



## “HOW TO READ THE BIBLE”

### **There’s more to Bible study than “What’s in it for me?”**

**S**tudy after study shows that North Americans revere the Bible. Solid majorities say – as they have for decades – that Scripture is God’s word. Evangelicals are even more committed to the Bible, in theory. Of course, we all know of the disconnect between what we say about Scripture and how – or if – we actually use it. The Bible might be the world’s least-read bestseller. Yet even if we manage to buck the tide and actually crack open this book, we have not yet overcome the disconnect.

That’s because we read it not as God’s Word, allowing it to transform us on its terms, but because we approach it for what we can get out of it – or allow our academic bent to crowd out what God is saying to us. We need to read Scripture as God intends – in a believing community, looking to Christians who have grappled with these issues before, and with Christ at the centre.

**This Bible Study is meant to introduce the five ‘teaching points’ that we will be using on our “Holiday Road”.**

**All five Teaching Points will be included this first week but not all will be used every week.**

**The aim of this first session is to identify our personal approaches to Scripture.**

This study had been adapted, with permission, by Christ Community Church Small Group Ministry Team, from the study at [ChristianBibleStudy.com](http://ChristianBibleStudy.com).

Based on: “How to Read the Bible”, by J. Todd Billings, Christianity Today, October 2011

### **NOTES FOR LEADERS ON HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE:**

- **Don’t feel you must use all the material in the study. This first session has the most information to cover; not all weeks will have this much. For this first session, be sure to cover each section so that everyone is introduced to them. Some definitions of more unfamiliar words are provided throughout this material.**
- **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential.**
- **When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for all in the group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness priorities for your group.**
- **Each participant will want to have their own Bible to use, and paper and pen for notes and activities during the session.**
- **Take turns reading aloud, or read aloud together, the different sections of this study.**
- **Begin and end your sessions in prayer.**

**Note: Refer to the J. Todd Billings article summary at the end of this session.**

We love the do-it-yourself approach to Scripture. Knowing about the priesthood of all believers, we think we have all we need to interpret Scripture for ourselves. Unfortunately, all too often we come to the Bible on *our* terms, not God's. J. Todd Billings says we need to use care: "The Bible is a large book, and even careful readers can interpret it in a variety of ways. But not all of these ways are *Christian* ways of reading Scripture." So how do we avoid this danger and allow Scripture to judge us, rather than the other way around?

**Discussion Starters:** (Please share in one or two sentences)

[Q] Why do you read the Bible?

[Q] Do you come to Scripture asking God, "What's in this for me?" or, "What do you want me to know and apply?" What's the difference?

[Q] In a given week, how often do you read the Bible outside of church?

[Q] Who has taught you most about the Bible and why?

**Asking why we read the Bible actually tells us a lot about what we believe. Answer yes or no to these questions:**

- Do I read the Bible to learn more about the world and humanity?
- Do I read the Bible to inspire me?
- Do I read the Bible to know how to live?

**The Bible does all of these things but these aren't the reasons we should read the Bible. We should read the Bible because, first and foremost, it is God's Word, God's way of making Himself known to the world.**

**We shouldn't be going to the Bible for its usefulness to us, but so that God's words can change us. This is the difference of reading the Bible for transformation, not just information.**

### **Teaching Point One: The Word takes work.**

J. Todd Billings believes that far too often we either look at the Bible as an answer book for our pet issues or study it academically but forget to apply it to our lives as God's authoritative Word. We need to combat both tendencies.

Either way, we have to work hard at interpreting the Bible. Working at hermeneutics\* is an old theme, and an old virtue. Paul instructed Timothy in this two millennia ago in a key passage.

*\*Hermeneutics: a fancy word to talk about the interpretation of the Bible.*

## Read: 2 Timothy 2:8-15

### Discussion Questions:

[Q] In verses 8-10, Paul tells his protégé that the focus of our study must be Jesus Christ. How does that focus, motive and passion affect how we study the Word?

[Q] How do verses 11-13 keep the focus on Christ?

[Q] What short commands does Paul give Timothy in verses 14-15? Which are communal? Which are individual? Who are the audiences?

[Q] What does it mean to be 'a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth'?

**Optional Activity:** We recommend your group do this optional activity tonight. Read through the scenarios, then spend 5 minutes with the discussion questions.

(If you are worried about time, use the second discussion question only.)

### **``Evaluation: More Than Just a Bible Study``**

*Three common obstacles to life change*

by Johannah Reardon (used with permission, from smallgroups.com)

``Cindy was in the Bible study I led for 3 years. She always answered the questions and participated in the discussions. She accumulated a lot of knowledge, but her life never changed. I have puzzled a lot over people like Cindy. I've met quite a few over the years. It seems that some people never move beyond head knowledge to heart knowledge. There are numerous reasons for this; I've listed three below. Evaluate which of these could be problems in your Bible study.

#### **1. Are we studying the Bible just to accumulate knowledge?**

Those who can rattle off chapter and verse but never become more like Christ may not truly believe that the God of the universe is addressing them personally. They see the Bible as an ancient document with interesting and wise information, but not 'living and active'. They see no need to apply it to their lives. These people come to the Scriptures with an analytical eye rather than by humbly asking God to transform their lives. They take pride in mastering the text, but they don't know how to let the text master them. They want to study Jesus, but don't really want to know Him.

#### **2. Are we coming to the Bible with arrogance?**

The person who is not transformed by the Word of God may come to prove his or her point. This person may have decided what he or she thinks or wants the Bible to teach. They may have been taught such ideas as children, been drawn to the Bible because it preserves the lifestyle they want, or because it gives them power in certain choices. They don't come to the Word of God to let it transform them. Instead they use the Bible as a proof text, to gain ammunition for selfish battles.

### 3. Are we reading the Bible through our baggage?

My friend Cindy's biggest problem was that she really couldn't believe that God would bring her happiness. Because she'd already decided that God was a killjoy, she didn't trust him with her life. Hence, she came to Bible study for friendship, not to be transformed by God in her mind. It was all up to her. She thought she'd find the perfect human relationship to meet all her needs. Until she truly believed that God was her only hope for joy and fulfillment, she would never be able to believe a word he said.

#### Discussion Questions:

[Q] Which of these obstacles is biggest in your Bible study? How can you address this?

[Q] Which of these obstacles is the biggest in your own heart? How do you see that manifested in your life?

### Teaching Point Two: The Word Judges Us.

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Billings notes two approaches many Christians have to the Bible: the blueprint and the smorgasbord. In the first, we're just looking for confirmation of our prejudices. With the second, "the Bible becomes the answer book for our felt needs and personal perspectives. With both the blueprint and the smorgasbord approaches, we end up using Scripture for our own purposes." We need to put *Scripture* in the driver's seat.

#### Read Hebrews 4: 12-13

#### Discussion Questions:

[Q] Billings says Scripture should not be used for selfish ends. That's clear from this short passage. From verse 13, make a list with 2 columns. In one, titled "Is", list all things the Word *is*, according to this verse. In the other column, titled "Does", list everything the Word *does*. How does each help us overcome a selfish hermeneutic?

[Q] Verse 13 switches the discussion to God. We are not hidden from his sight, we are uncovered and laid bare before him. Have you ever had a dream in which you were naked in public? How did it make you feel? How might that be similar to reading the Bible and recognizing our spiritual nakedness before God?

[Q] How can we let God's 'sword' slash us without becoming mortally wounded?

### Teaching Point Three: The Word is useful.

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Billings says we need 'to regain a sense of the place of Scripture in God's drama of redemption, and to enter into the task of reading Scripture with openness to being reformed and reshaped by God on our path of dying to the old self and living into our identity in Christ'. This passage reveals that the Word provides what we need to be reformed and reshaped. **Read: 2 Timothy 3: 10-17**

### Discussion Questions:

[Q] Given the reality of persecution, Paul tells Timothy to grow his roots deeply in the Word (vv 14-17). What are the benefits available to those who study the Word? Share how you have experienced any of these benefits.

[Q] How does the fact that 'all Scripture is God-breathed' encourage you about the usefulness of Scripture?

### Take-it-Home activity:

At home, reread 2 Timothy 3:10-17. Write one sentence describing each of the following in your life (taken from verses 10 and 11). Please bring this with you next week if you are willing to share answers.

- my teaching
- my way of life
- my purpose
- my faith
- my love
- my endurance
- my persecutions
- my sufferings

### Teaching Point Four: The Word is for God's People.

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Often we think that the best way to read the Bible is individually – and certainly there is nothing wrong with learning and reading the Word this way. But Billings rightly notes that “some assume that the individual is an omni-competent\* biblical interpreter. No need for commentators, no need for a community of faith. Just me, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit.

“While sometimes the slogan ‘sola scriptura’\* is used to justify such an approach, it is serious distortion of that Protestant principle.” **Read 1 Timothy 4: 6-13.** In this passage Paul emphasizes the communal aspects of Scripture.

*\* Omni-competent: able to handle any situation by your own power.*

*\* Sola Scriptura: Reading Scripture by itself, on your own.*

### Discussion Questions:

[Q] Paul tells Timothy that if he has been ‘nourished on the truths of faith and of the good teaching that you have followed’, he will be a good teacher of others in the church (v.6). There is a relationship between what goes in and what goes out. What does it do for your faith when you share the truths you are learning from God's Word with others? Give examples of how you can do that productively and not obnoxiously.

[Q] What do you think verse 7 is referring to? Give examples.

[Q] How can we 'train' (ourselves) to be godly? (v. 7b)

[Q] Paul says his hope is the motive for all his labouring and striving (v.10). What is the difference between hard work as a response to grace and hard work as a means to get grace?

[Q] Why is the public reading of Scripture important (v.13)? How does that fit with Billing's assertion that we should not interpret Scripture alone?

### **Teaching Point Five: The Word is about Jesus.**

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We need to read Scripture Christologically\*. The risen Jesus showed the way to two downcast disciples who failed to see their Lord in the Hebrew Scriptures.

*\* Christologically: Christ-centred or Christ-focused study.*

#### **Read Luke 24: 25-27.**

#### **Discussion Questions:**

[Q] Jesus reprimands those who read the Old Testament but do not see him there (v.25). Thus we see that Scripture knowledge is related to both the head and the heart. What might be some good ways to ensure that our head knowledge of the Bible finds its way down into our hearts?

[Q] What two things, according to verse 26, does the Old Testament tell us about the Messiah? What happens if we focus on one aspect of the Messiah to the detriment of the other aspect?

<b>PART 3: APPLY YOUR FINDINGS</b>
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We often approach the Word for what it can do for us. But the Word is meant not just to comfort and help us (though it often does) but to transform us. It will not be easy, but it will be worth it. Knowing the Word takes work. The Word judges us. The Word is useful. The Word is for God's people. And the Word is about Christ.

### **Any final questions to prepare for next week?**

**Close in prayer.**

## Summary of "How to Read the Bible" by J. Todd Billings

The article begins by explaining the current trends in biblical interpretation and reading. Many people read the Bible for situational advice, to answer questions, or to find a model for behaviour. Usually, though, such readings try to master or control the text and its message, to pick and choose what suits a situation best, or to pigeon-hole the message based on felt needs. Even people who take the biblical text very seriously can overdo it in their passion, focusing so much on the historical setting and indepth study of the original language, that they fail to remember that the Bible is God's word, aimed to tell us about himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and meant to transform us more into the likeness of Christ.

Next, Billings argues that how we use Scripture reflects what we believe the Bible to be. In the blueprint method, each Bible passage is turned into a set of principles that, when put together, builds a complete faith system. Any teaching from the Bible has to "fit" with a specific belief or principle. The other most commonly used method Billings refers to is the smorgasbord approach. In this treatment, we recognize that the Bible has many different tastes or ideas to offer us, but we get to pick and choose which ones we want to sample and digest. Either way, both of these approaches uses the Bible for our own purposes.

On the other hand, "instead of providing a detailed blueprint, a theological reading brings a map for a journey. Our map does not give all the answers about a particular text. Instead, our reading sends us on a journey in which God in Scripture encounters us again and again... Reading Scripture is not about solving puzzles but discerning a mystery."

So how do we do that? By reading the Bible with the "rule of faith." From the very beginning of the Christian church, the Bible has been read by followers of Jesus as God's message about himself. The basic beliefs in the Apostles' Creed are a perfect example of the rule of faith. A Trinitarian rule of faith understands that "Jesus [is] the fulfillment of God's promises in creation and covenant, applying it to the church as disciples of Christ." The Holy Spirit was the driving force in not only giving the message, but also leading humans to understand the Bible correctly. These basic beliefs don't force a specific interpretation of bible stories, but instead always keeps us focused on who the story is about: God.

During the 1900s, the rise of the scientific method and modernity led many scholars to argue that when we read the Bible we have to put all of our beliefs and cultural context to the side. But the Holy Spirit, just as he used humans to write the Bible, uses the way we read it to enrich its message for us. That's not to say we should read the Bible and interpret it all on our own. We should surround ourselves with a community of discernment, with a good "cloud of witnesses" that uses all of the gifts the Spirit has given in exegesis, research, study, and reflection to discern the mysteries of God's Word.

Finally, Billings argues that in our reading of Scripture, as part of our journey of discipleship more and more into the likeness of Christ, "God opens up a new place for us to dwell, a place of fellowship with Christ on a path leading to love of God and neighbor." We are not the masters of this text; God is mastering us through it.

This complete article is available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/october/how-to-read-bible.html>. (or by hardcopy at the church office if you don't have web access).

Some definitions that you may find helpful in your reading are posted on the Christ Community Church website (and once again, available at the church office for those who cannot access our website).