

Devotional and Exegetical Reading of Scripture

Dennis Bratcher

There are two very different ways of reading Scripture: **exegetically** and **devotionally**. Both are valid, but serve totally different purposes and approach the Bible in totally different ways. It is often a confusion of these two ways of reading that leads to misunderstandings between people in talking about Scripture, and even in misunderstanding Scripture itself.

Exegetical reading of Scripture is how most preachers, educators, or scholars study the biblical text. This way of reading Scripture has as its goal understanding the meaning of the biblical text for the larger purpose of drawing theological, doctrinal, or homiletical conclusions from it. It involves using various methods of biblical study, such as: historical, cultural, and social backgrounds; the original languages; the history of interpretation; relating texts to the whole canon of Scripture; theological implications, etc. There are a variety of emphases in these methods, but most are aimed at understanding the theological message the text communicates. While not all Bible students agree on all these methods, or their results, there is a great deal of agreement about the basic principles, and about the boundaries of interpretation that arise from careful study (what the text *can't* mean).

Theological and doctrinal positions are (usually) constructed from such deliberate and careful study of Scripture. The study is done openly and publicly in the Christian community, with much dialog about differing views. “Lone Ranger” or eccentric views are not accepted in the larger community, which serves as a balance to over zealous individual interpreters (“no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation” -2 Peter 1:20).

Devotional reading of Scripture is a personal reading that is intimately tied to prayer as devotion to God. It is an attempt, a search, to encounter God through sacred Scripture. In this way of reading, the person approaches the Biblical text from the context of his or her own immediate world of experience, often in times and attitudes of grief or indecision, or simply wanting to draw closer to God. The Bible is read closely and thoroughly but always with the prayer that God will speak through Scripture. There is always an immediacy to devotional reading that addresses people where they are in a particular set of life situations. As individuals contemplate a passage from Scripture, they allow the Biblical text to master them as they saturate themselves in the presence of God through focusing on Scripture.

It is important to notice here that the primary method of reading Scripture in this approach is not to find out what the text might mean in the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, or what the original author had in mind when he wrote, or what the historical background of the text might be. This is not Bible Study, and should not be confused at this point with the exegetical approach that has more pragmatic ends in mind (theology, teaching, preaching, history, doctrine, etc.). Yet, the Bible does not become some magic key for the answers to life’s problems. In fact, and this is the crucial point, Scripture itself is not so much the focus in devotional reading as is the communion with God that occurs in the reading. The reading of Scripture is a vehicle for expressing devotion to God, and allowing God to commune with us.

Often in devotional reading, people say they are “given” a message from Scripture. I have no doubt at all that this happens. Theologically, we would say that the Holy Spirit has helped them understand something about themselves, their life situation, a direction to go, a personal need. This does not mean that the Scripture itself necessarily “means” this. And the insight gained is so personal that it probably cannot be used as doctrine or theology for all of the church for all time. It is not that kind of truth. But it is a personal

truth whereby the Holy Spirit enables the person to understand something that they need to know at that particular juncture in their lives.

Another way to say this is that the “truth” for the person comes in the context of prayer through the Holy Spirit, who uses the Bible as the vehicle or form for that truth. They **have not studied Scripture** for its meaning; they **have sought God’s presence** through the vehicle of Scripture for strength in their lives. What they end up with in this reading of Scripture is not the theological meaning of Scripture, but an assurance of God’s presence in their lives, and the strength that comes from an encounter with God. This is always the purpose of acts of devotion of any kind. I am convinced that devotional reading of Scripture serves to create the climate in which we can hear God in new ways, and in ways that will not come from any other devotional practice.

Now, the real problems come when these two ways of reading Scripture are confused, or one is eliminated altogether. I have no doubt that Phoebe Palmer, a nineteenth century leader of the holiness renewal movement in the United States, gained some marvelous insights into her own faith journey as she read Scripture devotionally. She inspired thousands through her devotional writings earnestly to seek a deeper, closer relationship with God. However, as soon as she began making her devotional insights into theological propositions, which quickly moved into doctrine in the American Holiness Movement, she ran into trouble. She never did exegetical reading of Scripture, and so drastically misunderstood Scripture. And 150 years later, the heirs of the American Holiness Movement are still struggling with the fallout out from those errors.

The same problem often occurs with preachers who opt for devotional reading as a basis for sermon preparation or building personal theology rather than taking the time to do exegetical study first. It is one thing to share a personal devotional experience with others, and I think there is a time and place even for preachers and pastors to do that. But it is not the same thing as proclaiming a message of God that is biblically and theologically sound. -1-

Most “Bible Study” groups I have attended are mislabeled. A “Bible Study” where everyone sits around a circle and the leader goes around the circle and asks, “What does this passage mean to you,” is **not** a Bible study. It is an exercise in devotional reading. That may be adequate for a certain context, as long as people understand what they are doing, and know the difference between devotional reading and Bible study. Shared insights and shared faith journeys are a valuable source of encouragement to a community. But there should be no illusions in such contexts that “study,” or exegetical reading of Scripture, has taken place.

Devotional reading of Scripture plays a crucial role in the church, as a means of communion with God, and probably has been too neglected in our modern culture where fewer people read. And for some of us who do far more exegetical reading, it is difficult to read devotionally. When I do, I quickly find myself wondering what the Hebrew word is behind this translation, or start relating the theology of this passage to some text somewhere else. I have heard others comment that they do not know enough to do “Bible Study” since they don’t know Greek or Hebrew or all the technical stuff of biblical exegesis. Maybe that’s why we all need each other. And maybe we all need to work harder to cultivate and nurture both ways of reading Scripture, lest we end up from either direction assuming that our own thoughts are God’s.

Notes

1. “The difficulty that too many people experience in reading the Bible is not that it is a cryptogram to be deciphered but that they lack an awareness of the historical context. Identifying this setting requires help in most cases. This is why study helps . . . are crucial for the average person, even though many passages of Scripture may come alive because the words address in a very personal way the existential situation of the reader.” H. Ray Dunning, “Does the Bible Contain a Secret Code,” *Herald of Holiness*, December, 1997.