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Teaching Sound Doctrine

How to Get The Most Out Of Your Bible Study #4

I have in my experience that most brethren have never participated in a survey-type study of the books of the Bible, but have most commonly followed the verse-by-verse study or have used [and are now using] books that are not challenging enough to most adults. Even within the teenage classes, I have found most local churches use the same three or four publishers that offer books with lessons that are not even challenging enough for the teenagers. I don't know if they are just being prepared for inadequate books when they get older, but surely we can do better than this! I know — and have heard some state — they would like to have something better, but cannot find anything worthwhile. Some have expressed their frustration over books that are too simple, but admit that they also do not have the answer. Many simply do not know what to do differently than what they have always seen and what they have always done.

Whose fault is this? The blame can be spread around, but I believe the basic fault lies in the fact that most people have never heard of — or done — anything else. Most people have never even heard of a survey study of the Bible, and wouldn't know what to do should someone tell them there was a better way than verse-by-verse studies. What we need to do is correct the problem by supplying our soldiers with the right equipment so they can more readily fight the good fight and resist the enemy. It is the responsibility of preachers, teachers, and elders in all locations to provide the equipment for the saints that they may be able to more effectively do the work we have been given to do (Eph. 4:11-16). Just think how much more effectively an army would fight if they upgraded from bows and arrows to rifles and mobile artillery delivery systems!

So what is involved in survey-type studies? How is it different from the traditional verse-by-verse study? I probably do not have to tell you that a lot of adult Bible classes begin something like this:

TEACHER: "Okay, everyone, open up your Bibles to Acts 6. Or is it chapter seven? Oh, well, we'll just cover it again just in case."

STUDENT: "I missed two weeks ago; could you go back over the last verse of chapter five again?" And on on and on it could go.

Not too long ago, I was attending a Bible class in our congregation and for about a month we went over portions of Hebrews chapter three three times in three weeks, verse-by-verse. The teacher kept coming up with more and more on the

same text and simply presented more information than what most adults needed, and the meaning of the text was eventually lost to most who were listening. Far too often, this is the case in our Bible classes. It seems the accepted method is to put everything under the microscope and examine everything until every student [and the teacher] has put in their comments. Some more scholarly preachers end up lecturing the class while no student has a say, and some get down to parsing the Greek or Hebrew words, losing the majority of the audience by going over their heads.

The survey study is one in which the student [and the teacher] do all the work before coming to class on Sunday morning or Wednesday evening. Instead of considering the verses [or even chapters or the book as a whole] while in the class, we will consider them on our own time — at home — and bring those thoughts and discoveries to class to share with others. And if someone else in class reveals what we have found, we do not need to repeat it just so others can hear us talk.

And when you study on your own time, please realize that, to have a productive study, it requires time. You cannot hurry a good study. The purpose of doing the survey study is to see each verse, chapter, or passage in its proper relationship with the rest, to understand its intended meaning, and to get the overall view of what the writer has given us. Picking out a verse and considering it without the context would be useless, for the most part, and misleading, at worst. We would not like it if someone took our words out of context to make us say something we did not intend, so neither should we do this with God's inspired word.

As you probably already know, we must consider each passage in light of its immediate context. The three things I urge students to always consider are: who is writing, to whom he is writing, and what the situation is in which this is written. [It is here we must consider the author's personal situation and how it may shed light on what he has written, the setting in which the book/letter was written and/or received, and the situation of the audience to whom the writer directed the message.] Consider the letter to the Philippians, in which Paul writes to encourage them in the faith, and does so even as he is imprisoned. Think how the brethren must have been encouraged when they read such positive words from a man who was imprisoned as he wrote!

As you sit down to do this study, resolve to do more than one reading of the text — even if you are considering an entire book or letter. The first reading should be just to get a feel for the writer's message, not stopping to note organization [ignore, as much as possible, verse and chapter divisions]. At the end of the initial reading, write down your cursory observations. This may include some of the people, places, or events mentioned, the writer's intended message or theme, and maybe some key points that illustrate the overall message. The second [and sometimes third, fourth and so on] reading should note the structure of the book

or letter, noting how the writer supported his main thought or intent. It may be that he makes an argument or statement early in the writing, and defends or illustrates it by using multiple points throughout the book (Romans), or he may simply make statements or provide illustrations throughout the writing and conclude with a statement or argument at the end (John). If a statement is made anywhere within the context that sums up the book's message, note it as a 'key verse.'

Another helpful thing to do in your study is to make a chart or table of the book or letter. Begin with a blank sheet of paper and put the book's title at the top. Then, give it a descriptive headline immediately underneath. [For example: My descriptive headline for Romans would be 'The Righteousness of God Revealed.'] Write your 'key verse' immediately under that. Then, begin making descriptive headlines for each chapter. [As you use this study more and more, you may divide the book up into your own divisions, ignoring chapter divisions. However you do this, keep the connected thoughts connected!] After giving each chapter or section a title, then go back and list significant words, phrases, or events and label your list as such. Look for ways to incorporate these significant words into your chart's layout. [Grouping some sections may illustrate a significant thought.] By the time you are done, you will have an outline for the book or letter that you may reference quickly to see the overall message of the book, and some of the writer's main points. Keep this chart handy for your own personal benefit as you study more. As you study the book more [and maybe even the next time you study it], you will find more — or different — things to note. Write down your discoveries! Don't ignore new things you may learn!

Hopefully, the things we have covered in the last month will help you to enjoy your Bible study more and more. Every place I have been where this was implemented, I have seen a noticeable improvement demonstrated in the attitudes toward — and even participation in — the Bible class period. What happens is more people studying because they enjoy it, and more people participating because they love hearing what others have found, and want to share their personal discoveries. Bible study can be a joy!

Let us open our Bibles more, and let us have a love for God's word, as did the psalmist (Psa. 119:97). But let us also remember their value to us: “Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble.” (Psa. 119:167) Sin has no power over the Word of God!