

Getting a Perspective on Bible Study

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What is *Bible Study*?

The expression “Bible Study” is, dare I say, actually somewhat misleading.

Let me ask a question: in “doing Bible study”,

are we studying the Bible *per se*?

Is this our purpose?

Yes and *no*. You will hopefully understand what I mean.

The Bible is a book, or rather a *collection* of books, a library of sorts.

These books can be read

- in many different ways
- from many different perspectives

These perspectives or approaches include:

philosophical, literary, psychological, historical, geographic...

The Bible can also be read from a Christian perspective,

i.e. as a *believer*. i.e. with/in *faith*.

Allow me to articulate what faith is.

Faith is a gift, which takes root in the mind, enabling us to “hear” God.

As you know, to “*hear*” is a metaphor.

More precisely, faith qualifies and ennobles the mind, enabling it to

- receive God, insofar as he is light
- receive God, *light*, sharing himself

Faith is a theological virtue.

“Theological”: meaning it has to do with God.

“Virtue”: meaning it disposes the mind,

in a stable way, to a particular act.

A *stable way*: we can, when we want, exercise our faith,

i.e. we can receive God, First Truth, sharing Himself.

A human virtue is an acquired stable interior disposition to a particular act.

Temperance e.g. is an acquired stable interior disposition

which gives us strength, and thus a certain mastery,

e.g. with respect to chocolate.

By the way: I am sharing what I have read, not what I have experienced!

A theological virtue is different, however, in that it is not acquired.

It is *infused*.

The object of faith is *God* himself.
Faith, therefore, finds its completion
 (and thus disappears) in the Beatific Vision.
When it is said in I Corinthians 13:13 that
“faith, hope, and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love”, what is said,
amongst other things, is that faith and hope will cease,
 and love “everlasts”.

This God, who is the object of faith, reveals, i.e. *shares* himself.
And we believe that He shares himself, in a particular way,
through the Scriptures, which employ already existent human language.
The Christian Scriptures do not use a new language.
There is not some mysterious language
 that only those endowed with grace understand.
In the Bible, as you may have noticed, we read words that we find elsewhere
(on the McDonald’s menu, in the Baltimore Sun, on the computer screen...).
That is why the Bible can be read by *anyone*,
 and can *not* be read as revelation.
To be read as revelation, the Bible must be read with/in faith,
 faith which touches the mystery of God.
One reads the Bible in the context of a living relationship
with the Triune God,
 and thus under the movement of the Holy Spirit.
When we read the Scriptures, we always beseech the Holy Spirit!

The words that God uses, familiar *as words*, refer to realities and concepts which God
 uses to reveal something of Himself.
E.g., “God is love”. (I John 4:8)
Hmmm: notice how what this means is not immediately obvious.
Notice the impending labor that it will entail to get a glimpse
 of what God is revealing about himself?
The question that a theologian poses is,
“What about human love is true of God,
 who is a unique, entirely other being?”

And so, God speaks *through* the Scriptures.
The word of God is not the Bible, strictly speaking.
The word of God is “every word which comes forth from the mouth of God”
(Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4)
These “words” preceded the Bible as we know it.
The “word of God”, therefore, is God speaking through the Scriptures *in the present*.
The Scriptures are not God *having spoken*.
Moreover, God speaking is not primarily a *message* from God.
God “speaks” (again, think *metaphor*)
 so to associate/join our mind to His mystery.
Which means that we are in well over our heads!

Thanks to faith, our minds touch God
– well beyond the realm of immediate human experience –
but we do not “get” God.
There is no grasp of the “what-ness” of God.
We simply touch His existence,
 and this act of the mind (sustained by the heart!)
is accompanied by a certainty that comes from the gift of faith itself.
The certainty of the act of faith does *not* come from actually seeing,
 as is the case in everyday experience
(for example, when someone says, “That is a car. I am certain. I can see it!”)
It comes from the gift of faith itself.
In addition to “touching God,
all we can do is make analogical use
of what we believe God makes use of to reveal Himself
 so to catch “oblique” glimpses of God,
 whom we will only “get”/grasp
 when we see Him face-to-face,
 and our minds are entirely and perfectly seized by divine light.
Then we will say with the Psalmist, “In your light we see light”. (Psalm 36:10)
Although incredible for the mind, faith is, nonetheless,
 awkward as regards its normal human functioning.
And faith, understandably, awakens a hunger to see God.

These considerations invite addressing two more specific things:

1. Literalism
2. Tradition

As a prelude (and probably a much better perspective!) to these further considerations, allow me to include thoughts from Benedict XVI, from “Jesus of Nazareth”, his recently published book, the first of his papacy, a book which are personal reflections, and express, as he says, his “personal search for the face of the Lord”.

Neither the individual books of Holy Scripture nor the Scripture as a whole are simply a piece of literature. The Scripture emerges from within the heart of a living subject – the pilgrim People of God – and lives within this same subject. One could say that the books of Scripture involve three interacting subjects. First of all, there is the individual author or group of authors to whom we owe a particular text. But these authors are not autonomous writers in the modern sense; they form part of a collective subject, the “People of God” from within whose heart and to whom they speak. Hence, this subject is actually the deeper “author” of the Scriptures. And yet likewise, this people does not exist alone; rather it knows that it is led, and spoken to, by God himself, who – through men and their humanity – is at the deepest level the one speaking.

The connection with the subject we call People of God is vital for Scripture. On one hand, this book – Scripture – is the measure that comes from God, the power

directing the people. On the other hand, though, Scripture lives precisely within the people, even as this people transcends itself in Scripture. Through their self-transcendence (a fruit, at the deepest level, of the Incarnate Word) they become the people of God. The People of God – the Church – is the living subject of Scripture; it is in the Church that the words of the Bible are always in the present. This also means, of course, that the People has to receive its very self from God, ultimately the incarnate Christ; it has to let itself be ordered, guided, and led by him.”

(Forward, pages XX-XXI)

Literalism is a particular school of thought as regards revelation, a school of thought which consists in a literal reading of Scripture. Such an approach, which has tempted the Christian community from its beginnings, has given birth to those Christian churches we qualify as “fundamentalist”. Such an approach to Scripture, however, essentially negates what we have just stated. Note: I am not making judgments about the personal holiness of members of these churches. I am trying to understand intellectually, *theologically*, the perspective that prevails in so-called Evangelical churches (if I may, in somewhat simplistic fashion, group them all together).

If, as previously stated, there is no new language (and no new clear concepts, as it were, infused into the mind), and the mind, in being elevated to God by the gift of faith, must lovingly labor to cooperate with revelation, then literalism is intellectually impossible. And if so, fundamentalism is theologically bankrupt (I indeed say *theologically*, not *morally* or *spiritually*). Fundamentalism is well-intended, marked by a desire to “hear” what God has to say without diluting it. But it is the unfortunate, logical extension or outcome of Martin Luther’s claim that the human mind has been destroyed at the Fall, and should thus not intervene in revelation, at the risk of deforming revelation. The intention, once again, is beautiful. The Christian tradition as a whole, however, for the 1500 hundred-or-so years prior to Martin Luther’s claims, believed that human nature (and thus the human mind) was *damaged* at the Fall, not *destroyed*. Martin Luther misreads the consequences of original sin. The mind not only can, but *must* intervene.

This “Lutheran”, literalist perspective on the mind and its role – or lack thereof – in “reading the word of God” is seen in the claims of certain churches to be purely “Bible-based”, and without dogma or doctrine (which is claimed to be of human invention), as though this were possible. One will notice, however, upon closer inspection, how literalism seems to be more theory than practice. The need to appeal to “Scripture scholars” in such churches, in order to “interpret” well, is a testimony to this. “What does Billy Graham say about this passage?”, for example. To truly be literal would be to approach Scripture in such a way as to hope that, by some sort of osmosis, one directly assimilate them. Literalism also leads to the perspective that the simple utterance of the words of Scripture has some “magical” effect. Unfortunately (or fortunately!) this is not how it works. We must think. Faith seeks understanding. The “power of the word” lies not in the book, in the words, but in God as He speaks in the here and now, a power with which we cooperate.

The question of *Tradition* arises in conjunction with these considerations about Scripture. Jesus did not write anything – *deliberately*. And all that Jesus does we must presume to be supremely wise. We would probably have advised Jesus to proceed

otherwise, “Jesus, do not risk any misunderstanding; do not risk contradictory interpretations of what you say. Put everything in black and white.” Why did Jesus not write anything? So that Christianity not be reduced to a religion of the book. Christianity is a religion of the *person*, of the Christ. Jesus first deposited “the word”, the revelation of God (“man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God” Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4) in human hearts. Revelation received in the hearts of believers *is Tradition*. And Tradition started in the heart of Mary, the one in whom the Word was made flesh: “And she kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19; 2:51). Theology, which is faith seeking understanding, is (should be) a particular expression of Tradition. Every time we place our minds at the service of faith and revelation, e.g. a Bible Study, we are being theologians, we *are* Tradition.

As so, for “Bible Study”, we enter a whole world, the world of the Scriptures, the world of Tradition, both of which, together, contain the sacred deposit of the faith. I heard a wonderful “definition” of theology the other day: “Theology is like entering a room where a conversation has been taking place for 2000 years”. We enter that room. We are not alone. We need not be. We *cannot* be. We prayerfully probe, touching God and touched by God, hoping to catch a glimpse of His majesty, hoping to be enlightened as we journey home...