, but fear that I may not be. The letters of John certainly address the historical and ideological problem of Docetism. However, this ideological problem arises because of a problem of life, not just theory. It is the gap between accurate historical information and its present-day importance that I wish to face with the approach of reading the Bible through life.

A Model for Reading Through Life

I keep returning to the original question: What do we hope or expect to gain from reading the Bible? (I have in mind especially in Bible classes.) In previous days our purpose was *to understand correct doctrines*; in recent years *to receive new information*. Both these purposes regard the goal of Bible study as gaining information. Certainly this is a valid goal for education of all sorts, Bible included. However, it does not seem to me that this is a fully sufficient goal. I am not most concerned that my children have accurate information, but that they have proper attitudes and live faithful lives.

A second-level purpose in Bible study is more life-related when it asks us to *examine our attitudes* as well as our knowledge. Jesus, you will recall rebuked the Pharisees most often for their attitudes of self-righteousness and haughty disapproval of others.

How can we read the Bible with concern for whether our attitudes are changed?

A third level is that of *conduct, or behavior change*. It is not enough just to have correct definitions about *agape* in comparison to other Greek words for love. It is not enough even to feel sympathy for the battered stranger in the ditch. The key issue, it seems to me, is whether our lives are remodeled by the gospel. Paul admonishes us in Romans 12:1 not to have our minds shaped by the world, but by faith--then he proceeds to tell us what we are to do as believers (12:3-8).

If we try to read the Bible through life we must ask ourselves some questions as well as what we ask of the Bible. The first question, a decisive one, I think, is whether we tend to regard the Bible only as a *warrant* for what we are, or also see it as a *critique* of who we are. This is a skill very difficult to develop and practice. In their interesting book *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*² Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart tell of a Sunday school teacher who concluded the study of the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee with this prayer: "We thank you, Lord, that we are not like the Pharisee in this story"! (And in a very refreshing bit of candor, they add, "And we had to remind each other not to laugh too hard, lest our laughter be saying, "Thank you, Lord, that we are not like that Sunday school teacher.") As Paul teaches us most clearly in Romans 2, there is nothing in grace that humanity is not able to pervert.

One of the best teachers I ever had, formulated for his students this interpretive principle: "Whenever you find the Bible teaching something that you already held to be right, suspect that you are misinterpreting it." He tried to instill in each of us appreciation for what may be called the "anti-church" character of the Bible. The Bible calls us into question more than it congratulates us on what we have achieved. This seems to me to be reading "with the grain." The prophetic books, and the letters of the New

²Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Zondervan, 1982) 134.

Testament all were originally written not as letters of recommendation for Israel or the church, but indictments by the Lord of the church.

In conclusion, let me list the basic questions which help us read the Bible with a focus upon issues of living.

1. What is the situation of the readers regarding the world outside the church?
2. What is the situation of the first readers regarding each other? What is happening within the church?
3. What are they admonished to do/not do? (i.e., not just think).
4. What arguments/reasons are set forth to encourage their actions in this regard?



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