

## READING THE BIBLE



In Paul's last correspondence to Timothy, he reminded his younger co-worker how that "...from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Ti. 3:15). Then Paul described the purpose for which God inspired Holy Scripture—a purpose which is very practical. The role of Scripture is to teach, to rebuke, to correct, and to train in righteousness so that Christians might be equipped to do good works (2 Ti. 3:16-17).

But just how did Timothy learn about Holy Scripture? And how did early Christians become familiar with the stories about Jesus? For most early Christians, familiarity with the Bible came not from reading it personally, but from hearing it read aloud and explained in worship services. It is for this reason that Paul instructed Timothy to devote himself "to the public reading of Scripture, and to

preaching and to teaching" (1 Ti. 4:13). The reading and explaining of Scripture had been part of the regular practice of the Jewish synagogue services (Lk. 4:16-21; Ac. 15:21), and the early Christians followed suit. The Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew into Aramaic and Greek, so whether one was a native of Palestine or a citizen of the world, the Scriptures were accessible.

Today, the Scriptures are much more accessible. The Bible has not only been translated into our own language, it has been inexpensively reproduced so that each of us can have a full copy of our own. Unlike early Christians, whose local church might have been fortunate to possess a few of the scrolls of the Old Testament, perhaps one or two gospels, and a half dozen of Paul's letters, today we have immediate access to all the books of both Testaments. Each of us can read from them every day, if we so desire. And we should!

The fact that we can read Scripture, however, must not lead us into a careless or irreverent treatment with its contents. When we read the Word we must take care to handle it correctly. Paul also instructed Timothy to "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Ti. 2:15). If Paul says that one should "handle it correctly," surely he implies that there are some incorrect ways to handle it as well. On one occasion, Jesus reprimanded the Pharisees because they "nullified the word of God for the sake of tradition" (Mt. 15:6). On another, he told them that they were badly mistaken because they did not understand the Scriptures (Mk. 12:24-27). That sincere readers could misunderstand the message of Scripture is apparent in Jesus' words, when he said to some opponents, "...you do not believe the one God sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (Jn. 5:38b-40). Furthermore, the New Testament itself warns that no one is entitled to interpret Scripture at his or her own personal whim (2 Pe. 1:20, RSV).

So, then, how does one go about reading the Bible in a way which is faithful to its intent? At this point it is helpful to make a distinction between interpretation and application. Interpretation is the art of discovering what the original writer meant for his first readers. Application is discerning how the Bible might instruct, correct, and guide us today. Application without interpretation will inevitably undermine the authority of the Bible, for application without interpretation will encourage the reader to manipulate the Bible so that it will mean all sorts of things that were not intended in the first place. The first question which any reader of the Bible must pose is not, "What does it mean to me now," but rather, "What did it mean then?" Too often, well-meaning but naive Christians pass over careful interpretation so that they can quickly get to what God might have to say to them personally, but this negligence is unwise. If one

does not take the trouble to discover what the text meant to its first readers, the Bible will be terribly distorted. Its authority will be no bigger than the imagination and prejudices of its modern reader.

Of course, someone might say, "Well, one doesn't really need to interpret the Bible—he or she just needs to read it for what it says." This homespun wisdom might sound impressive, and in fact, there may indeed be passages in the Bible that need little interpretation but which are quite clear without any special interpretive skills. But the person who amputates his arm or gouges out his eye because "the Bible says" could benefit from some sound interpretation (Mt. 5 :29-30)!

In one sense, the availability of the Bible in the common language has created a danger which was not felt so acutely in the early church. Since the early Christians heard Scripture read in their services of worship, and along with that, heard the explanations of the Word offered by the elders, they were not so apt to stray into unsound interpretations (providing, of course, that their elders were sound in their teaching). However, as it is now with every Christian reading privately for him or herself, the danger of interjecting alien ideas into Holy Scripture is multiplied for those unskilled in language, literature, and logic, or unfamiliar with the teachings of the Christian faith. This danger ought not to discourage Christians from reading their Bibles, but it should caution them to be careful in how they approach it.

Probably the greatest concern for one who wishes to correctly interpret the Bible is to pay close attention to context. This same care, of course, must be shown toward any kind of literature, whether a novel, a newspaper, or even a personal note, but it is especially crucial in reading the Bible. The Bible, like most other literature, is written so that ideas flow into one another. Rarely does a biblical statement stand alone, but it must be read in light of what has preceded it and what follows it. In addition, sometimes a particular writer in the Bible will exhibit certain tendencies in his writing. John, for instance, frequently uses double entendres, that is, words or expressions which are capable of being interpreted in two ways, as in, for instance, the terms "light", "bread", "water", "birth", and so forth. Sometimes biblical writers use idiomatic expressions, such as Paul, when he speaks of "bowels" as an idiom for compassion.

A particularly dangerous approach to interpretation is the practice of stating a proposition about doctrine and then citing a list of biblical texts which "prove" it, an approach often called "proof-texting". This method is not bad, so long as one carefully interprets the cited texts in their original settings, but very often, this method strips the biblical passages of their original context, and when they are put together with other passages, a new context is created which may be alien to the original meaning of the verses.

So, yes, Christians should read their Bibles for instruction, rebuke, correction, and training in righteousness. They should read the Bible so that they may be equipped to do all kinds of good deeds. At the same time, they must not read the Bible in isolation from the church and their Christian leaders (2 Ti. 4:1-4). With the psalmist, we can say, "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word" (Ps. 119: 15-16).

