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The Devotional Use of the Bible

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This article draws attention to the importance of Inductive Bible Study as foundational to personal piety and application to one's everyday life. This devotional use of the Scriptures is widely used among evangelicals for personal devotion, in small group discussions and for neighbourhood evangelism. Its function is to let the text speak to the reader rather than the reader mastering the text. The author emphasizes the need for confidence in the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit and in belief in the perspicuity of Scripture sufficient for salvation and growth in Christ. Learning to meditate on the Scriptures is becoming a lost art and must be recovered. Perhaps it is the churches in Asia that will pioneer the skill of meditating upon the Word of God.

Editor

The art and discipline of using the Bible in one's life is fast becoming a lost habit of the heart, mind, and soul. For those who still do attempt to maintain daily devotional practice, it may frequently involve reading a half page of heavily illustrated comments in a devotional guide printed on very small pages, easily digested in a matter of minutes, and ostensibly centred on a verse, clause, or phrase of Scripture. Unfortunately, the biblical portions, meagre as they are, are frequently detached from their scriptural contexts and often reflect little or no connection with the purpose that they originally held in their canonical settings.

If this problem is more acute in recent years than before, it certainly is not a new issue for the body of Christ. Near the beginning of this century, Wilbert W. White, founder [p. 230](#) of a seminar in New York, spotted this same weakness in the Bible reading and study habits of that day. In an attempt to meet that need, he developed what has become known as the inductive method of Bible study. Dr. White's principal goal was to train readers of the Bible in developing for themselves, a way that they could independently gather from the text of Scripture original ideas that would help them to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, it was his hope that those who had discovered this new method of systematically and inductively gathering from the text of Scripture its teachings would go out and teach others also, thereby causing the benefits of this new devotional use of the Bible to expand.

In time, this inductive method became quite famous, so that today there are a host of users of this approach, many of whom perhaps have not so much as heard of Wilbert White. Without it being called the inductive method today, it is especially noticeable in the parachurch ministries of the last four or five decades and in several Bible study guides, especially those that have been aimed at the campus ministries in the western world. This method has honed the special patience of the reader, who carefully sits with a text and steadily observes it until the text has mastered the observer, rather than the observer mastering the text. Whether a strict inductive method is followed or not, believers ought to give serious attention to their devotional use of the Scripture.

DEFINITION

The devotional method of studying the Bible is rooted in a strong desire to find in the scriptural texts solid applications to one's everyday life. Such study is not motivated by intellectual, historical, or critical curiosity; instead, it involves a strong commitment to seeing changes in one's own attitudes, values, and actions.

The terms *devotion* and *devotional method* are linked with the verb *to devote*, which in *Webster's Dictionary* is defined as a solemn act of dedication involving the giving of one's self wholly, and the focus of one's attention is centred completely on the other. Thus the major goal in the exercise of the devotional reading of Scripture is not the mastery of God but God's mastery of the reader, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, as each reader uses the Word of God as a challenge to making progress in Christian growth and fruit.

One volume that has had an enormous amount of influence in the very area being discussed is by Merrill C. Tenney, the late dean and professor of New Testament at Wheaton Graduate School of Theology: *Galatians: Charter of Christian Liberty*. In this wonderful anthology of the different ways one may approach the study of the biblical text, Tenney defined the devotional study of the Bible as 'not so much a technique as a spirit; it is the spirit of eagerness which seeks the mind of God; it is the spirit of humility which listens to the voice of God; it is the spirit of adventure which pursues earnestly the will of God; it [p. 231](#) is the spirit of adoration which rests in the presence of God.'¹

The Bible itself urges believers to enter into regular discipline of approaching the Word of God in order that each person might be daily refreshed by the instruction, encouragement, rebuke, and guidance that is to be found in that Word. Perhaps the best-known text encouraging this kind of exposure to the Word of God is the Word the Lord gave to Joshua as he took over the reins of leadership: 'Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you might be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful' ([Josh. 1:8](#)). This text practically defines the devotional approach in its entirety. Devotional study must be regular ('day and night'), reflective ('meditate on it'), retentive ('be careful to do everything written in it'), and regulated ('do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth').

The Scripture was not intended to be the special province of scholars and professional clergy; it was directed to the people themselves. Indeed, one of the central issues in the Reformation itself was the issue of the clarity of the Scriptures and their availability to all readers.

THE CLARITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

If all believers are encouraged to use the Bible devotionally, there must be a presumption that the words of Scripture are perspicuous, or clear, enough that all can understand what they say without needing the counsel of a scholar at their elbow to instruct them. Is this a reasonable presumption? Can we ensure that such readers will not fall into error when they wander off into the full canon of Scripture, reading the text for themselves and according to their own insights and understandings?

No one was more forceful in taking a stand that the Bible is plain in its meaning, and that it should therefore be accessible to all, than Martin Luther. His most vigorous affirmation of this principle can be found in his book *On the Bondage of the Will* written in response to a work entitled *On the Freedom of the Will* by the highly respected scholar Erasmus. According to Erasmus:

¹ Merrill, C. Tenney, *Galatians: Charter of Christian Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 207–8.

There are some things which God has willed that we should contemplate, as we venerate himself, in mystic silence; and, moreover, there are many passages in the sacred volumes about which many commentators have made guesses, but no one has finally cleared up their obscurity; as the distinction between the divine persons, the conjunction of the divine and human nature in Christ, the unforgivable sin; *yet there are other things which God has willed to be most plainly evident*, and such are the precepts for the good life. This is the Word of God, which is not to be bought in the highest heaven, not in distant lands overseas, but it is close at hand, in our mouth and in our heart. These truths must be learned by all, but the rest are more properly committed to God, and it is more religious to worship them, being unknown, p. 232 than to discuss them, being insoluble.²

Though Luther at first seemed to disagree violently with Erasmus, implying that everything in Scripture was plain and equal available, he eventually settled down and allowed that there were certain kinds of obscurities in Scripture. 'I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter [as Erasmus had argued], but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of the subject matter of Scripture.'³

In the end, the argument between Luther and Erasmus was not over the application of learning and scholarship, or even over whether the texts of Scripture were sufficiently clear so that the main message of the Bible could be understood by the average reader. At the bottom of all this debate was this question: To what degree was the average reader, indeed the whole church, obliged to submit to tradition and the official pronouncements of the pope for the proper exposition of scripture? To this question the Reformers shouted a loud, 'None, for the essential meaning of the message of the Bible!' There was no need of anyone's history of tradition to interpret the Scriptures; the Bible is sufficiently perspicuous without it.

What, then, was meant when the Scriptures were declared to be clear and perspicuous for all? Simply this: the Bible was understood to be clear and perspicuous on all things that were necessary for our salvation and growth in Christ. It was not a claim either that everything in the Bible was equally plain or that there were no mysteries or areas that would not defy one generation of Bible readers or another. If readers would exert the effort one generally put into understanding a literary work, it was asserted that they would gain an understanding that would be adequate and sufficient to guide them into a saving relationship and a life of obedience with their Lord.

This definition on the of Scripture was represented in many Protestant works shortly after the Reformation. The best known is paragraph 7 on the doctrine of Scripture in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; *yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation*, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (my emphasis).

More is indeed at stake here than the mere understanding of the words in and of themselves. Even when ordinary laypersons are able to gain an adequate and sufficient understanding of what is being said in the Bible, there is the other dimension of the

² E.G. Rupp *et al.*, eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, LCC 17 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), pp. 39–40 (my emphasis).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.

reception and application of these matters to one'sD. Leuner, 'Judaism in the Worlds Religions'. J. N. D. Anderson (ed.), *Christianity and World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 59. [p. 233](#) own life and heart. Does this not have an effect on the issue of the clarity of Scripture?

THE ILLUMINATING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

One of the key texts that must be considered here is the pivotal statement of the apostle Paul in [1 Corinthians 2:14](#): 'The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.' While working on my doctoral program, a most unusual experience took place in one of the seminars I attended that graphically sealed this text on my heart and mind.

A distinguished professor, recently retired from Yale University, was offering a special seminar entitled 'Origins of Christianity' at the university I was attending on the East coast. One day the class sidetracked the professor into discussing his understanding of the meaning of [Romans 1-5](#). With unusual eloquence and masterful exegesis, he walked through these chapters with a precise deftness, affirming that everyone in the class had sinned and therefore had come short of the glory of God. But those who would believe in God's sacrifice of his Son for their sins, 'would not just be made righteous' no, they would be declared righteous by a God who justified sinners, 'much as a judge did who dismissed a case that had failed to prove its defendant guilty'. Rarely have I ever heard such a bold and fair treatment of this text of Paul.

After two hours, however, the spell was suddenly broken when one of the Jewish students in the class who, along with many others, had sat uncomfortably through this long and, to them, seemingly parochial tirade, blurted out (amid all the nervous smoking that was going on in the seminar by now), 'Do I get the impression that the professor of this class believes this stuff?'

Immediately the professor responded in a scoffing tone, 'Who said anything about believing it? I am just arguing that this is what Paul said. I'm sick and tired of hearing the younger neoorthodox scholars say, 'This is what this or that text means to *me*.' I was trained under the old liberal theology; we learned what *Paul* said. We just don't happen to believe what Paul said!'

I then began to perceive what Paul was driving at in [1 Corinthians 2:14](#). This professor did not 'welcome' (as *dechetai* could be translated) the things that he knew well enough to teach, practically without a flaw, for almost two hours. It is thus clear that the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit, in illuminating the hearts and minds of those who hear spiritual truths, is not to be treated lightly in this whole area of biblical interpretation, especially in the area of the application of those things that are taught in the Bible.

Some have felt that there might be two separate types of logic in the world: one for the believer and the other for the unbeliever. But Paul makes it clear in [Romans 1-2](#) that those who are unconverted understand the essential truth about God well enough to condemn themselves, since they have not acted on [p. 234](#) what they do know about God. And [1 Corinthians 2:14](#) adds the thought that, without the indwelling ministry and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, such persons will neither welcome nor embrace the realities found in the biblical text. Thus, one of the unique roles of the Holy Spirit is to convict, convince, and arouse sluggish hearts by applying the truths perceived in the text of Scripture to the lives of individuals. As a further aid to placing oneself in a position where the ministry of the Holy Spirit can work more effectively, Scripture calls upon the reader to ponder and meditate carefully on what is being said in the biblical text.

THE ACT OF MEDITATING ON SCRIPTURE

The art and practice of meditating on the Scriptures plays an important role in one's devotional use of the Bible. Meditation is presented in Scripture as an act of worship, one that involves communion with God. Instead its being an avenue of escape, wherein the individual is swallowed up, absorbed, or mingled with the divine in some sort of unspecified mystical process, as it so frequently is taught in many eastern religions or some of the modern western cults, meditation in Scripture can be carefully defined as to its objects, its methods of practice, and its results.

We can get a good idea of the meaning of meditation by examining the contexts where the concept and words of meditation are found. Especially prominent is [Psalm 77](#), with references to meditation in three of its verses. The psalm falls into two parts: verses [1-9](#) express Asaph's sorrow and distress; verses [10-20](#) report how he rose above these problems. In the time of his distress, and through sleepless nights, he mused or meditated on the Lord (v. [3](#)). In his disquietude, the psalmist recalled happier days in the past (v. [5](#)), and in the long night hours his heart mused (or meditated, v. [6](#)) on what he had learned of God from his Word during the good times of life. Would God cast him off forever? he wondered. But then in verse [10](#) he suddenly recalled God's former deeds. At that point he decided that he would 'meditate on all [God's] works and consider [or ponder, meditate on] all [God's] mighty deeds' (v. [12](#)). Thus, the psalmist's deep despondency gave way to praise for God's deliverance when he focused on meditating on the works of God. This is exactly the desired outcome of all devotional reading of the text of Scripture.

Meditation is a function of the heart, that is, of the whole person. Such meditation is stressed in [Psalm 19:14](#); [49:3](#); [Proverbs 15:28](#); and [Isaiah 33:18](#). The goal of meditation, according to [Psalm 49:3](#), is understanding, not, as is so frequently stressed in Oriental religions and some of the cults of our day, self-abnegation. In order to meditate, one must not try to be emptied of oneself, so that allegedly the divine can flow through one's being almost in a pantheistic way. Rather, one is to bring one's whole person—body, soul, and mind—to focus on God, his works, and especially his Word, which tells about both his person and his work. [p. 235](#)

Based on the sheer number of references, it would appear that the meditation encouraged by Scripture finds its basic focus in the Word of God. As we have noted, [Joshua 1:8](#) commands meditation on the book of the law all through the day and the night. The Psalter itself begins with a blessing for the person who delights in the law of the Lord and who meditates on that law day and night ([Ps. 1:1-2](#)). Repeatedly, [Psalm 119](#) urges its readers to 'meditate on [God's] precepts' (v. [15, 78](#)), his decrees (v. [23, 48](#)), his law (v. [97](#)), his statutes (v. [99](#)), and his promises (v. [148](#)). The mind of the meditator is not to be blank and empty; it is to be filled with Scripture, the Word of God. Accordingly, when the law of God is in one's heart, that person's feet do not slip, because 'the mouth of the righteous man utters [or ponders] wisdom' ([Ps. 37:30-31](#)). That is what it means to meditate on the Word of God as it is read devotion-ally. The result is that the Word of God remains constantly in the heart of believers in every situation that they find themselves in: when they sit down in their houses, get up to walk, lie down in the evening, or get up in the morning ([Deut. 6:6-9](#); [Prov. 3:22-24](#); [6:22](#)).

CONCLUSION

No one method of studying the Bible can claim exclusive rights over all other methods. In fact, Howard Vos identified some seventeen different approaches to studying the Bible in

his book *Effective Bible Study*.⁴ True, some of his seventeen methods involved more than one approach; however the point is that one may undertake one's devotional study of the text using approaches such as the biographical method, the topical method, the doctrinal method, the inductive method, or the analytical method. No one method is a magical wand that removes the need for using one's mind or for accepting the hard discipline that is needed in all these methods.

In fact, it would be well for readers of Scripture to vary their devotional use of Scripture from time to time. One should never be so bound that there is nor room for freedom of experimentation and enlarging the sphere of one's investigation. The only caution needed is that one should always be careful to let the text first say what it wants to say before we attempt to apply that text into our contemporary situations. It will always be helpful if we use a pen or pencil to pull together what it is that we think we are seeing in the text. A notebook recording our observations will complete the tools required, especially if we are going to draw together the various pieces into some organization that gives us larger overviews of what we are looking at.

Finally, one of the best ways to continually mull over a text is to select one or more verses from the passage we are reflecting on and to commit it to memory. There in the memory it can be stored for further moments of thought and reflection to be called upon for application in the various vicissitudes of life.

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The Use of Typology in Preaching

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In this article the author notes that there is a renewed interest in typology in scholarly circles but little in preaching. He shows that from the early Fathers to today typology has been rightly used and wrongly abused. He charts the difference between Typology and Allegory and suggests four essential characteristics of its right use, ending with a discussion use of typology in selected Psalms.

Editor

No interpretive principle in 20th century preaching has been more neglected than typology. One has to strain the memory to find any mention or example of it from the pulpit today. Reasons for this omission are varied, although one major factor is the deficiency of teaching the method to seminarians. Frankly, most students of the Bible have no idea what typology is, and the way it affects biblical interpretation is mostly ignored. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the reader to typology and to demonstrate its

⁴ Howard Vos, *Effective Bible Study*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956).