

NORTHERN LIGHT

Digest

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Reading The Bible

The Guinness Book of Records calls it the world's best-selling book, with over two billion copies sold to date. It is one of the most quoted (and frequently misquoted) books there is. I'm referring, of course, to the Bible.

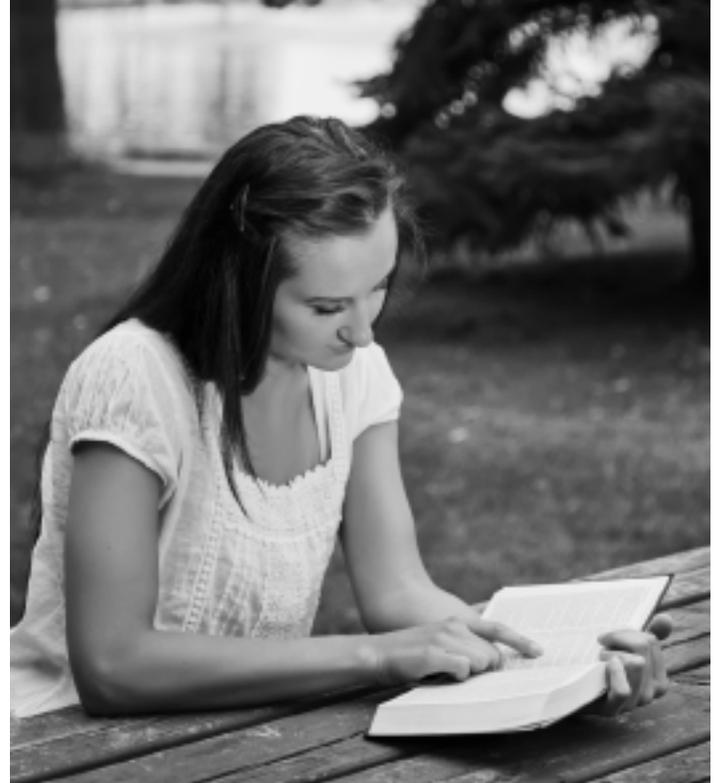
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Though we don't know how many people have actually read it, it's safe to say that billions have been affected by the Bible's message. Prior to the 20th century, very few people had access to a Bible. Early in Christian history, churches typically owned only a single copy of the Old Testament (the

Septuagint) and copies of various letters written by early church leaders. These were often stored in a cabinet called an "armarium." Seminary professor Timothy Paul Jones comments on its contents:

"It's possible that not all of these texts would have been identical to the twenty-seven books that you find in the New Testament today. To be sure, the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's letters, and probably John's first letter would have had a place in the armarion. But the cabinet could lack a few writings that your New Testament includes—the letter to the Hebrews and maybe the second epistle that's ascribed to Peter, for example, or a couple of John's letters. A quirky allegory entitled *The Shepherd* might have made an appearance in some areas. You might even find a letter or two from a Roman pastor named Clement. The New Testament canon—that's the twenty-seven texts that you find in your New Testament today—wasn't yet clear to Christians everywhere."

Thankfully, this lack of clarity as to the content of the New Testament was resolved in the fourth century by councils representing the whole church. But sadly, recent surveys indicate that Bible reading in our day has declined significantly. There are numerous reasons for that decline, including the habit of reading the Bible in fragmentary ways, reading it only for personal devotion and failing to recognize the Bible for the amazing literature that it is. Another reason for the decline is the instant communication that has altered the way people engage with all books.



Sadly, another reason for the decline in Bible reading is the habit many preachers have of misusing the Bible by lifting out passages in a proof-texting manner to illustrate their own sermon ideas. In that regard, note this from author Peter Mead:

"Not only does proof-texting fall short, but it also steals the experience of seeing the bigger picture, the sweeping thoughts, the epic narratives and the heart-stirring poems of Scripture. I often ponder the fact that the biblical men and women whom I most aspire to be like are not those with a ready quiver full of pithy proof-texts, but those who know the God of the Bible because they are washed in the Bible as a whole, book by book."

The Bible is a literary whole, and we gain the most when we read it as such. This means drinking deeply of the text to receive God's message for us. Because the Bible's communication patterns tend to be subtle, complex and nuanced, it takes time, skill and effort to do this. And the more experience you gain in doing so, the more you see the Bible for what it truly is: an unfolding narrative with plot and resolution. It is not a book of isolated bits and pieces for us to draw from in a proof-texting way.

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My good friend John Halford, likens the Bible to a symphony by Beethoven. John came to understand Beethoven well only when he listened to all nine of his symphonies—not just favorite parts of a few. John says that he has had the same experience with the Bible. Just as Beethoven's symphonies fit together as a unified whole, so it is with Holy Scripture. In that regard, note what Paul wrote to Timothy:

"There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us (2 Timothy 3:15-17 ***The Message***)".

The Bible is not merely a "to do" list from God. Rather, it is the dynamic and unified story of his love for humanity. In the Bible the Triune God of the universe shares with us his very heart and mind, nature, character and purposes. We find there the unfolding of his faithfulness and plan for us, inviting us to participate in what he is doing. The Bible holds out to us his promise of eternal relationship with him—it's our story of hope, redemption and sonship.

I encourage you to read the Bible personally in order to find answers to life's biggest and most important questions: Who is God? and, Who am I in relation to God?

Joseph Tkach

Bible Study In The Internet (Twitter) Age

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What has changed our approach to the Word radically in recent years is the avalanche-like increase in the world's knowledge—secular and religious. By some reports it is doubling now every 18 months and that was before Twitter and Facebook!

This provides some unique challenges for churches such as ours that see the Bible as a touchstone of our beliefs.

Just recently I came across two questions from members that touched on the subject of deeper Bible Study. You could call them "Bible Questions and Answers for the Internet Age."

Creeping Heresy

One lady passed on a Wikipedia blog she had heard of that purported to show that the blood in an infant comes only from the baby itself, not the mother. She wondered if this was a Biblical proof of Christ's incarnation since it seemed logical that if Christ's blood saved us then it could not be of human parentage.

We both reflected on this for a while. We could soon see that this idea was actually a form of Gnosticism—a first and second century heresy. The Gnostics were so hung up on God's holiness, his radical separation from us fleshly creatures that they developed the theory of the "Antiseptic God." That is, God could never come down to us in human form, and sweat and bleed and die. So they theorized that the Word only fell upon human Jesus at his baptism and departed before his death on the cross.

The flaw here is taking a good idea—God's holiness—and pushing it way too far. The answer to this question lay in the many Scriptures that speak of the Incarnation, when God took our whole humanity upon himself. One clear text shows this, Hebrews 2:14, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity...For this reason he had to be made like his brothers *in every way* in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest."

There is also the truth that the wonderful phrases about "the blood of Christ" refer symbolically to Jesus' life being offered up for us for, biblically speaking, "the life is in the blood." Jesus was giving his life for us. Furthermore, Jesus could not "carry" human blood into the heavenlies—think of the strangeness of that if read literally (Hebrews 9:7). Other translations read he entered "by" or "through" his blood.



The point here is that Internet bloggers cannot always communicate the New Testament background in their hard-driving, sometimes unbalanced, insistence on making just one point. Often missed is the difference between literal and symbolic language in Scripture.

Both my friend and I saw this more clearly after our discussion.

Seeking Expert Counsel

A second—much older—question surfaced again as to whether “the sons of God” in Genesis 6:1-8 were fallen angels that interacted with women before the Flood. This one was a bit trickier since it relied upon the “preponderance of evidence principle.” Here is where the principle of getting expert counsel comes in (Proverbs 2:1-5). With the help of a well-respected commentary written by Viktor P. Hamilton in the New International Commentary series, recommended to me by a former Toronto School of Theology theologian, getting the context helped. Genesis 5 lists the men and leaders who lived before the Flood. The emphasis here, Hamilton deduced, is so “human centered” and focused on human activity that the “sons of God” are most likely the human progeny descended from Adam before the Flood.

Also the rest of the verses in Genesis 6 fill out the thought that God is angry with human beings, not fallen angels. Same answer as we always taught but Hamilton showed how we must scan the text in front of us to make reasoned judgment.

Through these real-life experiences it may be possible to formulate a few principles that could be called “Bible Study for the Internet Age.”

First, **don't push available evidence too far.** Heresy can seem so reasonable. The “blood of Jesus” was a good idea pushed too far. You now there's something wrong about it but it is the attempt to honor Jesus *taken too far* that masks the problem.

Second, **allow for movement within the text.** This is more easily seen when we measure the Book of Galatians, for example, against the overwhelming Old Testament emphasis on the Law. No question—creative reinterpretation is certainly in order in a book written over possibly 1500 years of composition. This works even within the New Testament. Jesus told his disciples on one occasion not to go to the Samaritans (Matthew 10:5). Then he expressly listed later on the Samaritans as a target for evangelism (Acts 1: 8).

We have to allow for surprises within the text. Against the norms usually adhered to in the Law, God allowed the inheritance of land by the daughters of Zelophehad to pass through the female line (Numbers 27:1-11). The Holy Spirit is always at work to speak to new situations. God can surprise us. We must allow the Holy Spirit the freedom to reinterpret the text he has inspired.

Not for example that the Messiah was to be named Immanuel, God with us (Isaiah 7:14). But Mary called her son “Jesus” from the Hebrew “Joshua” for Savior. What is consistent here is *the meaning*, the sense of the passage, and this is a helpful principle in approaching apparent contradictions in

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God's Word. Let it breathe, like good wine. Don't come to it with preconceived ideas but reasonably expect some surprises from time to time.

As the "Immanuel" reference shows, the Holy Spirit does not take a "stenographic" approach to the New Testament events fulfilling Old Testament passages, and neither should we. For example Hosea's "I have called my son out of Egypt" was fulfilled in an extremely creative way few could have imagined (Matthew 2:131-5). Another example? Is "leaven" a sign of sin or the Kingdom? Answer: It is used both ways.

MLN—More Light Needed

Thirdly, **allow for new light to be shown on the text** as we uncover more and more of the Bible's historical background. In their fascinating study, *In Search of Paul*, scholars Crossan and Reed show how the struggle with Roman emperor worship dominated so much of what was going on in the First Century. To a certain extent, we always knew this but not as well as we do now that the science of archaeology has helped us better reconstruct Paul's world.

As Twitter devotees might say—MLN, More Light Needed. The Holy Spirit will teach us as we pass through history and this is why principle number four builds on that point. It is good to strive **to listen to the voice of the whole church** in weighing the inspired Word.

This ties in with the principle of seeking wise counsel. It's hard to condense the mighty implications of human salvation in a single blog, let alone a 128 letter-text message device. Some things are blindingly simple in Scripture (e.g. "Thou shalt not steal") but not the entire Bible is. The arguments for physical circumcision

seemed irrefutable—the practice had even superseded the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai but Jeremiah 4:4 showed the careful reader that a change was coming.

The Role of Humility

The Holy Spirit revealed this to Paul as part of exercising the prime teaching role in the church (John 14:26). And it is He who must have the final word, which leads to principle number five, **being sensitive to the Holy Spirit's lead**. Not all the entries on Wikipedia and Facebook live by that principle. Even though there are truly some excellent position papers, Bible studies, analyses and excavation reports from the field of archaeology online, some people are simply trying to "make a splash."

On balance, the Internet can be a great blessing. Most of us in teaching ministry use it and find it very helpful. In the United States we even have a full-fledged online seminary—Grace Communion International. But the final word should always go to the comparison of Scripture with Scripture enlightened with second or third person help God has placed in his church. That is, listening to the whole counsel of the church down through time and submitting conclusions humbly to the capable leadership of the Holy Spirit.

For, one thing is sure, no matter how much we grow in our understanding, there are always questions and surprises in store when we tackle a book as helpful and mysterious as the Holy Bible.

Neil Earle

Leaving a Legacy Gift

Over the years our church has benefited from the regular donations of our membership. Weekly offerings collected at church services have enabled us to support the various ministries in local congregations along with national and international initiatives.

Another way individuals have supported our denomination is through leaving a Legacy Gift. Such Legacy Gifts are an important way in ensuring a lasting gift to Grace Communion International Canada through estate planning.

There are several ways to leave such a gift:

Bequest through a will

There are several forms of planned gifts, but they are usually gifts that are pledged through an individual's will.

A gift of stocks

This can also be made through ones will.

A gift of life insurance

This allows one to make a significant contribution to the church for a relatively small payment.

If you should choose to make a legacy gift, your financial advisor, along with discussions with your family, can help you determine the best options available to you.

Legacy donations that are directed to Grace Communion International Canada will benefit the work of the Canadian denomination, while donations directed to local congregation (Grace Communion International Canada with the name of the local congregation, or city location) will be credited for the use of the local congregation.

(Grace Communion International Canada still holds the registration, Worldwide Church of God Canada and any previous Legacy gifts using that name will still be credited to our church)
