

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 27

'Be devoted to Scripture'

One of Christianity's most important doctrines is that of the authority of Scripture. Scripture is the basis for what we teach.

Faith is an important part of Christianity—an essential part. But not just any faith will do—our faith must be in something that is true. Faith must not be a false hope—it must be based on evidence. And such evidence needs to be taught. The church Jesus founded is to be a teaching church, and his people are to be people who are learning. (The term “disciple” means “one who learns.”)

People who believe in a Savior will be eager to learn more about him. They will hunger and thirst not just for a feeling about God, but also for knowledge of God that involves facts. They will want to learn. Doctrine is important—the New Testament makes that clear. Jesus told the church to *teach*. The book of Acts tells us that the apostles gave teaching a high priority. Paul repeatedly wrote that teaching was important. Teaching is an important part of our work.

The importance of the ministry of the word

After Jesus ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and the church began to grow by the thousands. What did the people do? “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

There were many unusual needs, partly because some of the people had come to Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost and ended up staying for months longer than they expected. How did the people respond to this unexpected need? “Selling

their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (verse 45).

Can we imagine what it must have been like? A new community was being formed—new leaders, new followers and new structures. The old social system, like an old wineskin, did not work for these people. Many were cut off from family and former friends, so new ties had to be forged. At first, everyone's needs were taken care of informally. But eventually a system was created to meet the needs. Donations were given to the apostles for redistribution to the needy (Acts 4:34-35).

As important as this charitable work was, the apostles did not spend all their time with it. They continued to focus their attention on teaching: “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:42).

Apparently the disciples delegated to other believers the responsibility of taking care of the poor. However, it wasn't long before people began to complain. The system wasn't working fairly, they said (Acts 6:1). If we had been apostles, we might have been tempted to step in to make sure that things ran right. But the Twelve resisted that temptation. They allowed lay members to take care of this need.

Why did the apostles back away from this important need? “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.... We will...give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (verses 2-4).

Note the priority set by these spiritual leaders: praying, teaching and preaching. This priority still exists. Spiritual leaders should not get bogged down

in things that take them away from prayer and the Word of God. Our primary role in the church is teaching and preaching, and we cannot do that without a firm foundation in prayer and study.

That is easier said than done. Many pastors face seemingly never-ending demands on their time. Often the requests are for legitimate needs, and each would be a good use of time—but when added all together they become an unmanageable burden. As much as pastors would like to help everyone who approaches them, they must prioritize their time and delegate secondary responsibilities as the apostles did (Acts 6). High on the priority list is prayer, and a ministry of the word.

Here I would like to emphasize the importance of “the ministry of the word.” This phrase encapsulates diligent study of Scripture, careful thought about the message, systematic teaching, and persuasive preaching.

Teaching and preaching

Scripture emphasizes the importance of doctrine, of teaching, of truth. Jesus’ commission to the church includes teaching (Matthew 28:20). A concordance will quickly show that “teaching” was a large part of Jesus’ own ministry. It is the truth that sets people free, and the truth needs to be taught. Good feelings and pleasant words are not enough.

In the early church, the apostles preached and taught:

- “The apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 4:2).
- “At daybreak they entered the temple courts...and began to teach the people” (Acts 5:21).
- “They never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (verse 42).
- “Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people” (Acts 11:26).
- “Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord” (Acts 15:35).

- “Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God” (Acts 18:11).

- “I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20).

- “He preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31).

The apostle Paul

Paul called himself a teacher (1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11). He taught in all of his churches (1 Corinthians 4:17), and the Holy Spirit also moved him to write to many of his churches. Throughout his letters, he teaches about the gospel. His letters are examples of the teaching that the early church was built on and immersed in. These letters were read in the churches and were the foundation of faith and practice.

Paul urged the Thessalonians to “stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). He told the Ephesians that they “were taught...in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21). He told the Colossians, “We proclaim [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone.... Continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught.... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Colossians 1:28; 2:6-7; 3:16).

Paul told the Corinthians that everything in their worship meetings should be done for edifying or building the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 14:26). No matter what spiritual gift is being used, it should be used to edify. Edification is the priority. The only words we should speak should be “helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).

Everything Paul did was for the purpose of edification (2 Corinthians 12:19). “Make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). “Encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). This continues to be an important part of our work today. We have the God-given responsibility to teach our members.

The pastoral epistles

After Paul had preached the gospel, raised up churches, corrected doctrinal errors, and trained assistants, he passed the baton of leadership to others. When the end of his life neared, he gave instructions to the next generation of church leaders. In the letters to Timothy and Titus, he also tells us that church pastors have an important responsibility:

- “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13).
- “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (verse 16).
- “These are the things you are to teach and urge on them” (1 Timothy 6:2).
- “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).
- “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).
- “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:2-3).
- A church leader “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9).
- “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1).

Clearly, doctrine is important in the church. We need solid teaching, based on diligent and accurate study of Scripture. We do not need anyone’s pet theories, but rather teaching that has been tested against the ideas of other faithful Christians.

Solid teaching doesn’t necessarily make us feel good. Solid teaching sometimes challenges our comfort zones. This is sometimes what we need.

Work is required

It is arrogant and dangerous for any one person to make his or her own interpretation the final word, and to proclaim all who disagree as incorrect and therefore not led by the Holy Spirit. No, when we approach Scripture it is helpful to do it in the context of the believing community today as well as the historic Christian church. Just as we hope that others learn from us, we also hope that we can learn from what others through their Christian experiences and discussions of Scripture.

Often, one group or school of thought can identify errors that another school of thought cannot see. So with caution, we can learn from others, and in some cases, they can point out areas in which we need further research. That doesn’t mean that we blindly accept what others say. If we wanted to do that, we would find it impossible, because some ideas contradict others. We cannot believe them all!

So what is the standard of truth? It is Scripture. That is why it is essential that we strengthen our foundation in Scripture.

The ministry of the Word takes work. It takes time. Pastors need to spend a considerable amount of time studying, researching and preparing sermons that have a solid foundation behind them. Most of this work will never be seen, but it is necessary. We should have a library, but we do not bring the library with us when we preach. We do not cite every fact we’ve found. We do not quote every Greek word we’ve examined. We have to take the time to distill the message of Scripture, to point out its relevance for modern life, and to present it in an interesting way.

A pastor must be active and “at home” in his study, with reference works and technical resources. He must also be active and “at home” in the marketplace, where those to whom he ministers live and work. His role is to bridge the gap between the two—to translate and explain the gospel clearly and in an interesting, compelling way.

Pastors have the responsibility to teach the members—and members of the church have the responsibility to study. Let us devote ourselves to prayer and study, preaching and teaching.

Joseph Tkach

Five simple rules for Bible study

The Bible is a complex book, but it has a simple message. There's enough wisdom in it for a lifetime of detailed study; and there is also wisdom that beginners can easily find. Here are a few basic rules to get you started on the right foot.

If you have never read a 1,000-page book, the Bible may seem difficult and unapproachable. The strange names and strange customs might be intimidating. But perhaps you *want* to read the Bible, despite its difficulties, because you have heard that it can tell you more about the God who made you and who loves you. It can tell you about Jesus, your Savior, and what he did and taught. There's treasure hidden somewhere in this book, but you aren't quite sure how to go about finding it.

Here are five simple rules to help you:

Start

It is a big book, and nothing will change that. The only way to begin is to begin. The ten-mile hike begins with the first step. So start reading! But don't try to read it all at one time. The Bible wasn't designed for fast reading. It is not a novel, a mystery, or a thriller. Rather, it is a collection of different types of writing.

Genesis, for example, contains several types of story covering several major characters. Each requires some thought of its own, so don't be in a hurry to rush onward just to say you've done it. Take your time, a little bit each day. Structure your schedule so that you will have some time set aside for this. But where do you start?

Genesis has some interesting stories, and Exodus starts with a great story, but then the story slows dramatically, and most people lose interest by the time they get to Leviticus and Numbers, which are even slower.

It's probably better to start in the New Testament, with the stories of Jesus. Mark is a fast-moving Gospel, and Acts has a great story flow. This will then put Paul's letters in context.

Don't feel obligated to read everything "in order"—the Christians in Rome did just fine reading Romans first. Feel free to skip around a bit, reading the Gospel of Luke, then the letter of Hebrews, or whatever. Later, you might want to try

an Old Testament book, such as Psalms or Samuel.

When you begin each book, put the date on the first page. That way you'll know which books you've read, and which you haven't. Eventually you'll get to them all—if you keep at it.

You may want to get a modern translation, too. There's nothing especially holy or helpful about 400-year-old English. Try the New International Version, the New Living Translation, or other modern versions.

Read

If you read only one sentence, you might *misunderstand* it. For example, if I shout "Fire!" you might not know whether I am warning you of danger, or telling you to shoot a gun. The word needs a context before you can understand it.

The same is true of sentences in Scripture. For example, "No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you." To understand this sentence, we need to know who is speaking, who he is speaking to, and why. We need a context.

So if you want to understand what is going on, you need to read *passages*, not lift sentences off the page as if they had independent meaning. Sometimes they do, but most often they do not, and the only way to know whether they do is to read at least a few sentences before and some after, to get a feeling for what the passage as a whole is talking about. Who is talking, who is doing what, and why?

Many modern translations help us see the context by putting the words into paragraphs and giving subtitles for the major sections. These markers are usually a helpful indication of where one subject stops and another starts. The point is to *read* each verse in context, not as a totally independent thought.

Ask

Unfortunately, we don't understand everything we read. We don't understand everything in a modern novel or movie, either, but we can nonetheless enjoy the flow of the story. But when it comes to the Bible, people often get troubled when they don't understand everything. After all, it is a message from God, and we are supposed to

understand it, and we feel stupid when we don't.

OK, let's make it clear: Nobody understands all of the Bible, even after studying it for 50 years. Nobody understands everything the first time they read it. (Some people *think* they do, but they have a bigger problem!) When it comes to the things of God, we are all a little bit ignorant. So relax. If you don't understand something, ask questions. Ask the Bible. (Talk out loud if you want to, but don't expect to hear any voices.)

Ask the Bible: Who is talking here? How does he or she feel? Why are these people doing things this way? Would I probably do the same thing? Are we supposed to take this literally, or is it really talking about something else? Is it something good, or something bad? Is there anything in the text itself to give me clues to help me understand?

Sometimes the answers are clear, sometimes they are not. Sometimes we just have to write a big question mark in the margin and move onward. That's just the way the Bible is. Maybe we'll understand it five years later. Maybe a Bible handbook could help us understand. We don't know, but what we know for sure is that we don't understand it right now. That's OK. Sometimes it's just best to move on to another passage. It's OK to have questions.

Talk

Often, the things you don't understand, someone else does—and vice versa. So when we have questions about the meaning of the Bible, we can talk about it with other Christians. They may have already studied the very same question, and may be able to make it clear.

Or you might want to share something you learned and enjoyed. Perhaps you've seen a proverb that applies to a situation you are in. Perhaps you have read a story of faith that you wish you had. Or

maybe it was a glimpse of how great God is. Talk about these things, too, to encourage one another.

The New Testament describes the early church as a fellowship, as a group of people who spoke often to one another about the things of God. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings. They enjoyed what they learned, and talked about their joy.

In the modern world, Christians often talk before or after church, or in small groups that meet during the week in homes—small groups that meet for the specific purpose of praying together, discussing Scripture, and helping one another. One of these groups could help you in your Bible reading. So that's a good step for better understanding: Talk about the Bible with other Christians.

Don't stop

Since it's a big book, and since we don't understand it all the first time, it is essential that we keep at it. If you really want to understand how God speaks to us through the Bible, then you need to form a life-long habit of reading, thinking, and talking about the Bible.

We will die before we know it all—there is always more to learn. This should be a motivation to keep at it, not to quit. There are indeed treasures hidden in the Bible, and it takes patience and persistence to seek them out. Some gems we can find right away; others will come to light only after many years. There's always something waiting for us to see.

And we all have to admit it, we aren't getting any younger. We forget things. We forget lessons we once learned, we forget promises we once knew. If we aren't refreshing our memory of Scripture, then we will be slowly losing something we once had. Out of sight, out of mind.

So don't quit—keep reading the Book!