

God's Word Written

FOCUS

David Shenk told of a Muslim who wanted to read the Bible. So he was given a copy but he brought it back in a short time. "It's just a bunch of stories," he said. Indeed, the Bible does contain stories. It is a story, the drama of God and God's people. Sometimes it is called "salvation history" because of our understanding that the people of God have been "saved".

In Article One of the Readings John W. Miller describes the story of God's people as "a drama in three acts". Act one is a story of the world, act two the story of a special people, and act three the account of how the people were restored after disaster.

The Bible story is a story with frankness. The saints in scripture are not paper saints. They make mistakes, they bleed when they are injured. A humorous article published in a magazine years ago was written as if it were a letter from an editor to the author of the Bible explaining why it was not publishable: too much sex and violence.

Yet we tell these stories to our children and urge them to read the Bible. Now as a student you are ready to view these stories through adult eyes and ask yourself important questions about them: What was going on here? Why did these people make the decisions they made? What implications do these stories have for us? How do they aid us and our people in our efforts to respond to the call for faithfulness to God?

Historically, Mennonites have been a people of the Book. Menno Simons (1536) saw the Bible as a source of life:

The divine Word changes and renews the whole person. It is the pure, unadulterated milk whereby the young and newborn children of God are nurtured. It is also the strong food for the mature and adult in Christ Jesus. In short, this seed of the divine Word is spiritual food whereby the whole person is nourished inwardly lest he perish and faint in the wild desert of this waste world (adapted from "Spiritual Resurrection").

Later (1539) Menno also claimed the Bible as a source of instruction:

Everything contrary to the Scriptures...whether it be in doctrines, beliefs,

Goal:

To reflect on the place of the Bible as a resource to the church

Objectives:

1. To review the inductive method of Bible study
2. To lead in discernment activity with members of your congregation
3. To consider how to introduce people to the Bible

sacraments, worship, or life, should be measured by this infallible rule (“Foundation,” 1539).

The Bible, for Menno, was a source of life and instruction. Can the same be said for the sons and daughters of Menno?

Road Signs for the Journey by Conrad Kanagy {Herald Press, 2007} is a report based on questionnaires from 2216 Mennonites in the US. Of these, 69 percent report that they read the Bible at least once a week and 32 percent every day. By comparison, 21 percent of conservative Protestants read the Bible every day as do 14 percent of mainline Protestants.

As a pastor or pastoral assistant, one of your primary responsibilities is to “preach the Word” (2 Timothy 4:2). Your congregation looks to you to proclaim the biblical message clearly and to apply that message accurately to the realities of life in North America in the twenty-first century.

Your congregation wants you to preach; they also need you to teach. They want to be partners with you in discerning and discovering God’s will for our day. Many pastors place “Christian education” low on their job description. After all, they reason, isn’t that the job of Sunday School?

Your most lasting contribution to your congregation may be to help them learn to read and interpret and apply Scripture. Pastors come and go, but God’s Word stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

This unit offers a Bible survey, with special emphasis on recognizing the different styles of the Bible (e.g., narrative, law, epistle, gospel). God is the author of Scripture but he conveyed his Word through human words. As Bible students we want to hear God’s Word as clearly and as completely as possible. The goal of this study is to make you more familiar with the Bible. If you take this study seriously, eleven lessons from now you will be able to:

1. Describe the thread of biblical history (“salvation history”).
2. Describe how the Bible came to be.
3. Identify the different styles of biblical literature.
4. Describe the major themes and trajectories of the Bible.
5. Describe what the Lord requires of us today as a people of the Book.

EXPLORE

THE FUNCTION OF SCRIPTURE

Many authors have written many books to describe and to explain the Bible. What does the Bible say about itself? Paul’s words to his spiritual son, Timothy, are helpful:

As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it. From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for

reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.
(2 Timothy 3:14-17)

The primary purpose of the Bible is to lead persons to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. Scripture then continues to support and guide our maturing in faithful living. The Bible is a trustworthy source of teaching, correction, and training.

Some traditions concentrate on words like “inerrant” and “infallibility.” Mennonites focus on the word “authority.” We take the Bible as our guide for faith and practice. The Bible is not a treasure to be admired; it is a road map to be followed. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* puts it this way:

We acknowledge the Scriptures as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture. (Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, *Herald Press*, 1995, pp 21, 22)

1. How often do you read the Bible? What passages of Scripture are most helpful to you?
2. What makes the Bible an authority in your life? (e.g., its source (God); its effectiveness (it works); the witness of previous generations (tradition).
3. What would you say to a person who does not accept the Bible as inspired and useful?



THE BLESSINGS OF SCRIPTURE

We take the words of Scripture seriously because they are words of life.

*Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.
Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.*

*O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! Then I shall not be put
to shame...I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you.*

Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes. (Psalm 119:1-3, 5, 6a, 11, 12).

All of us seek contentment and meaning in life. Some choose a life of self-indulgence, some a life of riches and comfort, some a life of status and prestige. The Psalmist contends that happiness results in knowing and following God’s law. The Bible provides us with the values and boundaries for truly abundant living.

Despite these obvious blessings, the Psalmist recognizes how easily we can become distracted and lazy in our obedience. Following God’s law requires a deliberate choice, a dedicated heart, and a disciplined will.

Note, further, the emphasis on keeping the law. Mennonites have always stressed the importance of obedient knowledge. A thousand verses of memorized Scripture are worthless if they do not result in faithful living. The test of how well we know the Bible is how well we live out its commands.



4. Reflect on your feelings when you read or study Scripture. Give those feelings a name (e.g., anticipation, joy, obligation, duty, frustration, gratitude).
5. The psalmist speaks of Scripture as a shield against sin. Describe a time when you were tempted to sin and your knowledge of the Bible protected you.

THE KEY TO SCRIPTURE

Without question there is a great difference between the biblical world and the modern world. The Bible does not address every issue of our day. It does not refer to microwaves, Blackberries or the ozone layer. This gap has left persons uneasy about the Bible. Persons wonder about the lasting value of those words. Should some books (like Numbers or Obadiah) be dropped? Should the works of modern thinkers and preachers be added? Who, after all, wants to study an “old” testament?

The Bible, written many centuries ago, continues to speak today. With the principles and perspectives of the Bible we can respond obediently to the challenges of modern North America. The differences do require us to do more than simply read the Bible. We must interpret the Bible.

The Bible’s unity is sustained by a single source (God) and a single purpose (to form and sustain the holy people of God). This unity does not, however, mean uniformity. The Bible displays a variety of writing styles: narrative, law, psalms, prophecy, gospels, letters, etc. The books of the Bible cover hundreds of years of ancient history. Human understanding and responses to God changed greatly over the centuries.

Does this mean that the Bible is not inspired? Of course not! If anything, it makes the miracle of the Bible all the more powerful. The diversity of the Bible does require us to bring all the resources we can to our study of the Scriptures.

Mennonites hold that the key to interpreting the Bible faithfully is Jesus Christ. We read the Bible “Christo-centrally.” In other words, Christ is the center of the Bible. We read the Bible through the lens or filter of Jesus Christ. We accept Jesus’ claim in Matthew 5:17, 18:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.



6. John W. Miller describes the story of the Hebrew Bible as a drama in three acts. To this the early church added the Christian story making the Bible we have today. Read “The Message of the Bible” (ARTICLE 1, page 110) a. What were the three acts which John describes in this article?
 - b. Why did it seem appropriate to add the Christian story to these three acts?

7. What passages of Scripture have you used most frequently in your preaching and teaching ministry?
8. What parts of the Bible are most confusing to you? What makes those passages difficult to read?
9. Describe the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament as you see it.



THE CONTEXT OF SCRIPTURE

Mennonites further believe that we can hear God's voice most clearly and most completely when we study his word together as God's people. We follow the Rule of Paul, outlined in 1 Corinthians 14:29:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

God speaks to us; so does the devil! The church does not accept new ideas blindly. She listens, she reflects, then she confirms or corrects. Put another way, we believe in *personal* Bible study but not *private* Bible study. This viewpoint was endorsed in the Mennonite Church in 1977:

The believing community is an interpreting community...It is the task of each member to participate in the interpretation of the Bible. We believe God gives special insight to individuals as they read and study the Bible. These insights are to be tested in the community.

10. Describe the settings in which your congregation is the interpreting community (e.g., Sunday School classes, midweek Bible Studies, small groups, Sunday morning worship).
11. What safeguards do you and your congregation practice to "weigh" interpretations of Scripture?



CONNECT

Money is the root of all evil. Right? Wrong—the *love of money* is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). Appropriate methods of study are required in order to interpret the Bible with integrity.

Bible study is hard work. When the stories are familiar, we often get sloppy in our reading. At other times we come to the Bible looking for support for our ideas, rather than building our ideas based on biblical teaching.

There are many varied (and good) approaches to biblical study. In this course we will be using **inductive Bible study**.

In *inductive* study, we begin with observations of the text (specifics) and then move toward conclusions (generalizations). In contrast, *deductive* study begins with rules or principles (generalizations) and then comes to conclusions about details (specifics).

Inductive study works with three questions:

- What does it say? (Observation)
- What did it mean? (Meaning)
- What does it mean? (Significance)

As an example, let's return to the passage from 1 Timothy 6. The paragraph is the basic unit in studying the Bible. A chapter is too large; a single verse is incomplete. A paragraph conveys a complete thought. Most modern translations print the biblical text in paragraph format.

Let's look at our paragraph from 1 Timothy 6:2b-10:

Teach and urge these duties. Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accordance with godliness, is conceited, understanding nothing, and has a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words. From these come envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.



What does the text say (OBSERVATION)?

- There are persons challenging Paul's teaching
- Meaningless arguments can destroy community as well as persons
- We abuse the gospel when we use it to "get" something ("gain")
- To be content requires only (adequate) food and clothing.
- The desire to be rich is addictive ("trapped by senseless and harmful desires").
- The love of money can lead to loss of faith and personal pain.

What did the text mean (MEANING)?

False teachers were confusing Timothy and his church. Apparently the teaching had something to do about money and attitudes toward money. As a result, Paul's readers were unclear about what was really important. Elsewhere in this letter (3:3; 3:8, 6:17) Paul condemned the love of money. In these verses Paul contrasted godliness with greed.

The goal of life, argued Paul, is not wealth but "godliness with contentment." He did not say that money or wealth is sinful. He did say that the love of money, the obsession with becoming rich, leads to sin and a loss of faith. Paul argued that instead of contentment the lust for money leads to "many pains."

In the paragraph following (verses 11-16), Paul urged Timothy to pursue a cluster of spiritual goals.

What does the text mean (SIGNIFICANCE)?

Human nature has changed little in 2000 years. Many continue to see money and wealth as a key to happiness. They continue to sacrifice their physical, emotional, and spiritual health in the pursuit of financial security. Seeking financial independence, they are trapped.

Paul confronted Timothy with a choice; that same choice confronts us. Will we run the “rat race” or the race of faith?

12. Choose a passage of Scripture (e.g., a favorite, one you will soon be preaching on, one you have avoided). Study the passage using the three inductive questions. Write out your answers to those questions and submit to your instructor.



13. Describe other approaches to Bible study that have worked for you in the past.

Earlier in the lesson I talked about the authority of the Bible. As Mennonites we confess this authority when we sing the Anabaptist hymn, “**The word of God is solid ground**” (*Hymnal #314*).



14. In what ways does the hymn affirm that the Bible helps Christians? Which of these ways has been most important in your own life and ministry?

APPLY

15. Identify a controversial issue within your congregation. How are your members using the Bible to work through this issue?



16. Gather together a small group from your congregation during a Sunday school hour, Sunday or midweek meeting, or host a Saturday morning brunch. Supply some scratch paper and ask them to complete the following statements:

I believe the Bible...

I think that our congregation believes the Bible...

Based on his sermons and teaching, I think our pastor believes the Bible...

Summarize and submit a report to your instructor.

17. John and Jan are a young couple who have just begun attending your church. They both come from unchurched homes. They ask you, as pastor, for suggestions on how to read the Bible (e.g., where to begin reading, what translation to use, what to do if they get stuck). Describe what advice you would give them. If you are not a pastor, answer from your own perspective as a participant...

18. [optional] Instead of your normal sermon, use the sermon block to read an extended portion of Scripture (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7); the “household tables” (Ephesians 3-6); a series of Psalms; Jonah; portions of Deuteronomy). Invite feedback from your congregation. What did they experience? How did they feel? How did you feel? Report this experience to your instructor.



Reading

ARTICLE ONE

“The Message of the Bible” by John W. Miller. Reprinted from *The Mennonite*, July 20, 1999.