

Bible Study – An Imperative for Church Leaders

Bible study is a very important discipline in a believer's life, and is critical for every church leader. Be careful not to get Bible study confused with daily devotional Bible reading. Of course, every follower of Jesus Christ should spend time daily in prayer and Bible reading for the purpose of cleansing, direction, and refreshing. That time is often called a daily devotional time. A Christian's daily devotional time may be first thing in the morning or last thing in the evening and may not last more than 15 minutes. Your daily devotional time will usually include reading a passage or chapter of the Bible and a few minutes of prayer to have fellowship with God and prepare for the coming day. But just as a Christian's devotional prayer for a few minutes in the morning is not all or even the most important part of a believer's prayer time, neither is reading through a chapter of the Bible each day the only time a believer should spend with the Bible. Daily Bible reading gives you regular spiritual nourishment from the Bible and allows God to speak to you and draw you closer to Him. In contrast, Bible study is your ongoing mastery of the Bible through spending regular blocks of time digging deep to find truths, insights, and application.

I am afraid that while some may have a regular daily devotional time in the Bible, very few actually study it. Some might occasionally read a Bible study book, but few do it for themselves. We may listen to teachers who tell us what they have discovered from their Bible study, but few do it for ourselves. Some believers might argue with those who would question the inspiration of Scripture, but don't really study it that much. Rick Warren says, "It seems we are guilty of being more interested in defending God's Word than studying it."

I recently heard a national Christian church leader in Africa reprove a large gathering of pastors for preaching on the same few verses over and over. His point was very true. The Bible is so full of riches that a long life of constant Bible study would not uncover all of the truths contained in it. A sign of a church leader who does not really study the Bible much is they preach or teach on the same passages or topics over and over again. The solution for such a limited repertoire of content is to begin regular in-depth study of the Bible.

God expects church leaders (and all Christians) to study the Bible, and though training and resources can help, every believer can and should do it.

The Biblical Command to Study the Bible

The Bible calls us to in-depth study in many places and ways, but none more clearly than in 2 Timothy 2:15.

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15

We will look at this verse carefully to see exactly what it says and validate its applicability to church leaders today.

Let us first look closely at the verse to get the full impact of Paul's instruction to Timothy. The verse can be broken down into four basic thoughts that together will reveal God's high expectation placed on those who handle the Bible.

The most important word in this verse is the very first word in the original Greek text. It is an imperative verb, meaning that it is a command. Specifically, in this case, the command is translated, "*Do your best...*" and then the rest of the verse explains in what area Paul was instructing Timothy to do his best. Another translation says, "*Be diligent....*" The Greek word means "*hasten*", "*exert yourself*", and, my favorite, "*endeavor*." Paul was telling Timothy to give all of his energy and effort toward accomplishing the task he is about to reveal.

The next phrase in our passage, "*...to present yourself to God as one approved, ...*", suggests that God has a standard of performance and that Paul was exhorting Timothy to present himself to Him as someone who has met that standard.

"In the ancient world there was no banking system as we know it today, and no paper money. All money was made from metal, heated until liquid, poured into molds and allowed to cool. When the coins were cooled, it was necessary to smooth off the uneven edges. The coins were comparatively soft and of course many people shaved them closely. In one century, more than eighty laws were passed in Athens [Greece], to stop the practice of shaving down the coins then in circulation. But some money changers were men of integrity, who would accept no counterfeit money. They were men of honor who put only genuine full weighted money into circulation. Such men were called ... 'approved'." Donald Barnhouse

Paul has not yet revealed what the task is, but he is setting the stage for a high expectation that will require constant, diligent effort to meet.

The third phrase, "*...a worker who has no need to be ashamed, ...*", reinforces the idea of high expectation by revealing the possibility of being ashamed for not meeting the standard. Paul calls Timothy a "*worker*" or a "*laborer*", a person who has been given a job to do. He warns Timothy not to fail to meet God's standard, in which case he would be ashamed before Him.

In the fourth phrase, Paul finally states what he wants Timothy to endeavor to do, and what task has such a high and important standard to meet. The phrase is translated, "*...rightly handling the word of truth.*" The word translated "*rightly handling*" means to cut straight. The word would be used when someone was building a road to tell them to make it straight to the destination. It would be used when a farmer was plowing their field to plow the furrows straight. It would be used to instruct a stone cutter to make sure they cut the sides and corners of the block of stone perfectly straight. It would also be used in a context very familiar to Paul, a tentmaker by trade, to instruct someone to cut their cloth straight. The phrase "*the word of truth*" refers to the Bible. Paul was calling Timothy to the task of carefully, skillfully, and accurately interpreting and applying the Bible.

What activity could Timothy perform that would best enable him to meet the goal of "*rightly handling the word of truth*?" Bible study! It is no surprise, then, that a very popular English translation of the Bible begins this verse, "*Study...*" Paul wanted Timothy to study the Bible so he could learn to correctly interpret, live, and teach God's truth found in it.

Pulling all of this together, we can see that Paul was instructing Timothy to give regular, diligent attention and effort to Bible study, so he could meet the high standard God has for those who handle His Bible, so that he would be approved and not ashamed before God.

Now that we have studied what Paul's message was to Timothy, let us now answer the question, "How should we view that message in our own lives?" Paul wrote the letter of Second Timothy to the young man Timothy, a church leader he had disciplined and made a leader of the churches in Ephesus. The letter is instruction to Timothy about how he should live as a church leader and how he should lead the churches in Ephesus. While Second Timothy contains a few instructions and details that were specific to that time and place, there is no indication anywhere in the text that Paul's direction to Timothy is limited only to him, to the church in Ephesus, or to that time in history. In fact, the vast majority of the text, including our passage in 2 Timothy 2:15, should be considered normative instruction for church leaders everywhere for all time. And further, since we receive the Bible as God's Word to us, we should receive the instruction in 2 Timothy 2:15 as a command from God for us to follow.

God wants you to give regular, diligent attention and effort to Bible study, so you can meet the high standard God has for you as someone who handles His Bible, so that you will be approved and not ashamed before God.

With a better understanding of Paul's message to Timothy and having established the applicability of this passage to our lives as church leaders, let us consider some important questions as we consider the essential task of studying the Bible.

Practical Considerations

It is evident that God wants us to study His Bible diligently and regularly. But many questions may come to mind. Can anyone do it? Is there training required? Why are there different translations? What translation(s) do I need? Do I need any other resources besides a Bible? What are some practical ways I can study the Bible?

Can anyone do it? Whenever God gives us a command, it is definitely something any Christian can do, because God never tells anyone to do anything they cannot do.

He does not put any requirements on the Bible student, either. There is no minimum age or intelligence, and no length of time since a person became a Christian. Also note that there is never a time when a Christian no longer needs to study the Bible. You never learn all you need to know about the Bible. God wants the newest believer and the most mature church leader all to study the Bible. Every Christian can and should study the Bible.

Is there training required? Training can help. It can give you experience and skills in using some of the resources we will talk about next. But training only gives someone a head start, and a diligent untrained beginner can quickly make that up and more simply by making the effort to get started.

Training in the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages can be helpful for advanced study, but today there are plenty of resources available that make knowledge of the original languages much less critical. Training is not required.

Why are there different translations? Whenever someone (or more typically a group of scholars) translates a text from one language to another, there is much more to it than mechanically exchanging one word from one language with an equivalent word from another language. The meaning and connotation of a word can vary by its context. The genre and purpose of a text can change the vocabulary and grammar. Idioms, euphemisms, colloquialisms, and weights and measures can seem bizarre and incomprehensible. For these reasons, even the most literal attempts to translate from one language to another require translators also to interpret what they believe the original meaning was in order to get the best translation. The greater the difference in time, culture, and world view between the original and the target language, the more interpretation may be needed to produce a meaningful translation.

The challenge faced by Bible translators is to decide how much interpretation of those historical and linguistic differences they should do as they translate the original text. There are three categories of translations that represent the spectrum of possible translation philosophies: literal, dynamic equivalence, and free. Literal translations attempt to maintain as closely as possible the original text with its idiom, grammar, and measures intact, leaving the interpretation and understanding of those often difficult and distant matters to the reader. The literal translators' effort to produce a translation as close to the original as possible is noble, but brings with it challenges that must be taken into consideration. Without exception, literal translations are very difficult to read in the target language. Thus, a potential downside to a literal translation is that a student of the Bible will be less likely to read it. Additionally, it may not be ideal that the highly educated and skilled translators who could likely do the best possible job of properly understanding and interpreting meaningfully the cultural, grammatical, and idiomatic aspects of the text instead leave that task in the hands of the usually much less educated and skilled students, who may or may not be equipped to properly interpret them. Therefore, while it is definitely useful to have access to a literal translation of the Bible for reference, it is probably not the best translation to use as a primary study Bible or for devotional reading. Examples of English Bibles that follow the literal interpretation model are the King James Version (KJV), Young's Literal Translation (YLT), and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

On the other end of the spectrum is the free translation. Free translations focus on translating the ideas from the original text, rather than the exact words. They attempt to reduce or completely remove the difference between the readers' culture and time and that of the original writer. Free translations are also often called paraphrases. They are extremely easy to read and often become very popular because of it. But, paraphrases are always written by one individual instead of a team of scholars, and therefore are more likely to contain inaccurate translations and interpretations and may be theologically biased. Examples of English Bibles that are paraphrases or free translations, include the infamous Living Bible (LB) and the more modern The Message.

Between the two extremes are dynamic equivalence translations. This translation model strives to keep the difference between the historical and cultural setting of the reader and that of the original writer, but attempts to interpret the idioms, grammar, and measures into their modern equivalents in the target language and culture. Dynamic equivalence translations are often very easy to read, but

they are typically good, accurate translations, as well. The biggest danger with dynamic equivalence translations is that the reader has to trust the scholars to interpret accurately and communicate meaningfully the idioms, grammar, and measures to them. Additionally, recent dynamic equivalence translations have raised concern due to the extent of their gender neutrality, which some believe have taken that concept too far. The best dynamic equivalence translations will include complete notes in the margins that expose the reader to the original literal text that is behind the interpretation so they can judge for themselves. Examples of English Bibles that are dynamic equivalence translations include the New International Version (NIV) and the New English Translation (NET), and two dynamic equivalence translations that are a little more toward the free side of the spectrum are the Good News Bible (GNB) and the The New Living Translation (NLT). (Note that there are actually many versions of the NIV including the original 1984 edition, the new 2010 edition, and numerous others targeted toward young readers, new Christians, and other specialized audiences.)

What Bible translation(s) should I use? There are many thoughts on which Bible translations are best. It is entirely possible that you might want to choose a more free translation for your daily devotional (e.g., The NLT), but use a more literal translation for your Bible study.

I recommend one of three translations for a primary study Bible, with the others being valuable study resources alongside. All three are based on the best Greek texts, unlike the venerable KJV. The NIV is the top recommendation by many Bible scholars. It is more of a dynamic equivalence translation than the others I will recommend, but scholars suggest that having experts interpreting not only the language, but also the idiomatic phrases and grammatical constructions keeps the reader from having to handle those most difficult aspects of translation and interpretation, as discussed above. In addition, there are a broad range of study Bibles available based on the NIV.

Some others recommend the NASB. It is a much more literal translation, meaning that most of the time, it translates the original language accurately, but fairly readably into the reader's language, in this case, English, even if the wording may be unclear due to idiomatic or grammatical differences between the languages.

The third translation I would suggest is the NET Bible. It is more of a dynamic equivalence translation, but includes literal translations in the notes whenever an idiom has been interpreted for the reader. Unique among the three translations, the foundation that funded it distributes it without license fees, making it free on the Internet and much less expensive in printed versions.

What kind of Bible should I use? After you have decided on the primary translation you are going to use, then you should decide what kind of Bible to get. There are many different bindings, print styles, and additional resources available. Since you will be using your study Bible heavily, make sure the binding will last. Get a print size that is big enough for you to read comfortably for long periods. If possible, find a printing that has wide margins, as you will be making lots of notes. And if it is available in your preferred translation, choose a printing that groups the text by paragraphs instead of breaking the text up by verses.

References and resources found in different Bible printings range from nothing but the text itself all the way to fully equipped "Study Bibles." You'll definitely benefit from annotations like cross references, translators' notes, concordances, and book introductions.

Full-fledged “Study Bibles” add more notes with the text, footnotes explaining the text up to the level found in an abridged commentary, and even practical applications inserted with the text, in the footnotes, and/or on additional pages inserted throughout the text.

The value of the resources is undeniable, but there are at least three cautions I should mention. First, it can be very easy to treat the notes unconsciously with the same respect that the Bible text itself rightly deserves. You must always remember that only the Text itself is inspired, not the added helps. Secondly, and related to the first, you should also remember that the commentary and other notes are opinions. Yes, they are likely educated, godly, respected writers, but their notes should only be used to assist and to validate the truths, insights, and application you have already discerned. Finally, since one of the important exercises of the Bible study process is to hear from God how His Bible applies to your life, I would avoid the practical application suggestions offered, if any. I’m completely confident God can communicate far more clearly and specifically to you directly as you begin to study His Bible seriously and deeply.

Do I need other resources? Some pastors in this world have only a plain Bible or even just a New Testament, and they can study the Bible very well. But, there are some resources that will aid you and are readily and inexpensively available to many students of the Bible. Here are a few recommendations, in a rough order of usefulness:

- **Other Translations** – Regardless of which translation you choose for your primary study Bible, you should get a few other translations, especially the NIV, NASB, and NET. In addition, you may find the YLT valuable to double-check the translators of the dynamic equivalence translators. It is the most literal translation I have seen, giving you a very good sense of the exact wording, grammar, and word order of the original language, albeit at the expense of readability. Or, you can do even better and get *The Bible from 26 Translations*, which has the KJV text of the entire Bible broken into phrases and then below it quotes that phrase from any of the other translations that differ significantly. It includes about every translation you would want to have except the NIV, which will not be an issue if you choose to get a separate NIV for study.
- **Exhaustive Concordance** – Contains the location of every appearance of every single word in the entire Bible. In addition, in the back it has the Hebrew or Greek word from which each occurrence is translated and a brief definition. And you don’t have to know Greek or Hebrew to use this feature, since it uses numeric indices to identify the original words. An exhaustive concordance is incredibly useful for word studies. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance* is the best known, but it is indexed to the KJV. Zondervan has published *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* and *The Strongest NASB Exhaustive Concordance* for those who use those translations. Just make sure the exhaustive concordance you choose is designed for the translation of the Bible you use as your primary study Bible.
- **Expository Dictionary** – Adds linguistic, grammatical, historical, and cultural explanations to the basic definition of the translated words. It is very useful for preparing for teaching and preaching. I have used *Vine’s Expository Dictionary* forever, but it is based on the English words found in the KJV, so it is less useful for other translations. *Mounce’s Expository Dictionary* is updated and more useful for modern translations.

- **Analytical Greek New Testament** – For those who do not know Greek, this is the resource that will give you most of the benefit of knowing the language. Starting with a Greek – English interlinear Bible like *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, by Jay P. Green, or a Greek Lexicon to determine which Greek word in the passage you are looking for, the *Analytical Greek New Testament* will give you the complete parsing of every single word in the original text, encoded in such a way that you can determine the case, mood, tense, gender, etc., without actually having to know the original language. I believe this tool is indispensable for serious study when preparing Bible lessons and sermons and for some of the more advanced Bible study methods that will be discussed in the next module. Look for the Friberg *Analytical Greek New Testament*.
- **Topical Bible** – Bible verses arranged by topic. It brings additional references to topical studies beyond what a concordance can offer. (E.g., a concordance will not be of much value when studying the Trinity, since that word does not appear in the Bible. A topical Bible will list many verses that relate to the Trinity.) *Nave's Topical Bible* is a good choice.
- **Bible Dictionary / Encyclopedia / Handbook** – Great for biblical background that will help interpret the historical and cultural differences among words, customs, and traditions, as well as historical, geographical, cultural, and archeological information that will illuminate the Scripture. Dictionaries are the most concise. Encyclopedias add more detail and topics. Handbooks follow the order of the books of the Bible, instead of being ordered by topic, and can add commentary. Most Christian publishers have a good bible dictionary, including Baker, Holman, Nelson, Tyndale, and Zondervan. Also recommended are the *Halley's Bible Handbook* and *The New Unger's Bible Handbook*.
- **Commentary** – Commentaries are very difficult to recommend. They vary not only in their focus, such as technical, expository, popular, etc., but also in their theological bias. Smaller single-volume commentaries generally contain little meaningful information due to their size limitations, but *The International Bible Commentary* by F. F. Bruce is one of the better ones. I do suggest staying away from the “classic” commentaries written before the latter 20th century, especially *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, because the language and application is too removed from the current day. You can get substantially better results purchasing separate single-volume commentaries on the Old and New Testaments. I recommend Walvoord and Zuck's *The Bible Knowledge Commentary (Old Testament)* for an Old Testament resource. I like Gundry's *Commentary on the New Testament*, both because of my respect for him as a theologian, and because of his expanded treatment of unclear or controversial passages that really adds value where you need it the most.

The large many-volume editions can be quite daunting for the beginning Bible student and are very expensive. Typically they are made up of one volume per book in the Bible, though sometimes a large or theologically important book may be broken into multiple volumes and some shorter books may be combined together into a single volume. You'll find that even the best many-volume commentaries are not the best commentary available on every book of the Bible. So, once you have obtained a few single volume commentaries, I would recommend focusing your attention on individual books of the Bible and adding specific commentary volumes on a single book. If you are especially interested in a particular book, you can find just the best commentaries on that book, instead of trying to purchase entire sets. For instance,

I have no less than 13 different volumes on the book of Romans in my library from 12 different commentary sets, but far fewer on other books of the Bible.

No matter which commentaries you choose, if possible, go to a store or web site to evaluate them before purchasing.

Note that these resources are also all readily available in Bible study packages available for Windows and Macintosh computers, such as Accordance, Logos, Online Bible, and QuickVerse, which can be quite expensive depending on the package chosen, but The Online Bible Starter Pack, e-Sword, and MacSword are free Bible study programs. There are numerous Bible study apps for iPad, Android, iPhone, and iPod Touch mobile devices ranging from free to relatively inexpensive, including Olive Tree, Bible+ (by Logos), and Bible (by LifeChurch.tv). For those who have Internet access, several of the above resources are available on the numerous excellent Bible study web sites, such as www.bible.org, www.biblegateway.com, and www.biblestudytools.com.

If you have a Bible, you have the minimum requirements for Bible study. If you are able to add another quality translation or two and a concordance, you will be much better equipped. Any of the remaining resources will further expand your effectiveness as a Bible student. But do not wait until you have a complete library to get started.

What are some practical ways I can study the Bible? The next module, Bible Study Methods, will introduce you to seven different ideas for how you can start studying the Bible deeply and meaningfully today.

PERSONAL APPLICATION:

1. Personalize the message of 2 Timothy 2:15 as God's command to you by putting your name in the blank:

_____, give all of your energy and effort to Bible study, so you can meet the high standard I have for you as someone who handles My Bible, so that you will be approved and not ashamed before Me.

In the light of God's command to you, how do you feel about your current level of Bible study?

2. What is the Bible translation you currently study?

Of the three types of translations discussed in this module, which type is your Bible?

List the translations of the Bible you have used below the different categories of translations:

Literal

Dynamic Equivalence

Free

3. What Bible study resources mentioned in this module do you have?

Are there other church leaders around you who might be willing to share their resources with you as you do with them?

Are there other ways you can get access to more Bible study resources?

4. If there are other Bible study resources you need, list them here and begin to pray that God will provide them for you.