

**Xenos Christian Fellowship
Christian Ministry Light Unit 2
Using Your Bible
Week 1 – Interpreting and Applying the Bible**

Editors' note:

- *Italics (lower case or ALL CAPS) show what students should write in their student outline.*
- **Bold (including bold italics and bold ALL CAPS) shows what appears in the student outline.**
- Regular text is used for lecture notes; ALL CAPS are used for emphasis.

Introduction to Christian Ministry 2

The focus of Christian Ministry Light Unit 2 is the Bible itself: why we should trust it, how to navigate your way through the various books, and how to apply it in your life and ministry.

Every week 100's of Bible studies take place all across Xenos—in cell groups, in home groups, in Oasis classrooms, and at Central Teachings. As cell groups, home groups, and spheres multiply, how can we ensure that the truth is being taught?

(David Garrison) “Missionaries experienced in Church Planting Movements would never admit to sacrificing orthodoxy (sound Bible teaching) for the sake of rapid reproduction. Instead they have learned to build the theological controls into the DNA of each church rather than trying to continually reinforce them from the outside.”¹

How are you going to pass on good “DNA” to your disciples and the cell groups and churches that you send out? Everyone will have to answer to God for the legacy of their own ministry. It is only as we use the Word effectively to back up our advice, our counsel, our praise, and our rebukes that others around us will see its importance and do the same.

(Acts 20:20) “...I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

(2 Timothy 4:2) “...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”

We have to develop a ministry that in all aspects is anchored in and informed by the Word.

¹ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Midlothian, Virginia: WIGTake Resources, 2004), p. 196.

How do I go about learning & understanding such a big body of information?

- **Learn the *broad storyline*.** You should have had a taste of this in Intro to the Bible. See the handout, *A High Altitude View of the Bible*, for a review.
- **Learn and follow sound rules of interpretation (hermeneutics)** – the focus of this week’s lecture.
- **Learn the *main themes*.**
- **Learn the *literary genres*.** (Define genre) In this course, we’ll mainly look at the Epistles.
- **Learn how to discern the structure of books & think *inductively*.**
- **Read *all of it*.**

What kind of response unleashes its power?

- A humble and teachable heart that seeks to OBEY what is learned.

(James 1:22) “And remember, it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don’t obey, you are only fooling yourself.”

Can the Bible be understood?

The consensus in the world today is that the average person can't accurately interpret what the Bible says. Do the following statements sound familiar to you?

"We should rely on the clergy/experts to tell us what the Bible means."

This statement reflects the assumption that the meaning of scripture is beyond the reach of the average person.

"People have always disagreed about the meaning of the Bible. That’s why there are so many different denominations."

People have disagreed, and sometimes their disagreements have been brutal. So is the best posture tolerance of hermeneutical diversity? To what extent? Are all meanings valid?

"The Bible has been used to justify everything you can think of. You can make it mean anything you want it to mean."

We can show clear historical instances in which people have interpreted the Bible through their own cultural values, often without even being aware of it. Examples: slavery (using Old Testament permission vs. Philemon & New Testament silence); women (patriarchal views vs. Bible); capitalism as a biblically sanctioned economic system; Christian psychology self-help books proof-texting

secular theories (e.g. self-esteem).

Can we become aware of our own cultural values sufficiently to avoid this, or should such historical abuse lead us to cynicism about the possibility of "objective interpretation?"

"That's just your interpretation." "It's impossible to determine the original author's meaning, rather, as we read it, we create our own meaning for the text."

These statements reflect the relativism and postmodernism that has permeated our whole culture.

These are secular, non-Christian objections to finding truth in the Bible. But what about the following scenario...

In a home Bible study when someone says "What this passage means to me is . . ." And then someone else says, "That's great. But I got a different meaning (and his meaning is contradictory)." And everyone concludes by saying "Praise God for all the great insight we're getting!" By affirming any interpretation that is put forth, aren't they admitting the there is no true meaning in the text? Aren't they violating the law of non-contradiction by accepting contradictory interpretations?

Perspicuity

We maintain that the Bible is "perspicuous," in other words, that it is "essentially clear."

Definition of biblical perspicuity: *The Bible is understandable with regard to its main message.*

Everything in the Bible is not equally clear (2 Pet. 3:15,16), but the main message is sufficiently clear for us to be saved and accomplish God's purpose. The biblical authors assumed their readers could understand their main message, as these passages demonstrate:

John 20:31 – John thinks that his book is understandable enough that the average reader of his day could get saved by reading it (see also 1 Jn. 5:13).

2 Tim. 3:14,15 – Paul says the main message of scripture is understandable enough for children to get saved by it.

(R.C. Sproul) "The Bible is basically clear and lucid. It is simple enough for any literate person to understand its basic message. This is not to say that all parts of the Bible are equally clear or that there are no difficult passages or sections to be found in it. Laymen unskilled in the ancient

languages and the fine points of exegesis may have difficulty with parts of scripture, but the essential content is clear enough to be understood easily."²

This belief in perspicuity was a major element in Reformation thinking. Luther opposed the Roman Catholic teaching that only the clergy was qualified to interpret the Bible.

Responses to attacks on Biblical perspicuity

1. "The Bible is so complicated. Who could understand it?"

Response: Doesn't it make sense that *if a loving God has recorded a vital message for humans, he would communicate it in such a way that we can understand that message?* Only a cruel, sadistic God would purposefully record his message in such an obscure way that we could not be reasonably certain we understand it. This is a presuppositional defense.

Honest readers of the Bible will see for themselves that the main doctrines are clearly taught and emphasized.

(James Sire) "When it comes to the central core of the Christian faith . . . the biblical evidence is overwhelming. The deity of Christ, the triune nature of God, the creation of the world by God, the sinfulness of all humanity, salvation by grace through faith, the resurrection of the dead—these and many other such matters are clearly taught in scripture."³

If you want your young children to understand something important, you say it to them several times and in different ways. There are many doctrines which are repeated and stated in many ways for clarity sake. Examples: How we get his acceptance--different atonement words to different audiences; our dilemma with God is spiritual and moral; that God is a personal God; etc.

2. "If it's so easy to interpret, why are there so many denominations?"

Response: *Wherever the Bible has been the final authority, Christians have agreed on the main message.* Their disagreements with each other have been over issues which, while often important, are not crucial. This is why documents like the Apostles Creed can be formulated and agreed on by Christians from many different denominations down through the centuries. This is why it is possible for us to provide you with a concise "Statement of Faith" which agrees with historic Christianity.

² R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p 15.

³ James Sire, *Scripture Twisting* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), pp. 12,13.

“If that’s the case, then why do “Christian” groups disagree on essential doctrines?”

Response: "Christian" groups have disagreed in their interpretation of even essential doctrines (CATHOLICS). How can this be explained? The answer to this question is surprisingly simple: *Because another authority has replaced God's Word*. They have made either official or unofficial additions to the canon. The Bible is then ignored and/or twisted to support that new authority's doctrines. There are hundreds of examples of this:

RELIGIOUS TRADITION: *Rabbinic "oral law" (Mk. 7:8,9)*

e.g. “Sacred tradition” in the Catholic Church. "*Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God committed to the Church ... the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ ... It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, are in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.*"⁴

NEW "SCRIPTURES": *Book of Mormon; Apocrypha (on purgatory)*

"KEYS" TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: *Christian Science's Key To Science & Health; Rev. Moon's Divine Principle.*

SKEWED TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE: *Jehovah's Witness's Watchtower Version (Jn. 1:1); Mormon Bible*

ALIEN PRESUPPOSITIONS: *Naturalism in Thomas Jefferson's Revised Deist Bible; Liberal Theology; Pantheistic Avatars (manifestations of the divine light); Postmodern Thought*

So the issue here is actually not one of differing interpretations at all, or that the Bible is unclear on essential matters, but of differing spiritual authorities.

3. "We're too far removed in time and culture from the original authors. Therefore, we could never understand what they intended."

Response: We read other pieces of ancient literature like *The Illiad* or the *Tao*

⁴ Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," no. 10.

Te Ching with much less skepticism about our ability to understand them. *If we approach the Bible like we would approach any other piece of literature, we find that its main message is indeed understandable.*

e.g. Consider this statement: "GO TO THE KROGER STORE AND BUY 10 LBS. OF POTATOES." Now we might reasonably ask which Kroger store and which kind of potatoes. If we were unfamiliar with American culture, we might even ask what a potato is and how much a pound is. But would it ever be acceptable to interpret this statement to mean: "GO TO THE HIMALAYAN MOUNTAINS AND MEDITATE ON YOUR NAVEL?" Would it be correct to say no one can be confident he understands this statement?

Now consider this statement: "HE WHO BELIEVES IN THE SON HAS ETERNAL LIFE; BUT HE WHO DOES NOT OBEY THE SON SHALL NOT SEE LIFE, BUT THE WRATH OF GOD ABIDES ON HIM." (Jn. 3:36) We might reasonably ask who the Son is, what "believe" means, or if "believe" and "obey" are being used synonymously. But would it ever be acceptable to interpret this statement to mean: "IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT RELIGION YOU BELIEVE BECAUSE EVERYONE GOES TO HEAVEN?" Would it be correct to say that no one can be confident he understands this statement?

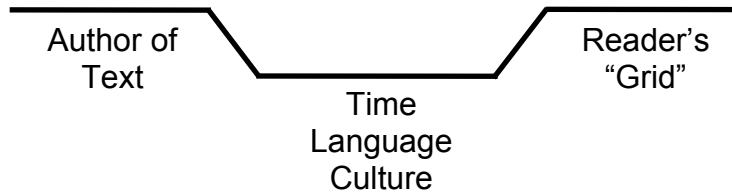
The truth is, **people are always engaged in interpretation**—even when they are not reading the Bible. Every type of communication we participate in requires a degree of interpretation.

Whether it's a grocery list or an ancient document, we can usually understand the general meaning of what we read. We rely on our shared knowledge of recent events when we interpret the meaning of the symbols 9/11. But we can also gather details from other time periods to help us better understand older documents (e.g. letters and documents from the revolutionary war).

So we affirm that the Bible is essentially clear. Its main themes and teachings can be understood by the average reader today. But that said, it does require effort to understand a message originally written to an ancient audience and apply it to our lives today.

Interpreting the original message and applying to our lives

We truly are separated from the original authors and readers of the Bible in many ways: by time, language, culture, geography, etc.



This separation is accentuated by two additional factors, the reader's "grid" and the nature of the Bible itself.

- **The reader's "grid":** We as readers are not neutral. *We bring our own experiences and prior understandings to the text.* They form a "grid" through which we take in information. One way we do this is by associating words with meanings they may not have originally had (e.g. a "Samaritan" today is a good person, back then they were despised.). Our grid shapes the way we read the text and can lead us astray if we're not careful.
- **The nature of Scripture:** *Books of the Bible were written to specific groups of people at specific times in history.* John Stott points out: **"Although his self revelation is addressed to every man of every age and every country, each part of it was addressed in the first instance to a particular people of a particular age in a particular country. Therefore the permanent and universal message of Scripture can be understood only in the light of the circumstances in which it was originally given."**⁵

Taking this into account, good interpretation must involve careful study of how the language of scripture was originally used (this will minimize the effects of our "grid"), and careful study of the historical setting in which these messages were written.

Grammatico-Historical Hermeneutics

"Hermeneutics" is the art and science of interpreting texts. There are many hermeneutical approaches to studying the Bible. The one we will employ in this class is Grammatico-Historical hermeneutics.

Grammatico-Historical hermeneutics is a method of interpretation that takes into account common rules of GRAMMAR and SYNTAX and the author's HISTORICAL context.

The goal of Grammatico-Historical hermeneutics is to ascertain as closely as possible the meaning intended by the original author. We want the interpreter to draw meaning OUT OF the text (exegesis) rather than read meaning INTO the text (eisegesis). This way the reader is UNDER the authority of the text rather than having authority OVER the text. If we can accomplish this, we can hear God speak to us through his inspired author—a goal worth pursuing.

⁵ John R.W. Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999) pp. 192-193.

The difference between interpretation and application

Before we describe this method in detail, we should pause to make a clear distinction between INTERPRETATION and APPLICATION.

Interpretation: *The author's intended meaning.*

Application: *How the reader should respond.*

While there may be *MANY* valid APPLICATIONS of a text, there is only *ONE* valid INTERPRETATION. Instructor's note: Remind students that the terms "interpretation" and "application" will be on the exam.

(Matthew 12:31) "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Is Jesus saying that we cannot venture into loving others until we first have a healthy love for ourselves? This is a common misinterpretation. Or does Jesus presume that we already love ourselves, even selfishly, and therefore we need to step out NOW and serve others? The latter most certainly squares with the rest of scripture.

The passage has one correct interpretation. And once we've settled on the correct one, "loving your neighbor as yourself," we can apply this interpretation in many ways (comforting a grieving friend, helping a refugee find an apartment, tutoring an underprivileged child, telling your neighbor about forgiveness through Christ, etc.). There are probably more applications than we'd like to consider!

Before we apply any passage to our own lives, we must interpret correctly. Now let's take a closer look at two principles that guide interpretation using the Grammatico-Historical method.

1. Interpret GRAMMATICALLY

Take the normal meaning of the words, phrases and sentences unless it is impossible to do so. The interpretation must correspond to the words and grammar in the text in a reasonable way. Most of the Bible can be easily interpreted by simply take the language (either in the original or in translation) in the usual way (John 3:36; Acts 1:11). So, in most cases, "if the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense!"

Hermeneutical approaches that fail to observe this rule often lead to interpretations that are disconnected from what the text actually says. This allows the interpreter to assign a meaning of his own without objective control.

e.g. Allegory

In an allegorical hermeneutic (many church fathers in the 2nd – 4th centuries, Augustine, Medieval Catholic Church, Amillennialists in their interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy), the details of the passage under study have a corresponding spiritual reality which leads to the “real” or ultimate meaning of the passage.

(Deuteronomy 14:6) “You may eat any animal that has a split hoof divided in two and that chews the cud.”

Allegorical interpretation: “Cleave unto those that fear the Lord... with those who know that meditation is a work of gladness and who chew the cud of the word of the Lord. But why that which divides the hoof? Because the righteous man both walks in this world and at the same time looks for the holy world to come.” – Epistle of Barnabus 14:35-45⁶

Equating “chewing cud” with “chewing the cud of the Word” and “dividing the hoof” with “walking in this world and the holy world to come” may make sense to the interpreter, but there’s no way to know if these connections were in the mind of the author. As a result, there is no objective control over the interpretation. For this reason, we reject any approach that doesn’t first consider the normal meaning of the words and phrases in the text.

Qualifications:

a. Allow for figures of speech.

A plain sense, LITERAL reading shouldn’t be confused with a LITERALISTIC interpretation. A literalistic interpretation ignores the use of figures of speech.

Psalm 91:4 “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.”

Lk. 22:19 - “ . . . this is my body . . . ”

Col. 1:15 – “...the first-born of all creation...”

Both Nicodemus in John 3 and the Samaritan woman in John 4 took Jesus’ message to them in excessively

⁶ Example adapted from John Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999) pp. 189-190.

literalistic ways.⁷

b. Allow for symbolism.

If a passage is symbolic or contains symbols, this should be indicated in the text, either by textual cues or because symbolism is required in order to make sense of the text. The Bible itself explains most symbols:

Revelation 1:9-20 – The symbols are identified as such ("like") and explained. Most of biblical symbols are handled this way. Many other symbols in Revelation have been previously explained in Daniel.

Revelation 7:14 – John says that the robes of the saints are “made white in the blood of the lamb.” Obviously, literal blood would not make their robes white. Rather the symbol communicates the powerful truth that our righteousness (“white robes”) is due entirely to Christ’s death (“blood of the lamb”) in which we have put our trust (“washed their robes”).

2. Interpret HISTORICALLY

Take into account the historical background of the author and the recipients.

This is the opposite of a “yearbook” approach, where students go directly to their own picture. When we start by looking for ourselves in the text, we risk reading through our cultural “grid,” and seeing things in the text things that were not in the mind of the author.

We are not interested at first in the question, "*What does it mean to me?*" but rather, "*What did it mean to the original audience?*" To answer this question, we must learn as much as we can about the SITUATION that gave rise to the passage, the STYLE in which it was written, and the CULTURE of that day.

- **Situation:** *Who wrote and to whom? What was the situation that prompted the writing?*
- **Style:** *The type of literature (genre) being used.*

The writers of the Bible employ many different writing forms that often reflect the time and culture in which they wrote. Readers today are not familiar with many of these literary styles (genres). Yet the style being used should effect how we interpret each passage.

⁷ See Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999) p. 190.

The Proverbs, for example, are a collection of short, pithy bits of practical wisdom. But they shouldn't be taken as universally true like the theological statements in the gospels and epistles. Proverbs are maxims which are generally true, not promises that are always true.

(Proverbs 22:6) Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.

We realize that not every child will go right, but most will.

(Proverbs 15:1) A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.

Obviously, not every gentle word will turn away wrath, but in most cases this works.

Contrast these to the didactic teaching of Rom. 8:1. Christians will never be condemned by God.

Which literary genres are used in the Bible? They include Narrative, Epistle, Parable, and so on. We will take a closer look at Epistles in this course. The regular version of Christian Ministry 2 covers a wider variety of biblical genres.

- **Culture:** *The customs, prejudices and beliefs during biblical times.*

Day-to-day life in ancient cultures is unfamiliar to most people who read the Bible. Understanding cultural customs, prejudices, and beliefs during biblical times provides additional insight into many passages.

e.g. Jewish attitudes towards Samaritans in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

e.g. The Pharisees' teaching on the relationship between illness and sin in Mark 2:1-12.

e.g. The significance of monetary values (300 Denarii in John 12:3-5; 50,000 Drachma in Acts 19:19).

e.g. Genesis 15:7-21 – “Cutting a covenant” solemnized a contract between two parties. It was normally bilateral (both parties walked through), but in this case only God goes through.

e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:4-6 – Shorn hair was typical of Aphrodite priestess-prostitutes; shaven heads were typical of convicted

adulteresses (v. 5).

Use Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, or other sources to learn more about customs, money, geography, etc. We especially recommend...

The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, by John H. Walton, et al.

The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, by Craig S. Keener.

Interpreting Critically

Your interpretation must also make rational sense. The hermeneutical rules that follow are either common sense rules that would apply to any text or logical implications of our belief that the Bible is God's Word to us.

1. Interpret in light of the *context* of the passage (which author? book? passage?).

Never view a passage in isolation from its surroundings. The context should be considered the most important kind of evidence in the interpretation of a passage. Public figures complain about being "quoted out of context" because an isolated sound bite often poorly represents their intended meaning. We can make the same mistake with the Bible.

e.g. (Matthew 16:28) "**Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.**" The immediate context of this passage suggests that Jesus is referring to his transfiguration, which Peter, John, and James were about to witness. Later in his life, knowing that Jesus had not yet returned, Peter could say that he was an "eyewitness of his majesty." (2 Peter 1:16)

e.g. James 1:6-8 The "doubter" is not simply any Christian who has occasional doubts. He is the "double-minded man," whom James further describes in 4:1-8. By taking into account the wider context of the book, we see that the doubter pretends to embrace God's values while still clinging to the values of the world.

2. Interpret in light of "*progressive revelation.*"

(Heb. 1:1,2) "**God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.**"

(Heb 8:13) "**When He said, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.**"

While God's *purpose* for man has never changed, his *strategy* in accomplishing

that purpose has changed. He has dealt with man under different "covenants," or "dispensations." Therefore, it is important to ask, "Under which program was this written?" **Primary** application of the passage will be to the people operating under that program, but not necessarily to others. There may be **secondary** applications for other programs based on *principles* which have universal application.

e.g. Compare Exodus 20:8-10 with Colossians 2:16,17

(Ex. 20:8-10) "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you."

(Col. 2:16,17) "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – (17) things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ."

Animal sacrifices, dietary laws, Sabbaths, holy days, festivals, priests and liturgy have all been fulfilled in Christ and are thus obsolete.

e.g. Theocracy was commanded in the Old Testament, but secular government is affirmed in the New Testament (Rom. 13:1-7; Mt. 22:21).

e.g. Mal. 3:7-12 - The practice of tithes should be seen in context of the Old Testament (see Num. 18:21-24; Deut. 14:22-29)

3. Interpret scripture in *harmony* with other scripture.

The entire Bible is the product of one author (God), even though it is the product of many authors (the men who wrote scripture). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect a consistent message throughout the Bible.

Your interpretation must make sense in view of the Bible as a whole. Since the Bible is inspired by God, it does not contradict itself. Therefore, never interpret scripture in such a way that it clearly contradicts other scriptures. If a passage can be legitimately interpreted in more than one way, choose the interpretation that doesn't contradict other scriptures.

(Acts 2:38) could be referring to either baptismal regeneration, or simply adding baptism as a desirable adjunct to the minimum requirement for salvation (i.e., faith). In view of the clear teaching on salvation by grace through faith alone, the latter interpretation is

preferable.

4. Interpret the unclear in light of the *clear*.

Every major, essential truth is taught clearly and many times. Never build a doctrine on an unclear passage.

(1 Cor. 15:29) "Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?"

Baptizing people "for the dead" was an obscure, unknown practice used in Corinth. Paul doesn't affirm this practice; he just asks why they're doing it if they don't believe in resurrection. Today, the Mormon church uses this passage to elevate dead ancestors to a higher status in the afterlife.

God's part and man's part in interpretation – 2 implications

Some Christian groups place a high premium on diligent study of the word. Others emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing the truths of scripture to us. Both are important.

1. Rely upon the *illumination of the Holy Spirit*.

The Holy Spirit revealed his Word to the authors of scripture (2 Peter 1:20,21) and actively helps Christians understand it's meaning:

(1 Corinthians 2:14-16) But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (15) But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. (16) For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE SHOULD INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

Our understanding is enhanced by having a humble, teachable attitude, an attitude that we express in prayer every time we study the Word:

(Psalm 119:18) "Open my eyes that I may see the wonderful things in your law."

George Whitfield, a well known 18th century evangelist, took a prayerful approach to Bible study. Reflecting on his life soon after conversion, Whitfield writes, **"I began to read the Holy Scriptures upon my knees, laying side all other books, and praying over, if possible, every line and word. This proved meat indeed and drink to my soul. I daily received fresh life, light**

and power from above.”⁸

2. Diligently study the Word

The illumination of the Spirit is no substitute for each Christian’s careful, disciplined study of the Word.

(2 Timothy 2:15) Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.

"Be diligent" implies *there are obstacles and difficulties involved.*

"Ashamed" implies *good interpretation can and should be achieved.*

"Handling accurately" implies *there is a proper interpretation.*

Some Christians may argue that only the illumination of the Spirit is needed. But consider the following scenario:

(D.A. Carson) "Almost twenty years ago I rode in a car with a fellow believer who relayed to me what the Lord had 'told' him that morning in his quiet time. He had been reading the KJV of Matthew; and I perceived that not only had he misunderstood the archaic English, but also that the KJV at that place had unwittingly misrepresented the Greek text. I gently suggested there might be another way to understand the passage and summarized what I thought the passage was saying. The brother dismissed my view as impossible on the grounds that the Holy Spirit, who does not lie, had told him the truth on this matter. Being young and bold, I pressed on with my explanation of grammar, context, and translation, but was brushed off by a reference to 1 Cor. 2:10b-15—spiritual things must be spiritually discerned—which left little doubt about my status. Genuinely intrigued, I asked this brother what he would say if I put forward my interpretation, not on the basis of grammar and text, but on the basis that the Lord himself had given me the interpretation I was advancing. He was silent a long time, and then concluded, 'I guess that would mean the Spirit says the Bible means different things to different people.'"⁹

Discussion: Why is claiming “God revealed it to me” an insufficient defense for the interpretation we have chosen?

We are commanded in the Bible in many places to use our minds and weigh

⁸ *George Whitfield's Journals*, first published between 1738 and 1741 (Banner of Truth edition, 1960), p. 60 quoted in John Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999) p. 180.

⁹ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1984) p. 13.

out the truth of what we hear. Study the use of the following phrases:

- **“Judge for yourselves.” (1 Cor. 10:15 and 11:13)**
- **“Test the spirits.” (1 John 4:1)**
- **“Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” (Romans 14:5)**
- **Mature Christians have “trained themselves to discern good and evil” by “constant use” of the Word. (Hebrews 5:15)**

Striking the right balance

The apostle Paul prescribed and the prophet Daniel modeled depending on God for understanding AND careful study of the Word:

(Daniel 10:12) "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them."

(2 Timothy 2:7) "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this."

Bible Reading Plans

It would be a shame to emerge from a course on using the Bible without ever developing a daily habit of reading the word! During this class, we encourage you to follow a Bible reading plan. Below are some plans that we have found helpful. All Christians should have an intentional and regular habit of reading and meditating on the word of God. This is a non-optional component of spiritual maturity.

Discipleship Journal Bible Reading plans:

<http://www.navpress.com/Magazines/DJ/BibleReadingPlans.asp>

- *The Original Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan* – This plan has you read four different places in the Bible every day: a Gospel, the Old Testament, an Epistle and the Wisdom Literature.
- *Book-at-a-Time Bible Reading Plan* – If you don't like splitting your reading four ways, this plan has you read from just two places in the Bible every day: an Old or New Testament book and the Wisdom Literature.

M'Cheyne Reading Plan:

<http://hippocampusextensions.com/mcheyneplan.html>

This plan was created by Robert Murray M'Cheyne, (sometimes spelled

McCheyne) who lived from 1813-1843. It takes readers through the Psalms and New Testament twice a year, and through the rest of the Bible once each year. A free copy of the plan is located at:

Carson, D.A., *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1998).

D. A. Carson adapted the M'Cheyne reading plan and published it in two volumes, along with his reflections on each day's scripture reading. Both volumes can be purchased at the Study Center and the Xenos bookstore.

Outlining books

It's helpful to outline a Bible book as you read it. Summarize each chapter and then organize your summaries into an outline. Then commit the outline to memory. This will help you locate passages on different topics and help you identify themes in the Bible that are emphasized. Try this with Paul's Prison letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) or his Pastoral letters (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) and trace the structure and thought development.

"Journaling"

While you read, consider recording your insights in a **journal**. Writing down your thoughts aids in meditation and greatly enhances the clarity of your thinking about a passage. It will also help you hold onto important insights you receive as you read the Word.

Memory Verses

2 Timothy 2:7* Promises God's illumination of scripture, and also says we must exercise our minds to understand it.

2 Timothy 2:15* We must invest effort to interpret accurately, and we should be ashamed if we can't do this.

Assignment

Complete the *Messianic Kingdom Assignment*.