

Bible Study Theme: The Twelve Great Subjects of Scripture

1. The Bible
2. The Godhead: The Holy Trinity
3. God the Father
4. God the Son
5. God the Holy Spirit
6. Angels
7. Humanity (Man)
8. Salvation (Soteriology)
9. The Christian
10. The Church
11. The Means of Grace
12. Future Things (Eschatology)

A very helpful book on these themes is:

Bruce Milne: *Know the Truth* (IVP) 2nd Edition (1998). Relevant passages are indicated in the notes [KTT]. It is helpful to begin by reading KTT 9–24.

A more technical book is:

T C Hammond & D F Wright: *In understanding be men* (IVP). Relevant passages are indicated in the notes [H & W].

In this study we look at the Bible “thematically” to find out what it says about particular subjects.

STUDY 1

The Bible

Four main points

1. Revelation
2. Inspiration
3. Interpretation
4. Authority

1. Revelation

Reading:

Hebrews 1:1-2; Luke 24:13-35
KTT 30-38
H & W 25-27

2. Inspiration

Reading:

2 Peter 1:20-21; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 3:7
KTT 39-59
H & W 28-34

3. Interpretation

Reading:

2 Timothy 2:14-19; 1 Corinthians 2:12
KTT 59-66
H & W 35-38

4. Authority

Reading:

1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Matthew 22:29-31
KTT 25-29
H & W 38-40

1. Revelation

Christian faith is a matter of trusting God rather than agreeing with a series of propositions or simply acknowledging that God exists (even the demons do that; James 2:19) - but how do we come even to a position of trusting God? On the one hand, Christians believe that God is transcendent (that is beyond the created universe) or hidden, but on the other hand, we believe that he can be known, not by our piercing into his realm (cf. The Tower of Babel; Genesis 11) but by his revealing something of himself and his nature to us. Our beliefs about God are therefore dependent upon divine self-revelation – especially that God speaks.

God has undoubtedly revealed something of himself through creation and the world around us (e.g. Psalm 19:1-4). Hebrews 1:1-2 points out that God has spoken in many ways, notably through the prophets but that God's supreme revelation comes through his Son. If God has revealed himself through the prophets, and supremely in Jesus, then Scripture claims to be the record of that revelation and a record of other events in which God was thought to be especially active (not least the history of Israel).

The idea of the Word of God is important in the Bible. In as many as three places (John 1:1; Revelation 19:13 and possibly 1 John 1:1), the 'Word of God' is Jesus but in other places the Word of God means either a sovereign decree (e.g. Genesis 1:3), a personal address (Genesis 2:16-17), a word spoken by God's messenger (be that an angel or a human being, e.g. Deuteronomy 18:18-20; Jeremiah 1:9) or God's word in written form (Exodus 31:18; 32:16; 34:1, 28).

Revelation often consists in an event and an explanation or comment upon it. If there is no explanation, no comment, no interpretation, what meaning can be drawn from the event? If there is no event then it is difficult to see how the comment alone is revelation.

The Biblical account of the coming of Jesus provides both the historical record and interpretation. There is an event (that is overwhelmingly accepted – that a person known as Jesus of Nazareth was born, lived and taught in Galilee and was put to death in Jerusalem) and a comment upon it (e.g. John 20:31 – 'these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name'). The Bible never claims to be neutral on these matters – it declares the message, teaches, challenges, corrects, instructs, equips, inspires and encourages, so that believers may be equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16).

2. Inspiration

The prophets claimed to be spokesmen for God while in places too numerous to mention the Bible characters and writers claim to have God's word on a particular matter. This has given rise to the traditional view that the Bible is, in a special way, 'the Word of God' and that the study of the Bible is worthwhile for it is God's chosen way to reveal himself to people of all generations and is the record of God's supreme self-disclosure in Jesus.

Words are indispensable for communication. Even sign language is interpreted in terms of words for what the signs mean. The Bible is punctuated by 'The word of the Lord came to me', 'this is what the Lord says,' or claims that the words spoken or written are under the power or influence of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine that the Bible is the 'Word of God' is sometimes expressed in the word 'inspired' though 2 Timothy 3:16 would be better translated God-breathed (expired). It is only fair to say that in recent times this has been a notoriously controversial area. The Methodist Conference report *Lamp & Light* (1998) describes various views.

The traditional theory, simply expressed, is that the Holy Spirit enabled the Biblical writers to find adequate words to express the divine revelation without reducing the Biblical writers to secretaries taking dictation. The description of this as 'verbal inspiration' is often misunderstood but the alternative term 'plenary' (meaning full) inspiration does not seem any more helpful. While there are places that state that the writer simply had to take down what God said (e.g. Revelation 2:1), at other times 'men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Peter 1:21) showing that the Scriptures themselves are against a theory of mechanical dictation. The Spirit uses the human personality and a variety of the writers in a mysterious way.

A further consideration that needs to be addressed is 'if the Scriptures are inspired what was the moment of inspiration?' This must be faced for clearly some of the books are collections of writings. But the broad answer is that the finished form is the 'Word of God' even if the exact point of inspiration is unknown (matters of conception and birth are like that). This view has to concede that the text may contain corruptions but an appeal on any major doctrine or practice is seldom made to this. The inspiration or 'God-given quality' of the Bible raises further questions. Is it all equally inspired? How do we know what should be included in the Bible. Parts of the Bible are clearly more inspiring than others. As to what should be included – we consider that later when we think about 'the canon'.

3. Interpretation

Biblical interpretation is most easily understood around three questions, namely:

What does the Bible say?

What does the Bible mean?

What does the Bible mean to me?

It is very important not to skip question two.

The Christian looks to the aid of the Holy Spirit for understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures. There is a sense in which the Scriptures remain black print on a white page unless the Holy Spirit works, for, at the end of the day, we are grappling with what the divine revelation means and there is no doubt that God himself is the one most suited to help us. Therefore, studying the Bible is different from ordinary study but many of the methods that we might use for ordinary study are still useful, indeed, it is important that we use them (e.g. cross-referencing, background reading, concentration and perhaps even note-taking).

Much has been made of the unsuitability of the expression ‘The Bible says...’ but it need not be wrong in itself (especially if it is merely a convenient way of expressing what the Bible means to me/us). However, there are a number of things that the Bible says which cannot be lifted out of their context and cultural background without doing violence to them. The issue of the purpose of the writer and what the passage meant to the original readers is very important. We might begin by asking what kind of writing is it (e.g. Gospel, letter, prophecy, poetry)? It might be helpful to know who the writer was and who the first recipients were. It is always good to look at what comes immediately before and immediately after the selected passage to see it in its broader context. Then it is important to relate the passage in hand to other relevant passages, to compare and hopefully illuminate the meaning. It would also be clearly wrong to allow one isolated text (proof-text) to influence one’s conclusions against an overwhelming trend within the Bible.

There are times when the Old Testament provides essential background to the New Testament and there are times when the New Testament completes the Old (e.g. in the matter of blood-sacrifice). But it is best to think of the Scriptures as a unity rather than look for tensions between the two testaments. As a genuine interpreter it is necessary to take the strain of having one foot in the twenty-first century world and one foot in the world of the Bible.

4. Authority

The Bible is a collection of other books and an important question is which of these books should be included – the technical term for this is ‘canon’ (which literally means ‘measuring stick’). The books of the Old Testament were established by the Jewish community. These began with writings such as the Ten Commandments and the Law (Exodus 31:18; 32:16; Deuteronomy 10:5; 31:24-26), the Five Books of Moses (Joshua 24:26) and the prophets (1 Samuel 10:25; 1 Chronicles 29:29; Jeremiah 30:2). Later writings (after about 435 B.C.) were considered not worthy of being in the canon. Jerome translated the *Vulgate* but the *Apocrypha* was considered to be a book of the church rather than Holy Scripture. Jesus never disagreed with the books of the Old Testament canon. The New Testament books became accepted by their usage and in time an authorized list was drawn up. There are no strong candidates for inclusion or exclusion.

All Christians are agreed that God has spoken in Christ and that some reliable record of Christ’s coming is recorded in the Bible. For over 2000 years the Scriptures have a proven track record. They are thus said to be ‘self-attesting’ or ‘self-authenticating’. The traditional Protestant belief has been that nothing can be added to the Scriptures and that nothing outside of the Scriptures should be imposed as an essential Christian belief or practice. This view holds that if there is prophecy today it must be measured against the Scriptural canon. The Bible is studied as the ‘Word of God’ in the belief that by the help of the Holy Spirit he still speaks through it.

Where Christians disagree is over the authority of the Bible. A general rule is that the higher view of inspiration goes with a higher view of Biblical authority, though all of this is inevitably subject to Biblical interpretation.

The four main sources of authority are Scripture, tradition, reason and experience and probably each is present in divergent views to some extent. Classical Protestantism has looked only to the Scriptures as the source of authority. Catholicism has seen the Scriptures as part of the tradition of the Church, which is itself the authority. Liberalism has tended to look to reason as the test, while some Pentecostals and Charismatics have given special authority to Christian experience. Traditional Methodist thinking (i.e. that of Wesley) has given supreme authority to the Bible but looked to tradition (Christian antiquity), reason and experience as useful helps to interpreting the Bible. Tradition, reason and experience are all subject to the central authority of the Bible but are not excluded as helps to the right interpretation of the divine revelation recorded in Scripture.