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Act of Bible Reading

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He will guide you into all truth—John the Apostle (John 16:13).

Jesus says that man does not live on bread alone but on every word of God (Matt 4:4). It is clear that the soul needs God's Word for sustenance and growth. Bible reading is not an option for the maturing Christian. For many, the Bible is not an easy book to read. It is a collection of sixty-six books put together over a span of more than a thousand years. The English Bible has about one thousand pages in length and includes material of many literary types. The authors came from different cultural and historical backgrounds who faced peculiar challenges to their faith in their own times. Reading the Bible, as Packer points out, is like going through a wooded forest where "it is easy to lose one's way and wander aimlessly, delighting in all that one sees but never developing any sure sense of direction and never being able to say confidently where one has to go."¹

The Difficulty of Bible Reading

There are various reasons why Bible reading is a struggle for many Christians. One obvious reason is the distance in time between the reader and the author of the biblical book she is reading. In order to gain an understanding of the author and his works, the reader has to bridge the historical, cultural, and linguistic gap between her and the writer. To a certain extent, this is made possible by the correct use of exegetical tools and application of hermeneutical principles. Even so, the exegete can

¹ J.I. Packer, "Theology and Bible Reading" in *The Act of Bible Reading*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 79.

never be exactly sure of the author's intent.

Another reason is the nature of the text. The Bible is not purely the work of human authors like other literary works. Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16). This means that God speaks to us using human authors. The divine origin of biblical texts poses a problem to many readers. Paul brings up this problem when he reminds us that we need to be spiritually in tune with the text in order to understand and benefit from it (1 Co 2:14). Luther sees the need for congeniality with the text. He says, "No one understands another in spiritual writings unless he savors and possesses the same spirit."² According to John Owen, the Puritan theologian, the reader has neither the will nor supernatural power to accept divine truth without the aid of the Spirit of God.³ Besides, the unenlightened mind will find difficulty in understanding the doctrinal issues of the Trinity and Incarnation implicitly embedded in Scripture.

Readers' prejudice is another factor. The reader is conditioned by his own context in terms of time and tradition. There is a temptation, as Barth points out, to read one's own meaning into a text and to hear what he wants it to say.⁴ Thiselton gives an example in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector (Luke 18:9–14). Conditioned in a different historical context and tradition, the impact of this parable on the modern reader is different from what was in the original setting.⁵ Contrary to what we know today, the Pharisees in the days of Jesus were well respected by Jewish society. Jesus' hearers would not have perceived the Pharisee's prayer as filled with pride or hypocrisy. Rather, they would see this kind of prayer as an expression of piety and thankfulness. Conversely, the

² Quoted in James Houston, "Toward a Biblical Spirituality" in *The Act of Bible Reading*, 163.

³ David McKinley, "John Owen's View of Illumination: An Alternative to the Fuller-Erickson Dialogue" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (Jan–Mar, 1997) 98.

⁴ Michael Dempsey, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Spiritual Interpretation: The Revelatory Presence of God in Karl Barth's Theology of Scripture" in *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 37 (2007) 120:124-5.

⁵ See Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), 12–15.

tax-collector would not be well received by the Jews. The verdict given by Jesus would have shocked the original hearers. Modern readers, who already regard Pharisees as self-righteous hypocrites, are not shocked by Jesus' verdict but rather expect it.⁶

Another difficulty has to do with the goal of understanding Scripture. The aim of Bible reading is not only to get knowledge about God but to know him. Today's readers do not come to read the Bible in this way. They read the Bible for some tips that can help them cope with the stresses of Christian living or to seek guidance over some important matters. We do not read the text for motivation, comfort, or information only. The Word of God is a means for the formation of our soul. The Spirit, shedding light on God's Word, will deepen our life with God. The truth sanctifies the disciple of Christ who follows its teachings (John 17:17; 8:31–32). A thoughtful study of God's Word will not lead us to a deeper friendship with God. There is a place for us to gain knowledge of the truth through critical analysis and posing questions to the text but these are not sufficient for us to encounter God. The reader of Scripture must come to the text with the sincere intent to hear God speak. "Listening to Scripture," says John Frame, "is not merely a transaction between ourselves and a book, even a very extraordinary book; rather, in Scripture we meet God himself . . . no experience offers a more profound closeness to God."⁷

The Need for the Spirit's Illumination

Human reason alone will not be sufficient to know God's truth. Our knowledge at best is partial and incomplete (1 Co 13:12). Besides, sin has darkened our understanding, weakened our will, and corrupted our desires. Those without the Spirit neither have the will nor the power to access God's truth (1 Co 2:14). Jesus talked about the things committed to him

⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁷ Quoted in Bruce Waltke, "Exegesis and the Spiritual Life: Theology as Spiritual Formation" in *Crux* XXX (September, 1994) 3:30.

by the Father that were hidden from the wise and learned but revealed to the children (Matt 11:26–27). When he appeared before the disciples after his resurrection, he opened their minds to understand how the Scripture spoke about his suffering and rise from the death (Luke 24:45–46). The difficulties we encounter reading God’s Word can be overcome by the Spirit of wisdom and revelation who will enlighten the eyes of our hearts to know God better and also to know of the hope, the riches, and the power given to us who believe (Eph 1:17–19). For this reason, we are given the Holy Spirit to guide us (John 16:13), anoint us (1 John 2:20), teach us (1 John 2:27), and assure us of its effectiveness (1 Thess 1:5). The weakness of our mind to grasp God’s truth is acknowledged by Calvin when he wrote in the Catechism of the Church in Geneva (1541):

Our mind is too weak to comprehend the spiritual wisdom of God which is revealed to us by faith, and our hearts are too prone either to defiance or to a perverse confidence in ourselves or creaturely things. But the Holy Spirit enlightens us to make us capable of understanding what would otherwise be incomprehensible to us, and fortifies us in certitude, sealing and imprinting the promises of salvation on our hearts.⁸

If a person’s mind is not enlightened, he is like the deaf or blind person who cannot appreciate music or color in his life. He is not able to perceive the spiritual excellence and profit to his soul when confronted with the truth. A veil hangs over him unless he turns to the Lord (2 Co 3:16). Only then will he be able to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps 34:8). The two disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus did not recognize him when he expounded the Scriptures to them. Only when he broke bread with them did the disciples’ eyes open and recognize the risen Lord (Luke 24: 15–16; 30–31). This was not the result of new information that they received from Jesus but rather a new appreciation. “This new comprehension,” as Alwyn York explains, “is not the result of given new information. It was being able to see and appreciate what was right before their eyes and they should have known all along.”⁹

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ Alwyn York, “The Holy Spirit’s Illumination of Scripture” in *The Mountain Retreat*.

Another reason why we need the illumination of the Spirit is due to the pressing needs of our time. Though times have changed, the same Spirit that inspired the writing of Scripture is still with us today, appropriating the text to pressing needs that are entirely different from those of the original readers. The meaning of the text is still the same but its significance to today's readers is vastly different. The contemporary faith context, with its pressing needs, forces us to dialogue and wrestle with the text. Through reflection, the text may allow a larger interpretation than was originally intended. Pinnock cites the issue of slavery which the Bible apparently tolerated and did not seek for its demise. Today, Christians cannot tolerate the institution of slavery for obvious reasons. Where do they get this idea from? Pinnock explains: "The Spirit brought to completeness among Christians what the gospel was really about. Interpretation is not blind submission to the text as a static object but an in-depth engagement of its subject matter within the contemporary faith context."¹⁰

The Interpretative Method of Bible Reading

How can we read the Bible to gain the most profit? Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). What is the appropriate method of studying the Bible? From this verse we know that three objects are involved in making the Bible profitable. They are the divine author—God; the human author who received the inspiration (God-breathed) to write; and the text—Scripture. To read the Bible well, we need to consider each object that demands an appropriate approach.¹¹ The method of study must satisfy the three objects at the same time. The text is impersonal whereas the divine and human authors are personal. To understand an impersonal

No page. Online: http://www.mountainretreatorg.net/articles/holy_illum.shtml

¹⁰ Clark Pinnock, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36/4 (December 1993) 496.

¹¹ I am indebted to Waltke for this line of thought. See Bruce Waltke, "Exegesis and the Spiritual Life: Theology as Spiritual Formation" 30.

object (non-volition), detachment and dispassionate objectivity is the appropriate method. The scientific method of using exegetical tools and hermeneutical principles of interpretation on the text is the right approach. In terms of the divine and human writers, the opposite approach is necessary. To understand a person (volition); we need attachment, passion, and commitment. “The scientific method,” as Waltke explains, “which we traditionally call the grammatico-historical method, is appropriate for understanding the text, but inappropriate for the principal aim of Christian understanding of Scripture, *the knowledge of God*. He further explains that the Hebrew term, *knowledge of God*, “includes and transcends the intellectual disquisition and calls for the full involvement of the person’s total personality with God.”¹²

The Text

Readers, as interpreters of Scripture, tend to bring along with them cultural and lexical assumptions to the text they are reading. This will give rise to misinterpreting the text. Good exegesis will help to correct that. Since we read the Bible to find out what it means in order to obey God’s Word, it is necessary for us to handle the Word well (2 Tim 2:15). The components of good exegesis are context and content.¹³ Context questions have to do with the type of literature or genre used in the document, the historical setting of the text, and the meaning of the passage in the immediate context (sentences, paragraphs surrounding it). Content questions have to do with the words used in the original text, the meaning of words, grammar, and the historical allusions behind the words used by the writer. The assumption is that with good exegesis, the exegete will be able to objectively infer the original intent of the writer. In this way, the plain meaning of the text will be revealed.

Can the reader truly achieve full textual objectivity? Can reader prejudice be fully overcome and the text viewed as a stationary object

¹² Ibid., 30.

¹³ Gordon Fee has a good explanation of what is good exegesis in “History as Context for Interpretation” in *The Act of Bible Reading*, 14–15.

with detached objectivity? Did the writers of Scripture understand the full implications of their own words?¹⁴ Though we usually try to take a text in its intended meaning, is it possible, as Pinnock suggests, that sometimes “we hear God saying something different, where a text will be given a meaning different from the one intended”?¹⁵ Luther, according to Houston, saw interpretation and understanding of Scriptures, with its infinite meaning, as having “unlimited possibilities of revelation for the Bible reader.”¹⁶ Luther was open to the alternate interpretations of the passage in his sermons. These are some issues that the reader needs to ponder when he approaches the text purely from an exegetical perspective.

Does the reader’s pursuit after clarity of meaning and accuracy of interpretation regarding the author’s intent distract her from the devotional use of the Bible? I think it is a common struggle with the readers of God’s Word. Again, we need to ask ourselves what is the aim of Bible reading? Is it just to achieve knowledge or the appreciation of knowledge in order to use it wisely? Can we grasp the meaning of the text in order to let its significance grip us? This, I think, is where the Spirit’s role of illumination is crucial. The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (1 Co 3:6). We need to hear the divine voice speaking to us beyond the meaning of the text.

The Divine Author

How can we engage the Word with a textual, relational or personal focus at the same time? How can we read Scripture intellectually and spiritually? Though we may not fully agree with Barth who says that the Bible becomes God’s Word only when it is received with faith and obedience by the human reader, he has a point in that God’s presence and power is essential in the hermeneutical process. We read the text with the aim to hear God speaking to us relationally about himself and about his

¹⁴ The Chicago statement on Biblical Hermeneutics states in Article XVIII that this is not possible. See Pinnock, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation,” 492.

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶ James Houston, “Toward a Biblical Spirituality” 164.

relationship with the people of faith. This, according to Barth, is the main theme, subject matter, and content of Scripture.¹⁷

According to William Lane, “exposure to the word of Scripture entails exposure to God himself.”¹⁸ The connection is observed in Hebrews 4:12 and 4:13. The living Word of God that judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart will expose the reader to God for “nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is now uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” When writing his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Lane made it a point to come before God and seeking his guidance when he encountered a critical or theological decision demanded by the text. He said:

This has made the preparation of the commentary a spiritual as well as an intellectual pilgrimage through the text of the Gospel. In listening to be sensitive to all that the evangelist was pleased to share with me I have been immeasurably enriched by the discipline of responsible listening.”¹⁹

Hence, to hear the divine voice, we need to understand that God has hidden himself in Scripture as he has hidden the revelation of himself physically in Jesus at the advent and in his textual presence in Scripture.²⁰ Upon Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, Jesus said that this revelation came not from man but from his Father in heaven (Matt 16:17). It is important to recognize that though we can use exegetical tools to dig for the meaning of the text, we have no power to oblige Scripture to render its secrets to us. The initiative of interpretation is in the hands of God. God will only reveal himself out of his sovereignty and “we cannot make God talk through the scientific method.”²¹ We need to pray for the Spirit’s wisdom and revelation as we read the Bible in God’s presence. Humility is

¹⁷ Michael Dempsey, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Spiritual Interpretation” 122.

¹⁸ Quoted in Klaus Issler, “Approaching Formative Scripture Reading with Both Head and Heart” in *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 5:1 (2012) 124.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁰ Bruce Waltke, 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

the precondition of any effort to read the Bible with the aim to know God.

The Human Author

Language reflects the thoughts and feelings of the writer. If we can get behind the words and empathize with the author's state of mind, we can better understand the meaning of the text. To empathize means to share and understand the feelings and experience of another person. To Luther, "no one understands another in spiritual writings unless he savors and possesses the same spirit."²² Empathy requires the reader to pay attention and be fully present to the author of the text. Simone Weil sees the need to develop the power of attention in prayer. "Attention," according to Weil, is "suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object." To her, the quality of prayer is subjected to the attention given to God.²³ In a similar vein, Barth sees the need for the reader to empty oneself of any preconceived ideas to prepare the way for God to enter the "chambers of the heart" (a phrase used by Anselm).²⁴

The same attention can be applied to reading the Scripture. The lack of attention will lead the reader to come before the text with a divided mind. Reading a text is similar to receiving a person (the author behind the text). Sue Monk Kidd points out that we often receive people with a divided mind:

To be fully present is not to pass judgment on the other person, wanting to convert her to our point of view, desiring her appreciation, wondering what others may think, worry about the weather, or generally getting caught up in one's own feelings, desires, and opinions of the moment.²⁵

²² Quoted in James Houston, 163.

²³ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*. trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial, 2001), 57–65.

²⁴ Michael Dempsey, 125-6.

²⁵ Sue Monk Kidd, "Live Welcoming to All" in *Weavings* XII:5 (1997) 9.

An unsympathetic reader will distort the meaning of the text. Each reader has her favorite books and it is not uncommon for a reader to prefer one author above others. She may subscribe to a “canon within a canon” and tend to respect certain authors or books more highly than others. If this happens the reader has closed herself to the full impact of their message.²⁶ Similarly, we tend to listen more attentively and respond positively to preachers that we recognize and respect highly. A speaker, unknown to the audience, will have to work extra hard to build rapport with the listeners at the beginning of his speech in order for his message to be heard and well-received.

Competent knowledge is not sufficient for us to understand the text completely. Empathy is needed. Waltke explains:

To understand the author, a reader must come to meet the author with empathy. We may have competent knowledge of the text’s philology, forms, and rhetoric, yet be incapable of knowing what the text means. Without empathy for the authors of Scripture, we cannot understand them.²⁷

The Requirements of the Bible Reader

What are needed for a reader to take full advantage of the Spirit’s illumination of Scripture? What are the necessary requirements for the reader to make sense of the text in order to apply it to a new context? What are the virtues or habits that a reader should aspire and attain in order to read the Word wisely and effectively?²⁸

First, we need to cultivate the habit of submitting and surrendering ourselves to God’s Word. It is interesting to note that when Ezra read the

²⁶ Daniel Wallace, “The Holy Spirit and Hermeneutics” No page. Online: [Http://bible.org/article/holy-spirit-and-hermeneutics](http://bible.org/article/holy-spirit-and-hermeneutics).

²⁷ Bruce Waltke, 31.

²⁸ Michael Gorman calls for “a hermeneutic of trust that is grounded in such dispositions as humility and receptivity, as well as such corollary practices as prayer and Christian virtue. See his book, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 146.

Book of the Law, he was standing above the people on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. The people were literally under the Book of the Law that was read. The people, when they heard the Law read to them, lifted up their hands in response crying out, “Amen! Amen!” They then bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground (Neh 8:4–6). According to Barth, we are able to hear the word of God “more strongly and gloriously” when we are prepared to let go of our own needs or desire for authority and trust ourselves at the mercy of God.²⁹ Luther recognizes the need of humility as a prerequisite for effective Bible reading. He writes:

Scripture is not in our power or in the ability of the mind. Therefore in its study we must in no way rely on our own understanding (that is, our intellectual powers) but we must be humble and pray that he may bring that understanding to us, since it is not given except to the humble.³⁰

Second, we need integrity. Integrity is the harmonization of the intellectual and moral virtues. Since the cognitive and volitional elements are needed in understanding and applying Scripture, the intellectual and moral aspects of our life will affect our reading of the Bible. To think well is to live well. The correct cultivation of our mind in terms of intellectual virtues (wisdom, prudence, foresight, understanding, discernment, truthfulness) will not only make us good thinkers but persons as well. Conversely, the lack of moral character (arrogance, dishonesty, pride, pugnacity, laziness) will undermine good thinking. “It is not possible,” writes Aristotle, “to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue.”³¹

²⁹ Michael Dempsey, 126.

³⁰ Quoted in James Houston, 163.

³¹ Quoted in Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 21. Athanasius wrote that a good life and a pure soul are needed for a right understanding of Scripture. See his book, *The Incarnation of the Word of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 96.

Third, we need to approach the text intellectually and spiritually. The reader must not neglect the use of exegetical and hermeneutical skills in studying the Bible. The historical context and literary styles of the text need to be seriously considered by the reader. A working knowledge of the original languages is an advantage to the reader. Owen believes that prayer plays a vital role in interpreting the Scriptures. Through prayer, the negative attitudes of the reader toward Scripture are exposed and a positive attitude with a teachable spirit takes over. Prayer gives the reader the power to apply the truths in her life.³² Meanwhile, Owen calls for a balance between personal and corporate interpretation. A reader's interpretation of the text needs to submit to other believers. Readers must subject themselves to mutual instructions, Bible studies, and preaching of the Word in order to keep this balance.³³ Bray cautions that while God does speak to individuals, his words are consistent to what he has spoken to the church. "Individual believers," he writes, "must therefore test their experience in the light of the common witness, and submit to its authority."³⁴

Fourth, we need to put words into action. Jesus tells the disciples that everyone who hears his words and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. For those who hears his words and do not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand (Matt 7:24,26). By putting into practice what we know will help us to better understand and appreciate the words we received from God. We learn best through experience. Luther has observed correctly:

Works produce more understanding than words. He who does not put Scripture to the test in life and morals, very quickly misuses Scripture; he falls into error because he measures Scripture by what he knows by himself. However, it is the works and practice which

³² David McKinley, "John Owen's View of Illumination" 101.

³³ Ibid., 101.

³⁴ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*. (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1996), 15.

expound and understand the Scripture.³⁵

Finally, we need a charitable spirit in our reading. This means that the text has something good to tell us and we must view the divinely inspired author as “a good man, whose writings were intended to benefit the human race and posterity.”³⁶ Reading the text is like drawing water from a deep well. The reader expects the text to contain something good and valuable that will refresh and strengthen her spirit and soul. As to the conflicting interpretations held among the readers, Augustine has this advice to all readers: “Choose the interpretation that most fosters the love of God and neighbor.”³⁷ This is a timely advice for the reader who lives at a time when Bible reading is “dominated by professionalized exegesis and hermeneutics.”³⁸ Humility, charity, spirituality, integrity, and practicality are the needed requirements for the reader who wants to read the text meaningfully and profitably with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

³⁵ Quoted in James Houston, 163.

³⁶ Augustine, *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J.H.S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 300.

³⁷ Quoted in Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in the Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 32.

³⁸ Houston, 168. Gorman believes that the primary location and ultimate focus of biblical interpretation is the church. See his book, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 151.