



BIBLE STUDY RESOURCE

THE BIG IDEA

Although the scope of this project does not allow a full development of a proposed method for Bible study, it will be helpful to sketch in brief the main aspects and procedures of a recommended method. Perry Yoder's companion volume mentioned above demonstrates quite fully the linguistic and historical dimensions of Bible study, giving examples of how the method works on four different texts. Though informed by both the linguistic and historical perspectives in biblical study and various philosophical orientations, my statement of method has been influenced to a major extent by an Inductive method of Bible study, outlined more fully in my book on Mark's Gospel.

This method reflects the conviction that there are three main tasks in the Interpretive event. These are not neatly successive stages, as the proposed method might suggest, but they constantly interact and, in reality, constitute one co-creative event.

The first important task in biblical interpretation is listening to the text, listening carefully from within the text. Although I recognize the significance that ideology plays in interpretation, I nonetheless maintain that the Interpreter most honors the text by seeking with all the powers of his/her being to make the encounter with the text an event of understanding generated by the text itself. Granted, there will be dialogue between the Interpreter and the text in this process, but the co-creative event of Interpretation should be as novel and distinctive as is each given text.

The second main task in biblical interpretation is learning helpfully from behind the text. While the first phase concentrates on the linguistic dimension of the Interpretive task, the second phase focuses upon the historical aspect of interpretation. At this point the above emphasis on the historical and cultural cradle for biblical revelation comes sharply into focus, enabling the Interpreter to better understand the message/event of the text.

Finally, the third important task in biblical interpretation consists of living freely from in front of the text. If biblical Interpretation is a co-creative event, as this study proposes, then its significance lies precisely and ultimately in the text's creative power to free the interpreter for a new life in thought and action that without the text would not have become historically possible. In this view of textual significance, the task is not merely applying a learning to a given situation. To be sure, it includes that but it involves much more; the interpretive event co-creates a new human being, a new history, and a new culture. Interpretation tells history's story, and each Interpreter takes the stand to give testimony before the giver of the text and the Judge of History.

These three components of biblical interpretation may also be described, in somewhat weakened but more programmatic form, as observation of the text, ascertaining meaning in the text, and discovering the significance of the text. Each of these three main components or tasks consists of sub-tasks, outlined as follows:

LISTEN CAREFULLY FROM WITHIN THE TEXT (OBSERVATION)

1. Hear, read (aloud) and reread the text, observing its world of distinctive structural relationships, contrasts, comparisons, repetitions, progression, etc. Write down these observations and creatively diagram how various components of the structure, especially key words, relate to each other.
2. Become aware of the literary forms, the particular type of literature, and the distinctive images of the text. Respect the distinctiveness of each of these features in the process of listening carefully to the text.
3. Read the text in several translations, or in several languages if possible. Including the original. Rather than seeking immediately to analyze differences among translations, allow yourself to respond holistically to the text. Respond to the text by asking questions and expressing feelings, even frustration with its message. At this point some attachment to the text must develop in order to sustain with spirit further investigation of its meaning.

LEARN HELPFULLY FROM BEHIND THE TEXT (MEANING)

4. Define the important words or terms that occur in the text. This may require the type of work that falls into steps 6 and 8 below. Notice also the significance of the grammatical constructions, such as tense of verb or word order.
5. Study the literary context of the specific text, and identify the function of the specific text within the larger literary narrative, including the entire book. It is important to notice that texts play roles within literary narratives. Each text's personality cannot be adequately appreciated until those literary roles are identified. Imagine that the particular text is to be used within a dramatic production of the entire literary piece. What role does it play in the larger narrative and drama?
6. Identify as accurately as possible the specific historical setting in which the text was written, both of the writer and of the writing's recipients. Describe as fully as possible the religious, cultural, economic, and political factors playing significant roles in the historical milieu of the text.
7. Attempt to grasp as completely as possible the distinctive message and meaning of the specific text; after feeling its import and impact place it in dialogue with other teachings and messages of the entire biblical text. If biblical study to date has been limited, use other resources more extensively, either oral discussion, group

process or secondary literature and biblical commentaries. When placing a particular text in dialogue and perhaps even tension with other biblical texts, consider the directional factor in the unfolding drama of biblical revelation. Consider here the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and the way in which all Scripture witnesses to the authority of Jesus Christ, the supreme revelation of God.

8. Learn how the text has been understood and interpreted by other believers and scholars in various settings throughout church history. Good commentaries are useful for this task. But commitment to the lifelong endeavor of learning how others have understood given texts and teachings, is also necessary. Special effort should be given to discover how believers in cultural, economic, and political situations other than that of the interpreter have understood the particular text.

LIVE FREELY FROM IN FRONT OF THE TEXT (SIGNIFICANCE)

9. Put the text aside momentarily, and examine yourself. As If looking in a mirror, ask yourself, "Who am I?" As interpreters, we need to think about our situations in life and Identify as fully as possible our biases, prejudices, our unique strengths, and our weaknesses that we bring to the interpretation of a text. We must ask ourselves: does my situation In life enable me to identify with the message of the text—culturally, economically, politically, and religiously? We should think about people we know who are quite different from ourselves in all these respects and ask how they would hear the particular textual message.
10. Reflect upon the significance of the distance between the world of the text and your world. Identify differences in societal structure and what the history and thought of the church has contributed to these differences. Assess these changes, asking how the text speaks God's Word to you in your world, what effect you—as a result of the text—should have upon your world, and how you should bring about this effect or change.
11. Take up the text again, read it aloud, and spend time in meditation. Respect again the distinctive personality of the text, allowing for feelings of not liking it, wanting to doubt its teaching, and even weakness In adequately responding to it. As you and the text struggle together, open yourself to the creative Spirit power of the Word. Pray, sing, write, remain silent, rebel, cry, embrace, confess—whatever the text in Its power calls you to do. In light of this response, assess your life values, vocational responsibility, and future goals. This should be done as a deliberate effort to correlate the Impact of the text with behavioral patterns, both at the routine and intentional levels. All spheres of one's life should be opened to analysis and critique by the text.
12. Test your co-creative experience of interpretation with brothers and sisters in the believing community, and perhaps also with some unbelievers. The purpose of the testing is not merely to ascertain whether a particular understanding is correct or appropriate, but to make one's own life-world a part of a corporate life- world and thus contribute to the reality of Christian (or Jewish) community, fulfilling the edificatory function of Scripture.

Those with limited experience in Bible study may feel overwhelmed by the extensiveness of this suggested method for Bible study. But It should be remembered, as pointed out above, that these steps do not necessarily occur in neat chronological order. In many cases, these different aspects of the task proceed side by side or as part and parcel of each other. This Is how it should be, for Interpretation Is as much an art as It is a science. Neither this nor any other suggested method should be followed in a ritualistic manner. However, discipline often stimulates creativity, and creativity In turn transforms discipline into worship.¹

¹ Swartley, Willard M (2012-11-21). Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation (Kindle Locations 2-5). Herald Pr. Kindle Edition.