

DEVOTE

Acts
2:42

TEACHING | FELLOWSHIP | COMMUNION | PRAYER

DEVOTE : TEACHING

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TEACHING

DEVOTE : ACTS 2:42

TEACHING

“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 ESV

The intention of this booklet is to help guide Life Group leaders in leading their groups through a series based on Acts 2:42, where we see the Christian life as one of devotion to the Apostle’s Teaching (the Word of God), Fellowship, Communion and Prayer.

The goal of this section on the Apostle’s Teaching is to help us all grow to love God’s Word in a deeper way. We want to be inspired again to read and devote ourselves to the Bible. Our desire is not to make intellectuals but people who are skilled at handling the Scriptures so they can know God better.

This section has been set out to be done over a four week period. The intention is to give you basic teachings that lay a foundation for discussion and application in weeks following.

We’ve included some questions at the end of certain sections or an exercise to aid you in that evening’s teaching. We’ve also provided some additional resources at the end of certain sections. We realise that this is a big subject and there are many views and questions. Unfortunately we can’t avoid this. Don’t feel guilty if you need to tell people to explore the answers to their questions themselves or explain that it’s impossible to deal with every aspect in handling the Word.

The purpose of this section is not to answer all the questions and objections a person might have regarding the truthfulness and authority of the Bible. It rather aims to instil confidence in the already-believing person that they can trust that the Bible is Almighty God’s very words - words that hold true forever and that will always be trustworthy.

If however you, or someone in your group, needs more in-depth answers, here is a link to a good talk by Tim Keller around the historic reliability of the Bible:

http://download.redeemer.com/sermons/Literalism_%20Isnt_the_Bible_historic_AM.mp3

The flow of the four weeks is intended to make specific aspects of the Word clear. To summarise:

Week one is about establishing that the Bible *is in fact* God's Word to us. This has many implications if we hold to this being true.

In **week two**, we'll establish how to better understand *what* God is saying to us - how to handle the Scriptures properly. If the Bible is, in fact, God's Word to us, then we better know what He is saying!

Week three is about feeding on the Word - how to practically take what we study and formulate it into a set of beliefs (a doctrine / theology) that we live by.

The **fourth week** is about driving home the point that knowing a subject doesn't mean much until it's lived out.

The following weeks are for you to creatively flesh out the fundamentals of the first four weeks.

Week One

Is the Bible, in fact, God's words to us?

John 5:39-40

[39] You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, [40] yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

Before we discuss the matter of the Bible being God's Word, it would be good to consider the passage above. The Bible is not an end in itself. It's been given to us for a real life-giving relationship with Jesus Himself. Believers are meant to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus (2 Peter 3:18). In this relationship with Jesus we are being transformed and His life in us causes us to be fruitful.

In short, the Bible is given to us by God so that we can know Him better and be transformed, bearing fruit for His glory. (Luke 8:15; John 15: 1-17)

What does the Bible claim for itself?

In the Old Testament -

Numbers 23:19 ESV

*God is not man, that he should lie,
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Has he said, and will he not do it?
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?*

The phrase "Thus says the Lord" often appears in the Old Testament and when it's used the prophet is claiming that what follows is God's absolute word of authority.

It's often also stated that God speaks "through" the prophets (1 Kings 14:18; Jeremiah 37:2; Zechariah 7:7,12)

In the New Testament -

Matthew 24:35 ESV

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Jesus would often quote Old Testament Scripture and cite it as the very words of God, even if the Old Testament author didn't directly attribute the words to God. One example is in Matthew 19:4,5 where the words of Genesis 2:24 are not attributed to God in the Genesis narrative, yet are quoted by Jesus as words God "said".

Matthew 19:4,5 ESV

[4] He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, [5] and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?"

Paul also saw that all of the Old Testament Scriptures were in fact "breathed out by God" and are therefore completely inspired by God.

2 Timothy 3:16 ESV

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

Similarly, Peter understood that all the words of Old Testament Scripture (or at least the prophets in the Old Testament) were given by God and that the authors of the Old Testament were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write down God's words instead of their own ideas.

2 Peter 1:20, 21 ESV

[20] knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. [21] For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

There are also examples of how the Apostles saw New Testament writing as Scripture (the inspired and authoritative words of God).

In 2 Peter 3:16 we see Peter acknowledge Paul's writings as Scripture and is happy to classify it along with all other Scripture.

2 Peter 3:16

... as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul quotes Jesus' words from Luke 10:7 and calls them "Scripture".

1 Timothy 5:18

For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

What's the best way to become convinced that the Bible is God's Word?

"The best way to vindicate the Bible is to preach (study) it. Each book contains within itself, sometimes in hidden form, the autograph of the Holy Spirit. Every page has the watermark of heaven. And a patient consideration of the content of Scripture will leave a stronger impression of God's authority and Authorship than any number of external evidence." - F.B. Meyer

Over and above the Bible's own claims of its Divine authorship and reliability there is external evidence that confirms the Bible as God's word. Yet there is only one way to be truly convinced and that is the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in believers.

RT Kendall puts it like this: *"Those who really want to believe in the infallibility of the Bible discovers its total trustworthiness. The most powerful and faithful testimony is the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to the Bible being the Word of God."*

If the Bible is God's Word then:

- All the words in the Bible are God's words.
- To disobey or disbelieve any word in scripture is to disobey or disbelieve God.
- Scripture is completely truthful
 - God cannot lie or speak falsely (Tit 1:2)

- The words of Scripture are true and without error (Prov 30 :5)
- God's words are the ultimate standard of truth (John 17:17)
- Written Scripture is our final authority.

Suggested group exercise

Either break the group up in smaller groups or have them individually read Psalm 19:7-11.

Have them meditate on the passage and answer the following questions:

- What different qualities do the psalmist attribute to the Word of God?
- In light of these attributes what should our response be to His Word?

Psalm 19:7-11 ESV

*[7] The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
[8] the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
[9] the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.
[10] More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
[11] Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

Week Two

Understanding my Bible

Which translation should I use?

Anyone who has ever walked into a Christian bookshop in search of a Bible will tell you how many translations there are to choose from. So which is best?

Firstly we need to understand that the original Scriptures were not written in English but in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. There are also different methods of interpretation into English.

Translations occur between two extremes: literal translations (KJV, NASB, ESV) and paraphrase / interpretations (LB, GNB, THE MESSAGE). To put it another way: word-for-word translations or thought-for-thought translations.

In short, we recommend the ESV (English Standard Version) for an accurate word-for-word translation or the NIV (New International Version) for an accurate thought-for-thought translation.

Why the need to interpret Scripture?

The books of the Bible were written for us, but not to us.

They are God's message *for* us, but that message is channelled, as it were, through other people in different circumstances, contexts and historical settings. That doesn't mean that the message is irrelevant – far from it! And that doesn't mean that God never had us in mind – far from it!

God's ways have not changed and neither has the human condition (and neither has sin). Once we get to grips with what God was saying through the author to the original hearers, we can translate the timeless truth into our day and hear what God is saying to us.

We see this in Scripture:

In Nehemiah 8:1-8 we see Ezra reading the Law (Scripture) to the people and in verse 8 we read: *"They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read."*

- **Making it clear** - *translating it* (NIV margin), *clearly* (ESV), *distinctly* (KJV), *translating* (NASB). It literally means to separate or determine. Therefore, to give the clear meaning.
- **Giving the meaning** - *give the sense* (ESV, KJV and NASB). It could also mean *wisdom and understanding*.

Here are further reasons why we need to learn how to correctly interpret scripture:

- We invariably bring to the text all that we are, our experiences, preconceptions, culture and understanding of words, etc.
- The differences of language.
- Traditional interpretations we already hold which influence us.
- The preoccupation or over-emphasis of certain truths, while neglecting the rest of Biblical truth.

"The plain meaning of a text is not always plain to everyone and interpretation is not a trivial exercise. Everyone who reads the Bible is an interpreter whether they like it or not. People tend to think that our understanding of the Bible is the same as the Holy Spirit's and the human author's intent. We fail to see that everyone brings to the Bible their own culture, personal experiences, pre-understandings of words and ideas and their own theological/philosophical presuppositions. If we aren't aware of this, it may lead us astray or cause us to read thoughts and ideas into the text that aren't actually there." - Fee & Stuart

The Goal

The goal of interpreting Scripture is to come to the plain and clear meaning so that we can understand what God is saying to us!

Ten Questions to help make sense of a verse

1. The question of our heart attitude

Am I hungry and willing to hear what God wants to say to me through the verse?

If we have the wrong attitude, we'll miss the meaning of the Bible. We're all in danger of putting our defences up as we come to God's Word. Replace pride with humility, dis-passion with expectancy, self-reliance with prayerful dependence on the Spirit.

2. The question of the author's intent

What was the original author trying to say to their readers?

After all, it cannot mean now what it did not mean then; and though there can be many applications of a verse, there is only one correct meaning - a meaning not meant to elude us, because it was originally written to mean something.

3. The question of genre

What type of literature is the book in which the verse is found?

Is it historical, narrative, law code, poetry, prophetic, parable, epistle or apocalyptic? In the same way you wouldn't read a love poem like you'd read a textbook, be careful to not interpret figurative parts of the Bible in an overly literal way.

4. The question of thought flow

What is its logical context?

The books of the Bible each have a structure, flow and sections; they are not just a mass of unrelated verses. What do the verses or chapters before and after say that might throw light on the verse? As it has been said, a 'text' taken out 'context' is a 'con'.

5. The question of historical context

Is there anything in the history and culture of that time that throws light on the verse?

If it's an Old Testament verse, it's helpful to take note of which period of Israel's history the book is in - for example, Israel's exile; David's reign; the Exodus, etc.

6. The question of other Scripture

What does the rest of Scripture say about the topic addressed in the verse?

If it's a difficult verse to understand, what do clearer verses say on the subject? Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. If there are several possible meanings, all meanings that contradict other scriptures must be eliminated.

7. The question of Christ

What light does this verse throw on God and Christ?

Scripture is primarily about God and His Son Jesus Christ, the hero of the Bible. If it's an Old Testament verse, in what way (if any) does the verse point to Christ as its fulfilment?

8. The question of other sources:

a) Credible commentaries

How do studied theologians interpret the verse? (See some resources at the end of this section.)

b) Other translations

How other translations translate the verse often reveals nuances to the original text that one translation may miss. Here's a good resource: type the verse reference in the search bar at www.bible.cc and see the results.

c) The original Greek / Hebrew:

As has been stated, the Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic (Old Testament) and ancient Greek (New Testament). By looking at the verse in its original language - with a good tool to translate for you - many nuances can be uncovered.

Here's a resource: type the verse reference in the searchbar at www.biblos.com.

9. The question of application

Is there a promise to believe, a truth to affirm, an insight to glean, a warning to heed, a command to obey, or an example to follow?

Be careful of the many laws of Moses (Exodus through Deuteronomy) - they are not for Christians who are under the much higher law of Christ.

Also be cautious of examples - just because the Bible describes someone doing something does not mean it endorses it (such as polygamy).

10. The question of the Spirit's nudging

Having understood the meaning of the verse, how might the Holy Spirit be specifically leading me as an individual and us as a church to apply the meaning of this verse to my life/our lives?

Helpful resources

Study Bible

The ESV and NIV have both very helpful study Bibles that can aid in understanding the meaning of scripture.

Bible Handbook

LO Richards "Complete Bible Handbook".

Commentaries

Michael Eaton's "Preaching through the Bible" commentary series are some of the clearest and simplest, yet very accurate, Bible commentaries.

Week Three

Feeding on God's Word

There is a difference between being informed and being transformed by God's Word. Learning to handle the Word well is part of the salvation process we are going through. After learning how to better read the Word we need to begin to feed on it. This is where many people get weary but it's also where great blessing will be found.

Consider this verse:

Matthew 4:4

*But He answered, "It is written,
"Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

Jesus highlights two important points with regards to the Word: we see that we need to feed on it; and we see we are to become familiar with 'every word'. This is referring not only to handling small portions of Scripture skilfully but putting teachings together, making a substantial body of teaching - a theology - to live by.

How then do we feed on God's Word?

While there are many methods in approaching this, a few key steps should not be avoided, whatever process is followed:

1. Determine to begin to work at this

There is a lifetime of joyous work to be done. Be aware of one common modern pitfall: Don't expect amazing experiences to be a way of life when it comes to handling the Word. This is the reason many people stop reading - they feel as though 'they aren't getting anything out of it'.

In the long run, you will see significant change. That's not to say you won't enjoy wonderful, joyous moments - these will come!

2. Set a course of reading

Taking random verses day by day is probably not the best approach to reading the Bible. We suggest you get hold of a Bible reading plan and follow it. It keeps you moving and leads you through all of the Scriptures.

There are different kinds of reading plans

Bible plans that cover selected portions of Scripture.

- New to the Bible – read John, Acts, Ephesians
- See www.youversion.com/reading-plans/the-essential-100 – a hundred most essential passages of the Bible.

Plans that take you through the whole Bible in different ways.

- For another online resource, see www.youversion.com/reading-plans/mcheyne-one-year-reading-plan
- Michael Eaton recommends you read the Bible in this order:
Genesis, Matthew, Joshua, Romans, Isaiah, Proverbs, Hebrews, Psalms 1-18, Hosea, Psalms 19-25, Joel, Psalms 26-33, 1 Corinthians, Jeremiah, James, Psalms 34-39, Exodus, John, Judges, Song of Songs, Psalms 40-47, Ruth, 1 Peter, Lamentations, Psalms 48-55, Ecclesiastes, 2 Peter, Psalms 56-64, 2 Corinthians, Esther, Daniel, Psalms 65-70, 1 John, Psalms 71-77, Mark, Ezra, 2 John, Psalms 78-81, Leviticus, 3 John, Jude, Psalms 82-89, 1 Samuel, Galatians, Nehemiah, Psalms 90-104, Ephesians, Psalms 105-108, Luke, Philippians, Ezekiel, 1 Chronicles, Colossians, Psalms 109-118, Numbers, 2 Samuel, 1 Thessalonians, Job, Amos, Psalm 119, 2 Thessalonians, Obadiah, 1 Kings, Jonah, Psalms 120-132, 1 Timothy, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Psalms 133-141, Deuteronomy, Acts, 2 Kings, 2 Timothy, Zephaniah, Haggai, Titus, Zechariah, Malachi, Philemon, 2 Chronicles, Psalms 142-150, Revelation

3. Learn to feed from your reading

Highlight

Don't be afraid to underline, circle or scribble in the margin anything that stands out to you or you wish to highlight. Highlight words, phrases and passages that impact you and you feel need emphasis in your life.

Begin to journal your thoughts

Have a little book with you. Write down all you wish regarding your walk with God – what you learned yesterday, challenges you are facing, prayer points, how God has been leading you, what He has communicated to you lately that you feel you need to remember, and so on. It's a good practise to gather your thoughts, think carefully through issues in your life or set a focus for the day. This is a personal process, try and find a groove that works for you.

Meditate on what you're reading

2Timothy 2:7 says, “**Think** over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” After reading, take time to engage your mind. Think, ponder, consider what God is saying or not saying, mull over His reasons for writing. Somehow, in this process, the Holy Spirit gives deeper understanding. This understanding changes us. It's some of these conclusions you may want to journal.

Memorise

In Matthew 4:4 (quoted at the beginning of this section) we saw Jesus using a scripture in everyday life. Try and memorise scriptures – even if only key ones – so you can draw on them easily.

Formulate Biblical doctrine

As you go about feeding on the Word there is another process happening. In the background we are formulating a set of beliefs, what is commonly called doctrine. We formulate beliefs around things such as the Church, the nature of God, sexuality, handling finance and so on - everything we need to *live*.

It's a process of constant learning, changing and adding to your set of beliefs.

Hint:

You will be surprised how far you get by just doing a little everyday! This is not only the job of the preacher / teacher. While teachers of the Christian faith may go into more detail, this process is the task of every believer.

Week Four

Obeying the Word

In the first week we began by affirming that the Scriptures are in fact God's very words. The many promises we find in Scripture that declare what the Word of God - when known and obeyed - can do for a Christian are vast and unfathomably brilliant.

Psalms 1 is an example:

Psalm 1:1-3

*[1] Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
[2] but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
[3] He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.*

Consider these further promises of what the Word can do for us

1. It can show us God

There is no easier, better or sure way of getting to know God than through His Word.

2. It can renew our mind

We live in a sin-sick world which is constantly driving its sinful values into our minds. Our thoughts determine our actions and therefore it's necessary to ensure that we keep filling our minds with God's thoughts. The only way to find God's thoughts is by reading His Word. (2 Peter 3:1.)

3. It can be a foundation for life

Behind God's Word is His faithfulness. If we live our lives in obedience to His Word, we will never succumb to the storms of difficult and trying times because God's faithfulness to His Word will uphold us. (James 1:23-25.)

4. It can equip us for good works

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." - Ephesians 2:10

5. It can show us ourselves and reveal sin. (Hebrews 4:12.)

6. It can purify our lives from sin. (John 15:3, John 17:17 and Ephesians 5:26.)

7. It can prevent us from sinning

Not only does God's Word reveal our sin and purify us from sin, it also helps prevent us from sinning. If we are fully loaded with God's Word and are confronted with temptation we will be far more likely to emerge victorious (1 John 2:1). Psalm 119:9 puts it this way: *"How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your Word."*

8. It can aid in spiritual warfare

God's Word is described as the sword of the Spirit. Thus it is a weapon of warfare against the Devil.

9. It can enable us to preach and teach

1 Peter 4:11a states, *"If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God."*

10. It can build faith

Romans 10:17 says, *"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ."*

11. It can give us peace (John 16:33).

12. It can give assurance of salvation (1 John 5:13).

13. It can lead to joy (John 15:11).

14. It can make us strong (1 John 2:14).

15. It can lead us to know the will of God (Psalm 119:105).

And there are so many more!

There are countless promises that are ours in Christ by actually doing nothing; by only believing in Christ we get such amazing blessings. But these promises above are conditional. The Word has to be believed and obeyed. God is making promises in God's own words. He is not playing, lying or tempting us – what He says will happen, will.

Jesus makes this clear in his picture of the two houses:

Matthew 7:24-27

[24] "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. [26] And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. [27] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

A Christian that possesses knowledge of the Scriptures but makes no attempt to do them is incomplete and destined for disaster. Doing what God asks us to do (and not doing what he asks us not to do) brings the promises into being. We will only become what the Scriptures say we can become when we do what they say.

Too difficult? NO! We have been given everything we could possibly need for joyful obedience. The power of sin has been broken, we have been given the Holy Spirit, Jesus is praying for us – everything!

Why is obedience challenging?

At the root of our common inability to obey is trust. It's the reason we have been emphasising 'the Bible is God's words'. If we mistrust who is making promises or asking obedience of us, obedience will not flow naturally.

Again... what He says will happen, will happen. Who or what can stop Him fulfilling His Word? No one and nothing. You can trust what He says!



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