

## Reading the Bible Like a Grown-up Child

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I was teaching philosophy at Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois, back in the 1960s when one of my students came to me and said, “I’d like to learn how to read the Bible.”

OK, I said. So Patsy Bylsma and I met every week for about an hour to read the Bible together. I think we started with Isaiah 40. We would read a chapter or so out loud to one another. Then we’d stop and comment on what was written:

“Why in the world would God say that?”

“‘You little worm of Jacob’—is that a term of endearment?”

“How come God likes this Persian-army guy Cyrus so much?”

“That can’t be, in chapter 54, can it? God offers you something for nothing? It’s just like the come-on of hard-sell advertisers!”

We would let our imaginations follow the narrative. We’d ask questions and not worry too much about conclusions.

It started to be fun. We never knew what to expect next. And slowly we began to listen intently, to reread earlier passages, and to remember things. We’d hear this amazing covenant Lord with whom the poetic Isaiah was interacting speak things that were intriguing. We felt we could just take hold of God and pull for blessings.

### **Read It for What It Is**

It’s not easy to read the bible. It’s easier to read it wrong or not to read it at all. To read the Bible the way it is written takes some coaching (Acts 8:26-31). But a lot of people don’t want that. They want an easy fix, and after a while they give up on Bible reading.

That’s because we often read the Bible for what it’s not and seldom read it for what it is. Here’s what it is not: It is not a book you use to prove a point. Neither is it a book written to solve your personal problems. Here’s what it is: It is the true story of what God has really done in history. It is a true account of how God works and what God wants done on earth.

To read the Bible the way it is written, you have to give up your own agenda. You have to dwell in the text and see the whole woven tapestry of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. When you do, you will find that God speaks to you and with you.

### **Shaken by the Word**

I learned that in a deeply experiential way as a graduate student in Basel, Switzerland, in 1956. I was scheduled to take an exam the day after spring break. Oscar Cullmann was going to examine me on the book of Romans. That meant he would pick a passage and I would translate the Greek into German on the spot and exegete it out

loud. So for 10 days and nights, I literally closeted myself with food and drink, a cot and a toilet, and the book of Romans.

At about day 8, I had worked myself through the text up to the powerful conclusion in chapter 9. That's Paul's impassioned argument that we are saved from evil and sin only through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul says Christ's Spirit indwells in us, causing us to cry out "Daddy!" to the living God.

Suddenly I became afraid of the book in my hand as if it throbbed with the very presence of the holy Lord God Almighty. It was like a burning bush that has just spoken directly to me. So I put the Bible on a chair, got down on my knees and prayed, shaken and awed by the power of what was written there. That sense of the Bible has never left me.

### **A Mistaken Way of Reading the Bible**

Gaining that sense of the Bible takes giving up some mistaken ways of reading it. One mistake we make is to read the Bible to prove a point. It can be a point about doctrine (the millennium, for example) or liturgy (the form of baptism) or mores (whether to refer to God as "he"). It can be a point about your pet peeve (smarmy gospel-praise tunes), your pet project (a new church building), church policy (evangelistic priority over education), or church polity (synods have the last word).

Whatever the point is, if you read Scripture in order to prove it to your neighbor or opponent, you are treating the Bible like a lawyer's codebook.

That's the way scribes, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the trained lawyers and leaders of God's people misread God's book in Jesus' day. They could twist texts to prove that dishonoring parents was obedience to the Lord (Matt. 15:1-9). They could argue immaturely about things like the laying on of hands while the church went apostate (Heb. 5:11-6:8). Jesus told them, in effect, "You search the Scriptures all right—to line up your insurance for eternal life. But you miss letting these booked writings convict you of my gracious, all-encompassing rule. If you did hear these words for what they are, they would instill selfless love of neighbor and exuberant praise of God in you as a body of saved sinners" (John 5:31-47).

Don't get me wrong. You can base doctrines and lifestyle on Bible study. But to read the Bible like a prosecuting attorney, marshaling evidence and scoring points, is to squeeze the juice of compelling mystery out of God's living Word. It is to leave it behind like a dried-out shell, as exhibit A or exhibit B. Whenever a do-it-yourself theology or even an official partisan theology calls on biblical texts as evidence to set somebody else straight, someone has lost the key to Bible reading. And that can lovelessly bind burdens on other peoples' backs (Luke 11:37-54).

What's crucial is not to treat the Bible like a block of wood that you cut and shape and customize for your project. When you do that, you read the Bible with an obscuring veil over your eyes (2 Cor. 3:12-18). Reading the Bible argumentatively also ruins the fun and scariness of hearing God's voice, which can caress your cheek lightly or suddenly hit you in the solar plexus.

### **The Bible is Not for Solving Problems**

It is also a mistake, I think, to read the Bible to solve your personal problems. We are all sometimes tempted to use the Bible like the yellow pages of a telephone book. We want it to list God's various numbers to call about troubles, accidents, joys, sorrows, perplexity, indecision. We want answers, so we put out the fleece, page through the Bible, and wait for a sign.

And God often stoops to our weakness. Even if the Bible is not a collection of "Dear Abby" answers straight from God's mouth, the Scriptures do dispense specific comfort or wisdom.

It is also true that once a Scripture passage has seared your consciousness, you can recall its treasured message the way lovers remember special times of past embraces or track runners relive moments of memorable tension, success, or failure.

I'll never forget Psalm 146:3 because in 1939, after a week of poor swimming lessons, the instructor threw me off the end of the pier. Then, as I went under the water for the third time, he had to jump in and rescue me. I stumbled home, crying under my breath, "Put no confidence in princes, nor for help on man depend." So special portions of Scripture become dear to a person. This is the way Christ remembered Scripture, in contrast to the devil's prooftexting misuse of the Bible (Luke 4:1-13).

But it is an error to reduce the Bible to recipes for one's needs. The Gideon hotel Bible lists places where strangers can find one-sentence answers to pinpointed questions. Because we are often in a hurry, the Family Altar devotional booklet offers a brief homily on a couple of verses to focus our attention for a few minutes. But the Bible is not a fast read. The Bible is not a pacifier, and it is not an inspired almanac of God's solutions for what ails you. It is not the mother of all self-help books. And it was not written, I believe, to make us feel good.

The Bible is, instead, a true account of what God has done in history and the way the Lord does things and wants things done on earth. So to read the Bible aright, you have to set aside your own agenda and hurried pace. You must delve into the book, dwell in the text, become acquainted with the whole woven tapestry of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. You can't just pull on a single thread and be fair to God's booked Word.

### **Reading the Bible Rightly**

It takes time, quality time, to read the Bible the way it is written.

I'd wager that if you read a book of the Bible for 10 days and nights straight, something extraordinary will happen to you too. It would help if you took along certain good notes—Martin Luther on Galatians, John Calvin on Psalms, Cornelis Van Gelderen on the Older Testament prophets, Herman Ridderbos on the Gospels, Klaas Schilder on Revelation. Once you catch the spoken-word character of the Bible, God's Word is a red-hot goad and a tender hug. The point is to actually hear God's voice—not just scan the scripted words—and meet the Lord's ongoing, connected, and promising deeds happening now.

If you don't have 10 days to spare, then sit down regularly with somebody who knows better than you do how to read the Bible. Begin discovering with them what is written there. This is what preaching used to be all about: understanding specific scriptural passages in their redemptive-historical context, focused on Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit would then work out the Word flexibly in daily lives.

I assume your Bible-reading teacher would have earphones tuned by Augustinian monks, by Luther and Calvin, by Abraham Kuyper and Schilder. This Bible-reading tradition of the Reformation breathes the vision of Jesus Christ's rule over all of life. It knows in its bones the Melchizedekian calling of women, men, and children to be faithful, joyful stewards.

I also assume your teacher will follow the Spirit in hearing God's voice. That way, submissive to what is written (1 Cor. 4:6), you will be gentle with others. After all, once you confess that you "believe without doubt all things contained in the Scriptures" (Belgic Confession, Art. 5), you are free to relax in the communion of saints and let your imagination follow the text as a grown-up secure in someone's love. And so you become a wide-eyed child again, hanging on the God's words, so full of surprises for sinners.

Reading the Bible, like swimming, is not easy until you know how. And you cannot read the Bible rightly if you are in a hurry. But once you take the time to learn how, no matter how evil you have been and are, God will speak to you and with you. It is so exciting—and it can change your life—to hear God's voice intimately whispering through the tones of Moses, Job, Deborah, Hannah, David, Asaph, Isaiah, Mary and the apostles, Peter, Paul, and John. The Bible is an amazing book of life and forgiveness when you read it like a grown-up-turned-child, believing expectantly on your knees.