

Kathleen's heart is to see God's people love his Word. Reminding us that the Bible is God's words spoken to his people in the context of the church, she provides very practical tools to equip us to dig deep and mine the treasure of eternal truth. This is the essence of disciple-making and fulfilling Christ's "Great Commission." Every church needs this study.

—**Jane Patete**, Women's Ministries Coordinator,
Presbyterian Church in America

After leading us through masterful studies of several books of the Bible, Kathleen Nielson now gives us an even greater gift: teaching us how she does it! Her literary expertise and love of the Bible that we have seen time and time again are put to their fullest use here, as Dr. Nielson shows us how to view the Bible as both the crucial (and approachable) Word of God and as a literary masterpiece to be immersed in and savored. As do all good teachers, she leads by example, making us excited to dive in and study the Bible by allowing her own excitement to infuse every page. And on a personal note, my wife tells me that Kathleen's material is as trustworthy as it comes. If you want to study the Bible—and, more importantly, know *how* to study it—I can recommend no better teacher than Kathleen Nielson, and no better resource than this book.

—**R. Kent Hughes**, Senior Pastor Emeritus,
College Church in Wheaton

Kathleen Nielson's theological precision, literary background, and deep love for God's Word, combined with the practical tools she provides, will inspire and equip the reader to rightly handle the word of truth. This skillful resource left me with a greater desire to study God's Word.

—**Susan Hunt**, Author, Women's Ministry Consultant,
Christian Education and Publications,
Presbyterian Church in America

Kathleen Nielson has written a substantial but practical guide for those who want to do an effective job of leading Bible studies. It is written specifically to help women who are Bible study leaders, but all who teach the Bible will profit enormously from this book. She issues the challenge through thoughtful exposition of five basic truths about the Bible, then draws out the practical implications of those truths for actual Bible study. I particularly appreciate the author's emphasis on Bible study leaders learning to master the text for themselves before attempting to teach others. She wants us to know and teach the Bible itself. What a needed emphasis.

—**Stephen Smallman**, CityNet ministries, Philadelphia

I don't know of a greater need among Christians today than better understanding and applying our Bibles. Kathleen Nielson has blessed us with a deeply profound yet thoroughly comprehensible tool to help us do that. I pray that this book will be widely distributed and diligently used by Christians all over the world.

— **Carol Ruvolo**, Bible Teacher, Author of *Turning on the Light: Discovering the Riches of God's Word* and *A Book Like No Other: What's So Special about the Bible*

Kathleen Nielson's book belongs to a very elite circle of books: it covers all the right topics in exactly the right order! As Kathleen pursues the successive topics, a momentum builds up that is akin to the unfolding of the plot line of a novel. The subject of the book has been thoroughly researched, and the personal statements by people who teach the Bible are a welcome touch. The book cannot be better than it is. For people who teach the Bible—or who aspire to teach it—this book will be the gold standard for knowing how to do it right.

—**Leland Ryken**, Professor of English, Wheaton College

Kathleen Nielson, who makes no claim to be a biblical scholar, is a laywoman who has sat at the feet of such scholars and through disciplined study has prepared herself as a master Bible teacher. Nielson gives her readers a fresh and innovative, yet solid and God-glorifying approach, to unlocking the truths of Scripture—not by listening to voices inside themselves in order to make its words justify personal whims and affirm their human choices, but by reading God’s words in order to ask what God is saying and how one should respond to him. According to Nielson, you “read [God’s Word] with a heart ready to listen and submit.” I am delighted to recommend this book, especially to women who are seeking to develop skills in personal Bible study, as a volume for their own personal libraries. This volume will move women toward the goal of unlocking the riches of God’s Word and becoming effective in woman-to-woman biblical exposition.

— **Dorothy Patterson**, General Editor of *The Woman’s Study Bible*, Professor of Theology in Women’s Studies, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Dissatisfied with leaving Bible study to the professionals while the rest of us are mere recipients of their work, Kathleen Nielson wants all Christians to be involved in thoughtful and faithful Bible study—and tells us how to do it. This is a well-written and wonderfully sane book that deserves the widest circulation.

—**D. A. Carson**, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Bible Study

Bible Study

Following the Ways of the Word

Kathleen Buswell Nielson



P U B L I S H I N G

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Preface

THIS BOOK ABOUT BIBLE STUDY is written with a heart full of thanks to all who have led me in the joyful pursuit of studying the Scriptures. First and foremost that includes my husband Niel, who has consistently modeled before me and encouraged in me a passion and a love for God's Word and who is somehow always ready to read (and lovingly critique!) my latest writing, even amid busy work and ministry. What a delight it is to love the Word and love the Lord together.

Thanks are due to many others, including parents and family, pastors and teachers, and countless cohorts in the activity of Bible study. Many friends in ministry have graciously sent comments sharing their wisdom and experience. I am grateful for these rich words and privileged to include them in text boxes throughout the chapters, all with the permission of the writers. Most of the quoted voices come from people I have observed "in action" and served with in ministry. How encouraging it is to be part of a chorus of voices passionately concerned about this topic! The *whole* chorus is huge and global; any one of us knows only a portion, only a hint. A small percentage of the voices quoted here comes from outside the

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United States. Those voices bring valued perspective, challenge, and clarification of the universal issues at stake.

The smaller portion of the quoted material comes from men; the vast majority was sent by women who are leaders in ministry across the country and the world. The women acknowledged serve in the areas of Christian education and women's Bible study. Clearly, my context of ministry has led me to connect most deeply with other women, and I am grateful for these connections. This book emerges out of my own study and experience, but not with any attempt to shape the content specifically for women; the book is about Bible study, not women's ministry in particular. Some have observed that women in general do a better job of answering the call for serious Bible study than men do. I offer no conclusions on this matter—only prayers that God will raise up in his church huge, loving armies of both men and women who are well armed with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

Introduction

What's Happening?

Thoughts on Bible study, with
three perceptions concerning:

1. The Church
 2. Authority
 3. Words
-
-

BIBLE STUDY . . . EVERYBODY'S DOING IT. In churches and dorms and neighborhoods all across the nation and the world, groups of people are drawn together for the stated purpose of studying the most influential book in human history. The Word of God is invading the world. This book celebrates Bible study, and at the same time it asks the question: Just what *is* Bible study? Is it possible to pinpoint a cluster—even a flexible cluster—of characteristics that must be present for “Bible study” to be identifiable and effective? Where should we begin in order to answer that question?

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These questions and this book arise from the observation that the generally accepted cluster of characteristics necessary for Bible study is expanding rapidly. Such expansion has a wonderfully positive side, as the Word of God evidences its ability to speak in all kinds of ways and contexts. And yet it is helpful for Christians—the ones who claim to believe the Bible—to stop and think it through, to see what’s happening around us, and most of all to examine our course in light of the Bible itself.

Such examination should happen from all sorts of perspectives; I want to acknowledge that mine is one of many within the Christian family. Mine is not the perspective of a biblical scholar trained in Greek and Hebrew—crucial as that perspective is. Rather, mine is the perspective of a layperson who has benefited from such scholars, who has been lovingly trained in biblically based churches, and who has participated in, led, written materials for, and spoken to Bible study groups for a few decades—mainly women’s groups. I should add that I am an American, a female, a middle-aged person, and a teacher formally educated in literary studies. Each of these categories provides both a limitation and an advantage in perspective. I believe it is people like me—not professional biblical scholars, but laypeople of all stripes—who at this point in time need to think through exactly what we are doing in Bible study.

The scholars and pastors are there doing the heavy work, but we cannot leave the work to them. Most Bible study groups do not enjoy the privilege of being led regularly by Greek or Hebrew professors, or even by pastors. Some groups benefit from the oversight of trained leaders, and indeed, the challenge ahead is to train more and more. Currently, many untrained laypeople, even in churches with strong pastors who

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preach and teach the Word, find themselves members or even leaders of a “Bible study” without having had the opportunity to consider carefully just what that term might mean.

Living out both the limitations and the advantages of my perspective, I’ve observed three perceptions at work in and around the church, perceptions that both clarify and complicate the task of getting down to the basics of Bible study. The first is a perception concerning the *church*. This perception is that the church, both on the local level and in the larger sense, consists of two classes: the professionals (who do the serious study of the Scriptures) and the rest (who simply benefit from the writing and teaching of the professionals). I wonder if we are giving up some of the benefits dearly paid for by the Reformers, who gave their labor and their lives to translate the Scriptures and make them available to all. Now, it seems, we would too easily hand them back to a group of experts to digest and interpret them for us. Many Bible study groups have no interest in spending a lot of energy digging into a text of Scripture; they are busy, this is not their expertise, and it’s frankly much easier to discuss a short chapter of a Christian book or watch a video together. Such activities can be good, especially if they do not substitute for Bible study.

In a speech to Beeson Divinity School seminary students, one of those experts named John Piper told those students to stop reading so much John Piper and start reading the Bible. His example was Luther, who gave himself to biblical study as primary, “elevated above” the reading of theologians and church fathers. “I know from experience,” Piper said, “and I know from observation pastors do not study their Bibles. They read Piper and other such books, which is a colossal mistake. Read and study your Bibles. You don’t know your Bibles yet. Could you give an exposition of Ezekiel? Could you give an

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exposition of Ecclesiastes?”¹ Even the experts-in-training are looking to experts rather than to the Scriptures themselves!

The very best experts—including Piper—know that they are not the ones to look to ultimately, but that the Bible itself is the only sufficient final authority for every person. The best experts are those who not only study hard to share the fruit of their labor, but also want to train others to read and study the Scriptures themselves, so that they can then train others to read and study the Scriptures themselves . . . and on and on.

To be clear, my aim in this book is not to speak as an expert in biblical matters. English is my field, and that will come through! My aim is to take the treasures learned under the authority of pastors especially, as well as all kinds of scholars, and to discuss how we laypeople can connect such treasures to the study of the Bible. We will discuss this further.

The second perception concerns *authority* and might seem to challenge the first one. This perception, which exists in the general culture (especially the general American culture) and has seeped into the church, is that no one has the right to act as an authority over me. We are all familiar with the cases of children suing parents, or of young people desiring from adults vulnerability and affirmation more than wisdom and knowledge. Ultimately, of course, the instinct to reject authority reflects the rebellion of fallen humankind against a sovereign Lord God. Such rebellion has existed since Adam, but it shows itself openly in cultures that are turning away from even outward submission to the Word of God.

A Word from God implies a word from outside us, a breaking into our lives by some transcendent being to whom we are obliged to listen. But our culture is listening much more closely to voices inside ourselves; we tend to read words and say how they make us feel, rather than read words and ask what they

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say and how we should rightly respond. To read the Bible as the authoritative Word of God means to read it with a heart ready to listen and submit. This is a radical activity in a culture that does not embrace the legitimacy of authority.

How does this perception concerning authority fit with the perception concerning the church? Wouldn't the perception of a group of professionals imply a kind of authority on their part—against which the rest of the church might struggle? In fact, biblical scholars are often not perceived to be those with an authoritative voice, but rather those who chose that specialty and who can be of huge help and comfort to the rest of us as needed. They are simply part of the whole ongoing conversation, with all kinds of interesting insights as they interact with the words of Scripture in new and creative ways. Perhaps part of the reason many are happy to leave the work of Bible study to the specialists is that such work is not generally perceived to be authoritative work—that is, work that deals with an authoritative Word. Perhaps if laypeople more deeply respected the authority of the Word, there might exist a more passionate and widespread interest in being led and trained by those who have studied it deeply.

Even contemporary newscasting reveals our distaste for authority. The public doesn't seem to want newscasters who simply impart facts as objectively as possible. Rather, people want news shows and talk shows that allow them to interact and hear other people's views and share theirs, whether via Twitter or online polls or chat rooms. News these days might be defined as the sum of what everybody thinks. The news, then, is not something outside myself that I learn; rather, it is my interaction with others as we all together process ongoing stories of the day. It is easy to make the jump to seeing Bible study as simply a group processing of words, a Twittering sort

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of interaction, with the point being not what the authoritative Word speaks, but rather the sum of what everybody thinks. We will discuss this further.

The third perception, again existing generally and bleeding into the church, concerns *words*. It is that words lack the power to communicate truth. I do not have time or proper expertise to explore all the intricacies of postmodern and post-postmodern language theory, but a few observations are in order as we begin to consider what it means to study a book of words given to us by God. To my remark that we are no longer a culture that respects words, a friend responded, “What do you mean? More of us spend more time dealing with words than have people at any other time in history!” This is true. With the advent of the Internet and all the associated and growing technology, we traffic in words more routinely than ever before. We can access or delete thousands and millions of words with the touch of a button.

The point, however, is not the amount or the accessibility of words, but rather our view of words. We traffic in them easily, but we do not generally trust them to carry a weight of meaning across that bridge that stretches from a speaker or author, on one side, to the one who hears or reads, on the other. We don’t mind this; in fact, we celebrate the dance of words across the bridge and the imaginative reassembling of them by the receiver on the other side. This wonderful dance has always occurred, of course, as words must enter the consciousness of receivers who have unique sets of understandings and experiences for processing them. I can send across the bridge the words *home* and *father*, confident that these words arouse different thoughts and pictures within each person who receives them. Yet cannot we also be confident of a quite basic and universally understood meaning to these words, a

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core meaning intended by the giver and understandable by the receiver?

To put the question another way, should we follow skip-ingly where Humpty Dumpty tries to lead Alice, in *Through the Looking Glass*? In the course of their discussion of birthdays and presents, Humpty Dumpty cries:

“There’s glory for you!”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”²

No question that Humpty Dumpty (and Lewis Carroll!) makes the words dance! But Alice’s concern is ours here: whether or not both the giver and the receiver of the words can assume a core of commonly understood meaning to them, and trust them to dance across that bridge of understanding without totally changing shape in the process. How far should we go in questioning the meaning of the word *is*?

Kevin Vanhoozer explores with expertise the intricacies of language and hermeneutical theory in his book *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. He leads his reader in learning humility

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from theorists who challenge an overconfident assertion of exact meaning. But he also powerfully challenges those theorists who deny the possibility of receiving meaning intended by an author—those theorists who have in fact proclaimed the death of the author in the literary process. Vanhoozer bases his argument in a biblical understanding of God, God's Trinitarian nature, and God as the source of all meaningful communication. It is no mistake, says Vanhoozer, that talk of the death of the author has come along with talk of the death of God.³

A more recent book, Vern Poythress's *In the Beginning Was the Word*, beautifully develops a whole theology of language grounded in a biblical view of the triune God as the source of all words and meaning.⁴ Poythress reminds us that words, any words, have meaning only in relation to the God who exists and who spoke the universe into being by his Son, with the breath of the Spirit. Human beings use words meaningfully because they image God their Creator, whether they acknowledge this or not.

Indeed, it makes all the difference in the world whether we view the universe as a dance of random particles or as a direct creation of God who spoke it into being and preserves it by his word for the end he ordains. The apostle Peter rebukes those who doubt God's coming judgment by reminding them that God's sure word encompasses the whole scope of human history:

For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. (2 Peter 3:5–7)

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The implications of all this for Bible study are huge. If we study with the assumption that we as readers use our individual contexts and experiences to shape our own meanings from the words, then Bible study will consist mainly of a series of personal reactions and opinions. The dance will be chaotic and, in the end, narcissistic. On the other hand, if we study with the assumption that God intends to give us meaning that we can receive more or less clearly through words, then Bible study will consist of learning to “dig into” the words as carefully as possible, so that we come closer and closer to the meaning God intends us to receive. We will come closer to *him*, for the words come from him. That’s the point. We will grow to love the divine master director of this dance, which is as beautiful as the universe he created.

I would venture to guess that most “Bible studiers” would claim to operate under the latter assumption but have imbibed and come to enjoy the taste of the former. The implications grow even huger when we unpack the special nature of Scripture’s inspired words. We will discuss this further.

Clearly, these three perceptions are all intertwined, with the word issues at the heart of them. These perceptions will be intertwined with the discussion that follows in this book—with the word issues at the heart of it. It is God’s Word that teaches us how the church, the body of Christ, must be fully equipped for the mission of making disciples in these last days. That equipping happens through the Word. It is God’s Word that teaches his authoritative and loving rule, through his commands that must be obeyed. It is God’s Word that is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12).

What huge claims for itself the Word makes! Do we believe them and operate according to them? These claims should be

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our starting point for any Bible study, and to these claims we will now give attention. Having sensed the overall complexity of the subject and the need to clarify this crucial activity of Bible study, we will focus in the following chapters on five key truths about what the Bible is. Knowing what it is will help us learn how to study it. Each truth, then, will lead to specific implications for Bible study.

1



If the Bible Is God Speaking . . .

Then How Should We Listen?

Truth №1: The Bible is God speaking.

Implications for study:

1. The nature of Bible study
 2. The goal of Bible study
 3. Our attitude in study
-
-

IT'S THE WORLD'S NUMBER-ONE BEST-SELLING BOOK. It's been translated into well over 2,000 languages, and that number is increasing all the time. It's the foundational text of Western civilization. Many Americans have dozens of copies in their homes. Yet in spite of the dramatic proliferation of this book and in spite of all the books written by all the experts about this

book, we may be in general less acquainted with its contents than many in the centuries preceding us. What is this book?

Perhaps the most basic element in the cluster of characteristics essential for Bible study is a clear understanding and communication of what Scripture is. What are we studying? The truths about Scripture in these next chapters appear increasingly radical in the world in which we live. New participants in Bible studies often include those who have only the vaguest sense of the nature of this book. Actually, we should hope that is true, in the sense that we hope our churches and our Bible studies will attract many who do not yet know either the Scriptures or the Lord of the Scriptures.

A new generation is emerging, one not steeped in the old Bible stories most people used to know. British author Vaughan Roberts tells an amazing story of a visiting instructor in a primary school who asked the children to name the person who knocked down the wall of Jericho. Nervous silence ensued, broken by one child's response: "Please sir, my name is Bruce Jones. I don't know who did it but it wasn't me."¹ The incident (admittedly unverified!) progresses through several more layers of ignorance, culminating in a letter from the Department of Education regretting the reported damage to the walls of Jericho and offering to cover the cost upon receiving an estimate.

In the midst of growing oblivion, the truths of just what the Bible is stand out as exceedingly precious, to be cherished and mused on and enthusiastically communicated. Not every Bible study should begin with a treatise on the nature of Scripture. However, if these truths are true, then the light of their truth must emerge, in one way or another, as the Bible is studied. Standing on these truths offers us a clear perspective on the Bible and what it means to study

it. Let's begin with perhaps the most basic truth: the Bible is God speaking.

"Many people consider the Bible inspiring but not inspired . . . a book to be respected, but not read . . . a book for the clergy but not the laity . . . a book for good, religious people but not for sinners. For many, its religious stories are irrelevant to everyday people in everyday life. We must teach that God speaks through the Bible, and that he speaks into our everyday lives, with truth and power to change us."

—Debbie Seward, Bible study leader,
College Church in Wheaton, Illinois

The Bible Is God Speaking

In his helpful basic introduction to the Scriptures, *I Believe in the Bible*, David Jackman makes it clear right at the start: "The Bible is not a book about God; it is God speaking to us."² I love this starting point, one that straightens out right away a whole host of common misconceptions, such as that the Bible is a set of propositions to be learned, or that the Bible is an old dead book we have to keep resurrecting for new times and places. Such misconceptions separate the words on the page from the speaker whose breath breathed them to his creation.

I love this starting point also because Jackman dares to say simply what theologians are continually debating in complex detail. We need professional scholars and theologians, and we must learn from them. We should look into a classic

like Carl Henry's *God, Revelation, and Authority*.³ We should read the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which is included in volume 4 of Henry's work. We should study the doctrines of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and search Scripture for its truths in these matters. If the Bible is actually anything like what it claims, then it deserves careful attention—as careful as we are capable of. Such care will enable laypeople to glean and communicate these truths in a simple but not simplistic way that makes sense to many fellow studiers of the Bible.

We begin, then, with the simple but huge truth of God speaking. In Scripture itself God appears as a word-speaker from the very beginning, from the moment he said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Psalm 33:6 puts it this way:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.

As the Bible consistently celebrates this powerful creative word, we begin to sense that God's word appears not as a disconnected thing that logically causes something else to happen; rather, in the very breath of his word being uttered, the creation happens! When we learn that the Hebrew word for *breath* (*ruach*) is also the word for *spirit* (as in the *Spirit of God* in Gen. 1:2), and when we go on to learn, for example in Colossians 1:16, that by Jesus Christ the Son all things were created, we begin to grasp the working of the triune God through his word from the beginning.

God pours out his three-personed self through his word. When we land in John 1 and read about the Word who in the beginning was with God, and was God, and through whom all things were made, we see even more deeply into the personal

Then How Should We Listen?

meaning of God’s word—even to the point of its being made flesh to dwell among us. God’s being a word-speaker is the most personal extension of his very self into his creation.

All this helps clarify “the inspiration of Scripture,” a crucial doctrinal tenet. In the context of Bible study groups, it is helpful to see this tenet in the most personal sense, as we understand that the Creator God personally “breathed out” all Scripture, according to Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. The process of God’s breathing it out is never explained in a technical way, but it is unfolded by Peter, who describes the writers of Scripture as men who “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).

I’ll never forget a certain training session for various teaching leaders at College Church in Wheaton. The young pastor leading the session spent considerable time talking about these writers’ being “carried along” by the Spirit as they wrote down the words of Scripture. I knew this basic doctrine, and I remember thinking that this instruction would be helpful for newer leaders. My pastor, however, proceeded to talk about how Luke used the same word we translate “carried along” to describe Paul’s ship, which in Acts 27:13–17 was “driven along” by a tempestuous wind, a northeaster so strong that they simply had to give way to it. He vividly described that wind filling up the sails of Paul’s boat and driving it along the coast of Crete. Then he asked us to keep that picture in mind as we considered the powerful wind of the Spirit that *carried along* these writers.

These writers did “speak”; they did indeed actively author the words. And yet they authored them as their hearts and minds were filled, blown full, driven along by the wind of the Holy Spirit’s breath, God’s breath, so that every word they wrote was exactly the one the divine Author intended to speak

to us. This is why we can say that Scripture is inerrant in the original manuscripts—because the perfect, sovereign God breathed it out and carried those writers along. That day, in that class at church, I began not just to understand better this doctrine of inspiration but to love it more—to love more the God who would so powerfully and perfectly speak himself to us in words. This was crucial training for Bible study.

How amazing that God has not turned away and withdrawn his word to a human race that has been made up of rebels against that word since Adam and Eve disobeyed his command in the garden of Eden. But God did not stop speaking. He came to Adam and Eve and spoke a promise—a promise that one day the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the evil serpent who introduced sin into the world. The entire remainder of the Bible reveals the working out of that promise, ultimately fulfilled in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ the Son of God. God overflows with words for us. He doesn't hide; he reveals himself and pours himself out through his word as he speaks to us, by his Spirit, ultimately through Christ.

“Some have told me that the Bible is outdated and can't meet all our needs in today's world. I deal with these kinds of issues by focusing in on what the Bible says about itself, and emphasizing that if it is in error about what it says about itself, then it can't be trusted to speak in any area because it isn't the Word of God. But if it is the Word of God, we must submit ourselves to all of it, not just the parts we like.”

—Carol Ruvolo, author, Bible study leader, Heritage Christian Fellowship, Albuquerque, New Mexico

Implications

The Nature of Bible Study

Three important implications arise from this foundational truth about the inspiration of Scripture. The first implication concerns the nature of Bible study: it is personal. Bible study is not primarily a matter of learning propositions or getting facts straight; it is a matter of hearing God speak to us. I am not saying that Bible study does not involve rigorous work and much learning. It does, as we will discuss. But the point is that the work and learning happen in relationship—first with the Lord God to whom we’re listening, and also with those around us who are related to us (or perhaps being drawn into relationship with us) through him, as we listen to his words together.

Many Bible studies these days emphasize this aspect of personal relationship, but too often the relational elements are separated from the elements of textual study, with the assumption that it is more sensitive and fulfilling to talk, pray, and encourage each other than to engage in intellectual analysis of words on a page. Such a false dichotomy thrusts aside a love letter from the one being whose words can pierce and fully satisfy a soul needy for loving relationship. Indeed, the context of loving interaction with others is beautiful and essential. But how amazing, in that context, to be privileged to hear from the Lord our Maker. How far away from sterile intellectual analysis is the process of deeply studying God’s Word. As we lean together over a biblical text to study it, we are in effect leaning in closer to the breath of God.

We were made to receive God’s words. And we were made to receive them not just individually but together, as his people. Taking in God’s words is not simply a mental exercise that we

then have to make personal; it is itself a relational activity—based on the primary relationship with the God who is there and who speaks to us. Perhaps sometimes we just don't believe he's there, and we're left to acknowledge only ourselves.

In a Bible study group, the actual study of the Bible is the foundation of the personal, relational aspect of the gathering. In a Bible study we come together to take in the words of our God who is there and who made us, loves us, and speaks to us—and who binds us together in a unity of the Spirit, which is stronger than the ties we can create ourselves.

The Goal of Bible Study

If the first implication of the fact that the Bible is God speaking concerns the nature of Bible study, the second implication concerns its goal—for people to know God through listening to him speak. This makes logical sense: if a Bible study is personal at its core, then the primary goal must be for each person and all the people together to develop this personal relationship with God and through him with each other. This goal must encompass both unbelievers' coming to know God initially as well as believers' coming to know God better. When Jesus prayed for his disciples just before his death, he prayed for all those who would believe in him, that they might be one in him “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20–23).

The goal for the time between Jesus' first coming and his second coming is for the world to come to know him as his disciples reproduce themselves. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is received by Jesus' first disciples and then, by its very nature, passed on to every subsequent follower of Jesus, so that the process of new disciples' being baptized and taught

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should continue to expand even to the end of this age when Jesus will come again. The first disciples participated in the crucial work of completing God's inspired Word, as the promised Holy Spirit brought the truth of Jesus' life and teaching perfectly to their minds, filling their sails as they wrote down the New Testament books. We later followers of Christ continue to press on with God's Word as our primary tool. The activity of Bible study must be seen in the context of this goal: that the world would come to know God through his Son.

"I've never experienced anyone who did not open the Bible without respect. They seem to perceive it as being God's book. However, the Bible is often a totally unknown book to a person attending a Bible study for the first time. It may only be a 'table book,' or this person may not even own a Bible. It's important to offer a Bible to anyone who wants one. In the first small-group session, I never assume that everyone knows how to find a biblical text reference."

—Nancy Hawley, Bible study teacher,
College Church in Wheaton, Illinois

Has the focus of many Bible studies become ingrown? How often do we Christians actually view ourselves as being in training to make other disciples, even through our Bible study? One wonderful way to expand our focus is to participate in a Bible study that includes nonbelievers or new believers or to change our current studies by including new people, perhaps even our own friends and neighbors.

People new to the Scriptures ask questions that longtime believers would never ask and lead a group to notice things about what God says that those of us in our established ruts might never notice. To witness someone else hearing God speak personally to him or her for the first time strengthens our own faith in God's Word and the personal God who speaks it. From the perspective of one being drawn to faith, it is powerful and compelling to witness believers in the act of loving God and loving to hear his Word. In the end, taking to heart this large goal of seeing the world around us come to know God is a step of obedience to the Word itself, and that obedience brings both joy to us and ultimately glory to God. Bible studies do feed Christians, but that feeding is part of a larger picture, of a world full of disciples being fed to feed others.

"I just heard this story from a woman who leads a small group. . . . One member of her group has not yet committed her life to Christ, but she keeps coming to the study and participating in the small group. She loves the relationships of love, clearly. Last week, after one Sunday of attending church with this small-group leader, the young woman had the courage to go to church on her own. She's growing in the graces, being showered with God's love and Word on a regular basis."

—Kari Stainback, Director of Women's Ministries,
Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas

I have seen this goal in action, along with the joy it brings, most often in churches where the leaders have established a

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vision for the world, and often in places in the world where gospel outreach is growing in spite of governments that do not approve. In some such countries, for example, where international Christian churches are allowed to meet, people from all over the world gather, drawn to these churches by their vibrant fellowship, their strong preaching, and often their welcoming Bible study groups. Many people receive the gospel and carry it back to their various places of origin. There is an excitement to see new converts—an excitement that inevitably spills into the immediate community, whether it's allowed to do so or not.

Our Attitude during Study

The third implication concerns the attitude with which we approach Bible study. We need an attitude of humility. If the Bible is God speaking, then we should not be too quick to speak ourselves, before we have listened well to him. Humpty Dumpty got it right: the question is which is to be master. If there is a God and he speaks, then his word is authoritative, a master's word, calling for reverence and submission. If there is a God and he speaks, then we will be full of prayer and supplication for his help as we take in his Word. "Your hands have made and fashioned me," humbly prays the psalmist; "give me understanding that I may learn your commandments" (Ps. 119:73).

We have to keep acknowledging the fact that each person brings unique contexts and experiences to Scripture's words, all of which will affect the process of understanding them. An attitude of humility will lead us to examine rather than simply acknowledge this state of affairs. After such acknowledgment, should we not go on to ask how we can keep our contexts and experiences from turning into hard interpretive grids? How

can we more and more fully open ourselves, each with our marvelous uniqueness, to become those in whom the Word can dwell richly? How can we learn to receive these words in ways that will please the God who spoke them? We will discuss various approaches and questions that can help. But perhaps most fundamental is the attitude of our hearts—humility that fears God and knows the weight of his Word.

Connecting the words of Scripture to the God who speaks them with his very breath restores in us that attitude toward the Word found in the Word: one of fear and trembling. It's also an attitude of delight and joy and wonder, as we will discuss, but it's consistently an attitude of humble fear. After rehearsing the works of God proclaimed in his Word, the prophet Habakkuk stops and says:

I hear, and my body trembles;
my lips quiver at the sound;
rottenness enters into my bones;
my legs tremble beneath me. (Hab. 3:16)

The apostle Peter, even as he wrote inspired words explaining the inspiration of Scripture, took on a solemn tone as he affirmed the surety of the prophetic word, “to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19). That beautiful admonishment should rouse in us not only wonder that God should speak through his Word, but also a humble fear that compels us to pay attention and listen prayerfully.

To start with the truth that the Bible is God speaking gives us the most important perspective when we gather to study the Bible. The next truth encourages us as we begin to handle the words.