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How to Read the Bible.

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THERE never was a time when so many people were asking how to read the Bible. This is a hopeful sign. Yet the frequency and urgency with which the question is raised must certainly imply a great deal of dissatisfaction on the part of the inquirers. If they felt satisfied with their own methods, they would not be so eager to discover other and better ones. Now it is altogether impossible in one brief article to set forth a satisfactory method, but a few suggestions as to how "not" to read the Bible, may indicate the causes of so general an inquiry and furnish a partial reply.

Any one who teaches the Bible discovers that even Christian people fail to bestow upon the reading of the Word of God the same kind of attention that is given to other important books. Such people really love the Bible, would defend it against all attack, and, undoubtedly, love the Lord it reveals. Yet with all their eagerness to obtain spiritual profit, they do not catch the meaning, do not retain the facts in memory, and after years of devotional reading show an incapacity for correct thinking on Biblical truth that is painful. There must be some adequate cause for this. It is not usually due to lack of intelligence or of piety. To blame it upon our depravity is simply to evade the question of responsibility. It seems to be largely due to a bad habit that has grown up as an excrescence upon a good one. Taught to honour the Word of God and to treat it with reverence, we are too apt to approach the reading of it as an end rather than a means. We come to regard Bible reading as an act of piety, instead of a help to piety. Accordingly the words are run over, so much at a time, with the feeling, unconscious to ourselves, perhaps, that a chapter read is so much good done. It is easy enough to show that such an attitude is false, that it dishonours God as well as His Word, that it stultifies Christians. But it is not so easy to show people that this is their attitude. Yet precisely this attitude seems to be the main cause of the ignorant and inattentive reading already referred to.

Many are in the habit of dividing the devotional reading of the Scriptures from Bible study. We may distinguish between them, but they should not be divided. No correct study should stop short of devotional reading, and no devotional reading will be free from misleading results unless it is based upon a proper knowledge of what the Bible says and means. Scholars may be in danger of neglecting the spiritual results, but most Christians are in danger of seeking spiritual results without the proper use of means. The knowledge of the Word is the means to the blessing from the Word. Hence when asked how to read the Bible, I am disposed to answer: Do "not" read it as if the mere reading, without attention and thought, were acceptable to God, or profitable for you. The desire and effort to understand its meaning is the first essential step.

Another suggestion seems peculiarly pertinent for Presbyterians just now. The Bible is largely history. The various books composing it have their respective places in that history. It took God a long time to prepare men for the full revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ. When our

Lord came He must needs train His disciples. They could not receive the full truth until after His death, resurrection and ascension, for the Gospel they must preach was based on these facts, and until they were facts the Gospel message was not fully known by them. Accordingly, the Bible should be read historically. Not only should the narrative be regarded as true, but every part of the Scriptures should be looked at in its historical surroundings. Every Biblical scholar will insist upon the necessity for this method, and what is more to the purpose, the Bible itself shows that this is the true method. Yet very many, who are seeking to read the Scriptures intelligently, as well as reverently, ignore the historical relations. The incomplete revelations in the Old Testament are treated precisely as the complete and final revelations in the New. The progress in the New Testament, plainly indicated by Jesus Christ Himself, is not recognized. The second suggestion is therefore: do "not" read the Bible as if it were all written at one time; recognize the magnificent method by which God gradually led the world to "the fulness of the time;" notice how our Lord Himself led men from one truth to a higher one; thus honour the whole Bible, by treating it as a living and consistent whole.

Another suggestion may be made, and this one is always pertinent. Do "not" read the books only in piece-meal fashion. Many Christians have never read one of the larger books through at a single sitting. This is a great mistake. The divisions into chapters and verses are not inspired; very far from it. They often hinder more than they help. A paragraph Bible is always the best for continuous reading, and continuous reading is necessary. For when we read a book, we need to know what it is about. The best way to find what it is about is to read it through. We resent the cutting up of the Pentateuch and other books into fragments, and the assigning of these fragments to different authors. But the effect on the ordinary reader is very much the same, if he allows the mechanical divisions of chapter and verse to break up the Bible into man-made fragments. The more important books of the Bible are not too long to admit of such continuous reading. The "patch-work" criticism, however untenable it may prove to be, has not affected so many people injuriously as the "patch-work" habit of reading the Bible. It is difficult to get theological students to apprehend the life of Christ as real history, and the practical hindrance, as I know sadly enough, is the fixed habit of reading the Gospels by chapters and not by books.

That no one knows how to read the Bible, unless he reads it for his spiritual profit, is implied in all that precedes. That this implies prayer for the illuminating Holy Spirit every Christian should know. But the Spirit illuminates the Word; that Spirit inspired it, therefore the illumination will make clear what was said by inspiration, and that only. Hence, we are "not" to read the Bible expecting the Spirit to reveal a meaning which is not found in the inspired Word. This mistake has led to grievous errors in the past, and is practically the principle on which the Roman Catholic Church has assumed an authority superior to the historical sense of the Scriptures.