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CHURCH LEADER'S PERSONAL GROWTH:

Bible Study Methods

Rules of interpretation:

The methodology used to study the Bible is vital as to how it is understood and taught. This is why pastors and church leaders need to be careful how they study and teach the Word of God. Because of the importance of this task, a church leader must “be diligent to present [himself] approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Therefore he who expounds the Word of God needs to be certain that the message he proclaims as, “Thus says the Lord,” actually is what God says in His Word. A church leader must remember that he will one day give an account for his teachings. James made this clear when he warned his readers, stating: “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment” (Jam. 3:1). God takes seriously how His Word is taught, and He expects those who teach it to take it seriously as well. He does not expect church leaders to teach “as doctrines the precepts of men” (Mat. 15:9), nor to add or take away from His Word (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Pro. 30:5-6; Rev. 22:18), thus manipulating or forcing their will and desires upon others as the scribes and Pharisees did, loading them down with unreasonable and heavy burdens (Mat. 23:1-4). Therefore they need to be sure they are not distorting of the Word of God, for one day they will be held accountable as to how they handled the Word of God.



There are two basic approaches when studying God's Word -- the deductive approach and the inductive approach. The deductive approach is when the student goes to the biblical text with preconceived ideas of what it is expressing. This approach can be dangerous because he is attributing a meaning to the text which the text may in fact not be conveying. For example in Luke 6:31, Jesus said: “Treat others the same way you want them to treat you.” Using the deductive approach to Bible study, someone who was mistreated by someone else might view this verse in the following manner: “He treated me badly, therefore that must mean that he wants to be treated badly in return.” Such an interpretation could be a catalyst for retaliation and revenge since the verse was not correctly interpreted within its proper context. Often this is the way in which Bible study is approached. When this occurs, the sermons which are preached and the Bible studies which are taught are a distortion of the truth.

When using the inductive approach to Bible study, the Bible student studies the Word of God with the objective of understanding the intent of the biblical writer. In other words, he will not interpret the passage from his own preconceived notions, but instead will derive from the text its actual meaning. To do this he needs to take into account at least five rules of interpretation:

1. Literal
2. Contextual
3. Historical
4. Grammatical
5. Dispensational

Understanding a text in its literal or normal form is important to understanding the correct meaning of the passage. What this means is that the Bible student must interpret the passage normally, as he would any other piece of literature; understanding the form of writing the author used. For example, did the author write straightforwardly (without figures of speech), metaphorically, allegorically, poetically, proverbially, prophetically, etc.? In understanding these writing styles, the Bible student will gain insight into how the author meant his writings to be understood.

When studying a passage contextually, the Bible student must work at understanding the passage within its context within the Bible. Therefore, he must first attempt to understand the passage within its immediate context (surrounding verse or verses), then within the context of the paragraph in which it is located, then within its immediate chapter, followed by its surrounding chapters, book, genre, testament, and then the Bible as a whole. This is important because in order for the biblical writer's original intent to be understood, the Bible student must understand the thought process of the writer from beginning to end. This is not possible if the passage is isolated and interpreted outside of its context.

Knowing the historical context of a passage is also vital when trying to understand the author's original intent. While writing, he wrote from his historical perspective, which was commonplace to him, yet unknown to his modern-day readers. This is why it is important for the Bible student to ascertain the historical context, as well as read commentaries and histories which address that era and geographical locale. Doing so will help the student understand historical background information which will give insight into the context and original meaning of the passage.

Understanding the grammar of a passage is also key to properly interpreting its meaning. Considering the syntax of a verse helps the Bible student understand sentence structure. Understanding the meanings of biblical words as they were understood when they were written is also crucial because many words have changed in nuance or in meaning over time. Therefore taking this lexical information into account is necessary if the Bible student wants to properly understand the correct intent of the passage. Not doing so can lead to a misinterpretation and an inaccurate handling of the Word of God.

Interpreting a passage from a dispensational perspective is also imperative. This is accomplished when the Bible student takes into account in which

dispensation¹ or economy (cf. Eph. 1:10, “administration”) a passage of Scripture was written in or refers to. This is important because he must understand when and to whom a specific passage of Scripture was written. For example, in the Law of Moses, do the dietary and priestly laws apply to believers today? If so, why do they apply? If not, then why not? Also, how does someone determine which promises in Scripture apply strictly to the nation of Israel and which apply to the church? Someone who does not take into account dispensational interpretation may apply passages meant for Israel to the church. They also may not view the church and Israel as two separate entities, but the church as an extension of the nation of Israel. Again, an improper interpretation of a passage can result when not studying the Scriptures from a dispensational perspective.

Bible study methods:

What are the basic steps for studying the Bible? The four simple yet necessary steps are:

1. Observation
2. Interpretation
3. Correlation
4. Application

These four steps can be compared to the process used by a detective who is investigating a crime scene. All are necessary to come to a correct conclusion and application.

Observation is the first step of Bible study. In this first part of the process, the student (biblical detective) looks at the passage and makes observations. In this step, he makes notes of things which he sees. He asks questions. He looks for answers to his questions. It is during this part of the process that the five rules of interpretation which were discussed previously are incorporated (literal, contextual, historical, grammatical, dispensational). After the student has made his observations and answered his questions, he then moves on to the second step in the process.

In this next step, he takes all the information collected in the first step and then interprets the passage in light of what he has learned. This is a crucial step and is the reason why it is important that the student use the inductive rather than the deductive approach to Bible study. He needs to let the passage speak for itself and not come to it with his own, preconceived ideas. If he did the appropriate work necessary in the observation step, then the facts gained should lead (induce) the student to a correct conclusion. But, as in any process, verifying that conclusion is always important.

If the Bible student desires to verify his conclusions, then the third step of correlation is imperative. This part of the process is when he looks at the rest of Scripture to correlate his findings. The question to ask is: “Do my conclusions agree with the rest of Scripture?” If they do correlate, then the student has properly done his job. If

¹A dispensation is a period of time determined by God during which He governs mankind according to His will. This does not however refer to how mankind is saved since it is always by grace through faith.

there are contradictions, then it is possible that he has come to an incorrect conclusion, or has not correctly understood the passage or passages which he is trying to correlate. Either way, the Bible does not contradict itself but will always agree with itself. Once the student feels confident that he has reached the proper conclusion in regards to the passage, he can then move on to the final step, that of application.

In the application portion of this process, the student takes what he has learned and applies the passage for his audience. Though a Bible passage has only one correct interpretation, that being the intent desired by the author, that same passage may be applied many different ways. Though this is true, the student needs to keep in mind that his application must remain within the boundaries of what the passage is teaching. As an example, Paul said in Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." To apply this verse to a person who desires to run a marathon would be an incorrect application. Why? Because the immediate context of this verse is a discussion by Paul about being able to live in both difficult and abundant circumstances. Therefore the application would have to be confined to this context, that of being able to do all things through Christ in the face of poverty or abundance; both situations needing the strength of Christ. The only time this principle of application would not be true is if there are other passages which state the same truth of Philippians 4:13, but in another context. The Bible student needs to be careful how he applies the Scriptures.

Another important aspect of Bible study to remember is that the Bible best interprets itself, therefore it is its best commentary. This is why the more a person knows the Bible, the deeper he will be able to study it. This is also why a church leader should read the whole Bible yearly and study and teach through entire books. In doing so, he will become more familiar with the Bible as a whole and its teachings, not just parts of it. Also, reading the entire Bible each year will give him a perspective which takes into account the whole of Scripture. He will then be able to better understand other portions of the Bible in the context of the entire Bible. God blesses such devotion to His Word. As a result, He gives greater and deeper insight which the average superficial reader will never gain. Therefore, when trying to understand one portion of the Bible, use the whole of Scripture to gain insight into that portion.

One great encouragement in the Bible study process is that the believer has a Helper (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19) to assist him in his study, this being the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps believers know and understand truth (cf. John 16:13). Therefore as a believer studies a passage looking for answers, the Holy Spirit will guide him in this process (cf. Rom. 8:26-27; 1 John 2:27). The Bible student ought to rely upon his Helper, the Spirit of truth (cf. John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13) as he studies the Bible, for He will lead him into all truth.



APPLICATION QUESTIONS FOR CHURCH LEADERS, CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES AND CHURCH PLANTERS:

1. As a teacher of the Word of God, do you clearly understand the privilege you have as well as the responsibility? Are you taking this responsibility seriously?
2. When studying the Word of God, which approach do you use -- the inductive or deductive approach? Do you understand the difference between the two approaches? Do you understand the danger of the deductive approach?
3. When interpreting a passage, do you take into consideration the various rules of interpretation (literal, contextual, historical, grammatical and dispensational)? Do you see the importance of these rules? Are there books you should purchase to help you better interpret the Bible; and if so, which ones?
4. Do you use the four steps of Bible study methods discussed previously (observation, interpretation, correlation, and application)? Do you ever skip the observation step and go right to the interpretation step? If you skip the observation step, are you doing inductive or deductive Bible study?
5. What can you do to be a better student and teacher of the Word of God?