

We must learn to read the Bible like the first-century Christians did

By Bob Young

I am part of a fellowship that focuses on restoring the first-century church in its teaching and practice. May I bring up an interesting point? **Most of us who are focused on restoration do not read the Bible like our first-century counterparts did!**

Think with me! The Christians of the first century did not have access to all of the books of the New Testament. They did not have the luxury of doing word studies, finding parallel verses, and tracing topics through 27 books of the New Testament text. Many, if not most, of them did not even read the Bible—they heard it read in the assembly, and they heard it read in its entirety. When a local church received a letter, they did not read Chapter 1 one week, Chapter 2 the next week, and so forth. (In fact, in those days there were no chapter divisions!) They did not read a small section of a letter followed by discussion and application!

The early Christians heard (or read) the text in order to hear and understand a message. Before they began to think about application, they were interested in hearing the message of the author. Their primary focus was on the message.

In my series of Bible study guides, I set forth five steps that will help you hear the message of Scripture in your Bible study. An overall orientation to a biblical book may be helpful as a first step, but an important beginning point is to read through the book of the Bible to grasp the content. Multiple readings will help you remember more details. A third step is to focus your reading on the specific section of text you are studying, with reading and rereading, followed by your own efforts to identify major points, thought patterns, divisions of the text, and subject matter. Finally, you can use Bible study tools to help you understand parts of the text that are difficult. All five of these steps are related to reading and grasping the message. Understanding the meaning or application of the text depends on correctly understanding the message.

I have published an article describing the “Message and Meaning Model” of group Bible study (http://www.bobyoungrsources.com/smallgroups/group-bible-study_message-meaning.pdf). The method shows how a group may effectively study the Bible simply by trying to identify and hear the message of a passage, followed by conversations about the meaning of the passage.

I have a suggestion: before you start your Bible study with topical comparisons, word studies, or cross references, read the Bible! Read whatever book or section of biblical text you wish to study. Listen to the text; mentally process the message. What did the original recipients hear? The best way to do your Bible reading is to set aside enough time to read a book of the Bible (or a section of the text) in one sitting. That is how the books of the Bible were meant to be heard.

When you begin the study of a new part of the Bible, read the entire book. When you begin preparations for a class or sermon, read the entire biblical book. This kind of reading is a good way to guarantee that you are not taking verses out of context. It is a good way to avoid the tendency toward “proof-texting.”

When you try to hear the biblical text like the first century church did, you are more likely to identify correctly the purpose and theme of the book and the overall message of the passage. You are more likely to hear the message the author wished to convey.

As reflected in the “Message and Meaning Model” of Bible study which I described above, two aspects of Bible study are what the text said and what the text meant. Understanding what the text said

precedes understanding what the text meant. In the same way, what the text said and meant then must precede any effort to understand what the text says and means today. It is highly unlikely that the message and meaning today will be significantly different than the original message and meaning.

Wes McAdams has written about the value of reading a whole book of the Bible in one sitting, mentioning two things: *One, you will see things you have not seen before. Two, you will likely hear yourself saying, "I've always heard that verse quoted, but I had no idea that's what he was talking about."*

I believe you will find that learning to read the Bible like the first century Christians read or heard it will enrich your Bible study.

- Using these principles will help you understand, teach, or preach a message and application that corresponds to the original message and meaning.
- Using these principles will make Bible study and the preparation of classes and sermons easier. If the teacher or preacher is honest with the text, a careful study must be done of each verse used in the sermon. In preaching topical sermons, this means spending significant time in a large number of texts.
- The "message and meaning" approach to Bible study suggested here will help the student, teacher, or preacher develop expository studies that focus on a certain book or passage.