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Teaching Sound Doctrine

How to Get The Most Out Of Your Bible Study #1

I am convinced one of the greatest shortcomings within local congregations across this country is our Bible studies. Most people I have said this to don't understand what I am saying; I don't believe that we are not doing enough, as individuals, and I also believe that the method of Bible study is part of the problem. Most Bible studies conducted in our churches are either a verse-by-verse study or a fill-in-the-blank type of study. These do not really challenge the majority of the participants and leaves them bored with the Bible classes. That boredom leads to disinterest, and the lack of interest leads to less and less study. Less study leads to ignorance, and ignorance leads to our own destruction (cf. Hosea 4:6). Surely this is not our goal!

So what do we do to remedy this? Some have recognized that our brethren are bored with the current setup and have decided the only way to make it less boring is to put on some sort of dramatic presentations and puppet shows [for the younger crowd], and some are even going for "mood music" to set the tone of the class. Some are forgoing Bible study altogether and are studying books of uninspired men and their classes resemble some sort of "Oprah's Book Club" group review. Some are opting to use denominational material [printed and visual] that teaches erroneous doctrines. Some have disbanded the Bible classes altogether [at least for the adults] because they can see no other choice. Surely there is a better way!

There is a better way, but it seems that very few churches know it. Still others have at least recognized that there is a better way but do not implement it for fear of changing things; they would much rather listen to those who say, "But we've always done it this way." Right. And what happens when you keep doing the same thing you've always done? You keep getting the same thing you've always got: Christians of all ages who do not know the word of God as thoroughly as they could. Why would anyone refuse to change if it is for our own spiritual good? That I cannot answer. But I believe we should question those who do not seem to want to grow spiritually — especially those leaders within our congregations who do not demonstrate any interest in the spiritual growth of their flock! Why don't they just hand the sheep over to the wolves and get it over with?

If this seems a little blunt — it is. But I believe we are at a point where someone needs to be blunt and say what needs to be said: There are far too many Christians out there who do not have an adequate grasp of the Scriptures, and

far too many teachers, elders, leaders, and evangelists doing nothing about it. The apostle Paul has told us that Jesus Christ established certain people within His church “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11, 12). Those apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are there for that very reason: equipping the saints. We must give our brethren the right equipment if we ever expect them to grow up in the faith.

One of the best ways we can properly equip our brethren is to give them the words of their Master, Jesus Christ. Within those words, we will find the answers to daily living, daily questions, daily trials and temptations, and daily problems. Lacking those words, we will fail at giving an answer for the hope that is within us (*1 Pet. 3:15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:*), we will fail to answer with an “It is written,” and we will fail to find the way of escape our Father provides for every temptation (*1 Cor. 10:13 There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*). It is essential we get the babe in Christ involved in daily Bible reading and regular Bible study. It is just as essential to get older Christians more involved in the same things. Do not assume that just because someone was converted 'x' number of years ago that they have an adequate grasp of the Scriptures. In many cases, individuals have endured many years of verse-by-verse studies and fill-in-the-blanks with questions that are almost insulting to a mature Christians' knowledge, and the result is a generation of Christians bored with Bible classes and who have a hard time being motivated to pick up their Bibles to cover [once again!] the same old tired methods and suffer through more regurgitated lectures from teachers who haven't even begun to scratch the surface of God's word.

By now, I am sure some of you are saying, "Okay, Mister Know-It-All, what's the solution?!?" Please take my word for it that I do not know it all, but I do know a better way than what most of us have endured for many years. The first thing to do is stop doing verse-by-verse studies. There is a proper time for such a study, but if you begin with that type of study, you are not considering the entire context of the book or letter you are studying. Only after you are familiar with the book's main message, and only after you understand the thought of each portion of the book or letter [paragraphs and/or chapters] can you get down to the sentences — or partial sentences [which is what many verses are]. Imagine opening a book and reading only half of a sentence. Would you be able to properly interpret the writer's message, or even that partial sentence? Of course not! So why start a Bible study in that way?

The first thing to do when beginning a Bible study is 'start at the top,' so to speak. Instead of beginning with a verse, start with the entire book! Do a survey study of the book and get a grasp of the writer's audience and his intended message. Write down a short title for the book that conveys the writer's intended message. Then, once that is clear, consider a chapter at a time or — if you're motivated enough to do so — a paragraph at a time. Make sure you understand the thought of each paragraph and write it down somewhere you will be able to refer to later. Then — and only then — can we begin looking at a verse, or portion of a verse and see it in its proper context. [Think of an inverted pyramid as the method of studying each book.]

Once the study has begun, how do we go about it? Here may be the most important part of the study. If we study in the wrong way, we will miss the message entirely, misinterpret it, or simply not get as much out of it as we possibly could have. It is important we enter into the study with the goal of getting as much out of God's inspired word as possible. That is not to say we will learn all there is to learn the first — or even second or third or fourth — time. Bible study is a lifetime task and should never be ceased. But here are some important tips to extract not only the true meaning of the Scriptures, but as much as possible each and every time you study. A Bible study in which we learn only what God has intended and in which we extract as much as possible must begin with:

Observation. This sounds like a given, but we have all seen one-on-one studies in which one has already made up his or her mind about what the Bible says, and enters into the study with blinders on. No matter what the text says, some have decided what it says before they even look at it and they do not truly see what it says. Observation is important! Proper Bible study is opening up the Bible and simply asking, "What does the text say?" Then comes proper...

Interpretation. Again, this is important because once we see what it says, we must figure out what it means. Many texts are misused because the audience and situation was not considered, and it has been applied to those to whom it does not apply. It is one thing to know what it says, but the meaning is even more important. This is where many errors are initially kindled — often because of preconceived ideas or doctrines. Let the Bible tell us what it means, without forcing it or twisting it to fit with what we already believe. Then, it is time to make...

Application. The most important part of our study is this. If I consider all of the Bible, interpret it properly, but then never apply it, what good is it to me? If we fail here, we have failed entirely. We will consider more hints for effective and worthwhile Bible study next week.