

# BIBLICAL APPLICATION

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## *Wonderful Words of Life*

### SCRIPTURE FOCUS

*“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Romans 15:4*

*“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17*

*“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Hebrews 4:12*

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### QUOTES

*“We ask that the words of Scriptures may also be not just signs on a page, but channels of grace into our hearts.” Origen*

*“Lord, as I read the psalms, let me hear you singing. As I read your words, let me hear you speaking. As I reflect on each page, let me see your image. And as I seek to put your precepts into practice, let my heart be filled with joy.” Gregory of Nazianzus*

*“God himself has condescended to teach me the way [to heaven]. He has written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book of God. Let me be a man of one book.” John Wesley*

*“When you read God’s Word, you must constantly be saying to yourself, ‘It is talking to me and about me.’” Søren Kierkegaard*

*“The Word of God well understood and religiously obeyed is the shortest route to spiritual*

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perfection. And we must not select a few favorite passages to the exclusion of others. Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian.” A. W. Tozer

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this session, cross-cultural witness candidates should:

- embrace the centrality of the Bible for Christian living, worship, and witness;
- recognize the necessity of biblical interpretation in the missionary task and know how to go about the interpretive process; and
- be able to help others, especially new believers, read the Bible more carefully, understand the Bible more fully, and apply the Bible more faithfully.

Biblical interpretation and application are necessary competencies for the cross-cultural witness. Not only must she be able to interpret and apply Scripture for herself but she must be able to lead others to do the same. Along with the skills necessary to give witness, learn a language, and survive culture shock, the cross-cultural witness must ably interpret and apply Scripture. The Bible is more than the rationale and reason for missions. It is the basis upon which new converts are to understand life and live as followers of Jesus Christ. One of the chief assignments of the cross-cultural witness is to lead new believers to embrace, interpret and live Scripture.

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### THE B-I-B-L-E, NOW THAT’S THE BOOK FOR ME

“Sing them over again to me, Wonderful words of life; Let me more of their beauty see, Wonderful words of life; Words of life and beauty, Teach me faith and duty: Beautiful words, wonderful words, Wonderful words of life; Beautiful words, wonderful words, Wonderful words of life.”

You may be familiar with this hymn by the American composer Philip P. Bliss (1838-1876), and it may well capture your sentiments and commitments regarding Scripture.

The Bible is so valuable, but we must do much more than sing and speak about it. We should read it, learn it, strive to understand it, seek to live by it, and attempt to help others to do the same. This lesson on biblical interpretation and application is not only written to offer general information about the contents of the Bible, but it is also intended to help candidates interpret Scripture more faithfully and insightfully for themselves and others. Additionally, this lesson aims to instill within new believers a hunger for Scripture that they, in turn, will share with others.

#### **Six Interpretive Vignettes**

Before we begin to learn more about the Bible in general and biblical interpretation and application in particular, let’s consider a number of examples that illustrate the challenge and importance of the subject at hand. Each of these illustrates how easy it is to misinterpret the Bible.

**John 3:30** – The best I can recall, it was not until my junior year in high school that I became serious about reading, studying, and memorizing the Bible. At first, I was directed and drawn to various notable and quotable passages scattered throughout Scripture. One verse that arrested my attention and won my affection was John 3:30: “*He must increase, but I must decrease.*” Neglecting the preceding and following verses, I understood this text to mean that Jesus must become greater and Todd must become lesser.

Subsequently, I learned that such an understanding was not without biblical support (see, e.g., Galatians 2:20). I also discovered, however, that I had confused biblical interpretation with personal application. Upon closer examination, I noted that John the Baptist was speaking regarding his role as the forerunner of the Messiah (John 3:28). Given that he was to be “best man” and not the “groom” (John 3:29), John was to “stand down” so that Jesus might “stand up.” John was not the Messiah, and now that the Messiah had come, it was in keeping with God’s plan for his ministry to give way to that of the “*Lamb of God*” (see John 1:20, 29, 36). Having now served as an interim pastor on numerous occasions, I have an enhanced appreciation for John’s role and remark. As the interim pastor, my role must eventually be to decrease, so that the new pastor can increase.

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**Colossians 2:21** – Along the way, I also recall hearing of a youth speaker who preached a sermon based upon Colossians 2:21 – “*Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.*” I was told that the communicator used these biblical prohibitions to denounce premarital sex on the one hand and drinking on the other. Although Paul opposes marital infidelity (1 Corinthians 7:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5) and drunkenness (1 Thessalonians 5:6-8; Ephesians 5:18), that was not his purpose for penning Colossians 2:21. In fact, as the surrounding verses reveal, Paul was standing against certain Colossian ascetics who were suggesting that true spiritual piety required “*severe treatment of the body.*” While such regulations have “*an appearance of wisdom,*” the apostle insists that they “*are of no value in checking self-indulgence*” (Colossians 2:23).

**3 John 2** – Another verse that I have sometimes heard misinterpreted over the years is 3 John 2. There, the “elder” writes, “*Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.*” Some preachers have taken this wish-prayer and well wish from the writer to the original recipients as a promise for the physical wellbeing of contemporary Christians. Furthermore, such ministers have frequently asserted in conjunction with this line of interpretation that God wants his children to prosper financially. They frequently conclude, then, that if people are not physically whole and fiscally flush then there is sin in their life of which they need to repent. To read a promise of “health and wealth” out of this biblical text requires one to bring such a perspective to the text. Students of Scripture should make exegesis (to read meaning out of a passage) not eisegesis (to read meaning into a text) their aim.

**Proverbs 22:6** – Turning to an Old Testament example, it is not atypical for Proverbs 22:6 to be read as a divine promise. This verse states, “*Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.*” As a parent of two boys whom I love very much and for whom I pray God’s very best, I wish that this passage was a promise. Unfortunately, it is a basic principle, not a specific promise. As Douglas Stuart observes, “What Proverbs does say is that, all things being equal,

there are basic attitudes and patterns of behavior that will help a person grow into responsible adulthood.”<sup>1</sup>

**Philippians 3:2** – We now turn to an example drawn from Raymond Davis’s volume *Fire on the Mountain*. A group of Ethiopian Christians, Davis recalls, was visiting in a missionary’s home.

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When the missionary family’s dog approached these African believers, they were seemingly afraid. Being assured that the terrier was a family pet and would not hurt them, they indicated to the missionary that they were not afraid. Rather, they recoiled because of their conviction that

Christians should not have dogs as pets, for Paul had written in Philippians 3:2 to “Beware of the dogs.” If their spiritual intentions were noble, their interpretive skills needed honing. The apostle was not condemning dogs per se; rather, he was warning the Philippians of potential opponents, at whom he hurls the unflattering epithet “dogs,” lest they have a negative effect upon their faith.

**Revelation** – As a final example, let us turn to one of the most controversial and misunderstood biblical books—Revelation. Not a few confident interpreters assure people that Revelation is to be read literally and as a “road map” or “blueprint” for the end times. Seizing upon the desire of some people to know the future with painstaking accuracy, many self-fashioned experts are more than happy to pull back the veil and provide all the fine details of the end of time. While Revelation does declare that God will in due course draw all things to his desired end through Jesus Christ, the book is not intended to give us a “blow by blow” account of the culmination of human history. Instead, John the Seer expresses deep-seated theological convictions through the luxuriant use of symbol as he calls churches in Asia Minor (and beyond) to be a faithful people until Christ comes. Regarding Jesus’ return, C. S. Lewis remarks: “1) That he will certainly return. 2) That we cannot possibly find out when. 3) And that, therefore, we must always be ready for him.”<sup>2</sup>

**REFLECT #1**

1. List below particular Scripture passages that you have come to understand more fully over time.
2. Can you remember a time when you thought someone was misinterpreting the Bible? What was the Scripture passage and how did you respond?
3. It has been suggested that when it comes to Scripture there is one interpretation and many applications. How confident ought we be in claiming that we have understood the original intention of the author?
4. If the possibility exists to misunderstand or misinterpret Scripture within one’s own culture and language, how likely is this possibility within another culture and with another language?

**WHY IS CAREFUL AND FAITHFUL INTERPRETATION SO IMPORTANT?**

If we do not carefully and diligently interpret Scripture, any interpretation and, by extension, any application will do. Without proper interpretation, we will be unable to make faithful application of what Scripture teaches. A common sense or naïve reading of Scripture may sound nice and quaint but such a reading has given license to many to misuse and misappropriate Scripture for what they intended to do anyway. Careful interpretation serves as corrective less we make Scripture mean more than what is intended or whatever we wish

for it to mean. In the end, interpretative principles and tools place us under Scripture and the weight of its instruction rather than over it, as its arbitrary judge.

### THE BIBLE: WHAT IS IN IT, AND HOW DID IT COME TO BE?

Before taking up specific principles of interpretation and application, let's explore the Bible – what is in it and how did it come to be. Protestant Bibles are comprised of two testaments and sixty-six books (*Biblia*).<sup>3</sup> Taken together, there are thirty-nine Old Testament and twenty-seven New Testament documents. Both testaments are arranged according to *genre* or literary category. The Old Testament commences with the Law or Torah (also known as the Pentateuch [meaning “five scrolls”]). Following Genesis—Deuteronomy are the Writings. This broad-ranging category, which contains seventeen documents, commences with Joshua and continues through the Song of Songs. The third and final genre, the Prophets, is also comprised of seventeen books, beginning with the “major prophets” (Isaiah—Daniel) and concluding with the “minor prophets” or “Book of the Twelve” (Hosea—Malachi). The New Testament commences with the Gospels (the Synoptics [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] and the Fourth Gospel [John]). A History follows (Acts). Thereafter, there are thirteen epistles attributed to Paul (nine to congregations [Romans—2 Thessalonians] and four to persons [1 Timothy—Philemon]), Hebrews (sometimes mistakenly attributed to Paul), and seven letters associated with the pillar apostles (i.e., Peter [1—2 Peter], James [James and Jude], and John [1—3 John]). The Apocalypse or Revelation stands at the end of the New Testament canon.

For the Christian, there is a discernible progression found in Scripture. In Genesis, the book of beginnings, there is *creation*. The fellowship that human beings experienced with God, however, was sullied by sin. In response to the fall, God calls Abram and forms a *covenant* with him and subsequently with the people of Israel. Although God's people are more and less faithful, in keeping with his character God

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continues to offer them providential guidance and care. Indeed, the Old Testament is replete with stories of divine intervention as well as judgment and is no less full of accounts of human trust in and disbelief toward God. “*In the fullness of time*,” as Paul puts it, “*God sent his Son*” (Galatians 4:4). The New Testament in general and the Gospels in particular bear witness to Jesus as the Christ. The Gospel of John declares that the Word “*came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*” (John 1:11). Among other factors, human opposition led to Jesus' crucifixion. Be that as it may, God did not “*let [his] Holy One undergo decay*” (Acts 2:27; cf. Psalm 16:10). Rather, he raised him up. As a result, the *church* was begun and charged to be a winsome witness for Christ in the world until the *consummation* of all things in Christ at his coming.

Far from falling out of heaven on golden plates, the Christian Scriptures were written by people as they were inspired and enabled by God (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). In the first instance, the books that now comprise the Bible were written to (in)form original audiences about various matters pertaining to life and faith. Over time, the initial recipients preserved, copied, and circulated these works so that in due course a collection of documents emerged. At least by the middle of the fourth century AD, the Christian canon of Scripture, as we know it, was formed. Throughout this process, one can perceive the work of the Spirit in both the production and preservation of the Scriptures, which we consider and call the Word of God.

**REFLECT #2**

1. Have you ever considered the contents of Scripture? What is in the Bible, what is not there, and how what is there got there? If not, take time to orient yourself to what is known as the canonization process. What are your thoughts about the formation of the biblical canon?
2. Think about the order of the Christian Scriptures. Trace the *metanarrative* from Genesis to Revelation. For a useful introduction to the “big Story of Scripture,” see <http://www.postmodernpreaching.net/metanarrative.htm>. Be ready to tell this story as briefly and succinctly as possible.
3. How do you describe Scripture? Are terms such as inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility, authority, and the like meaningful to you? Is it important for believers to use the same terminology when talking about the Bible? Is it essential that Christians think the same way about the Bible?

HOW ARE WE TO INTERPRET SCRIPTURE?

“God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” Or, so the saying goes. While one may affirm the conviction that gave rise to this slogan, it fails to take into account the always necessary and often rigorous interpretive task. Even as the Bible did not just appear out of the blue one day, understanding the Scriptures is not always as simple and straightforward as some have made it out to be. While a picture is worth a thousand words, a picture often needs a thousand words. The same may be said about the Bible. Even though the basic biblical message is clear enough, one can gain additional insight and nuance through careful, disciplined study.

Ideally, we would all be able to read the Bible in the languages in which the books were originally written (i.e., Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament). Unfortunately, not all of us have the time, opportunity, or aptitude to do so.

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Thankfully, we are the beneficiaries of many fine English translations. For most of us, the interpretive process will begin with reading time and again a given biblical text in English translation. I am often asked which translation of the Bible I would recommend. For the purpose of Bible study, I would commend more literal translations like the (New) American Standard

Bible and the (New) Revised Standard Bible.<sup>4</sup> Using such translations as an interpretive baseline, you may then compare more dynamic renderings like the (Today’s) New International Version and subsequently a paraphrase such as *The Message*.

After reading and comparing the passage you are studying in various translations, you will want to begin to dig a little deeper. Take note of punctuation and transitions. Jot down unfamiliar and recurring terms. Consult an exhaustive concordance to discover other places in Scripture where words of interest and import are found. Trace and read the cross-references given in the margins or at the bottom of the page. If you are using a Study Bible, read the notes set forth at the bottom of the page. (Remember, however, that these notes are not Scripture!) In an effort to know more about biblical places, people, or customs, utilize Bible atlases, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. Having done so, you will likely find it profitable to consult biblical commentaries. These resources will (hopefully) assist you in understanding the text more fully. Commentaries vary in purpose and perspective. You would do well to

consult with a trusted pastor or Bible teacher regarding commentaries and other Bible study tools.<sup>5</sup>

Once you have ascertained with the help of others what the Scripture “meant,” as one called and charged to make the Bible meaningful and relevant to others you will want to seek to discern and communicate the biblical “vision” to others. For the minister/missionary, the proclamation and application of Scripture should stand in a symbiotic relationship with interpretation of Scripture. Fortunately, God’s Word is forever fresh, and with industry, imagination, and unction, we can bring it alive for the people whom we are privileged to share and serve.

**REFLECT #3**

1. Why do you think that biblical interpretation is necessary?
2. Which biblical translation do you use most often? Why?
3. Describe your thoughts about your role in interpreting and preaching/teaching the Bible to others.
4. Do you find biblical interpretation or biblical application easier? Why do you think such is the case?

### TEACHING OTHERS TO LOVE THE SCRIPTURES

Our ministerial task is to reproduce reproducers. Stated otherwise, we are to disciple people who will in turn disciple people (see Matthew 28:19). As ministers and missionaries, we are “*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:12). Part of the work of ministry is “*to divide rightly the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15). In order for believers to grow in godliness and Christ-likeness, they will need to be able to read, interpret, and teach the Scriptures, too. What can we do to help them toward this end?

To begin, we can model for them an appreciation for and devotion to the Bible and the God revealed therein. If it is true that Christianity is caught as well as taught (and I think it is), then we want those with whom and to whom we minister to catch our love for and commitment to the Scriptures. Like Ezra of old, we want to “*set [our hearts] to study the law of the Lord and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances [to others]*” (Ezra 7:10).

Beyond modeling, we can instruct those under our pastoral watch to **read the Bible carefully**. There is no substitute for habitual, continual reading of the Bible. Biblical illiteracy is widespread among believers, and we would all do well to read the Bible again for the first time. We can also encourage them to **read the Bible prayerfully**. A. B. Bruce, a nineteenth century, Scottish New Testament scholar, would often carry out his interpretive work with the following sentence prayer written on a piece of paper: “O send out Thy light and Thy truth.” This posture toward Scripture is instructive and commendable. Another, final suggestion we can offer is to **read the Bible communally**. Reading the Bible in times of prayerful, private devotion is essential for Christian growth and wellbeing. No less important is reading and reflecting upon the Scriptures with saints and scholars. Scripture should not only feature in worship, but a steady diet of Bible study with other believers is also vital for Christian flourishing.

The Bible is a gift to the church and is in no way the special preserve of specialists and experts.

**REFLECT #4**

1. In Psalm 119:97, the psalmist exclaims, “Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.” Does this statement capture your view of Scripture? Why, or why not?
2. Rich Mullins once wrote, “It won’t do to preach on Matthew if you have not yet read Mark.” Do you read the Bible regularly? If not, do you think that you can encourage others to do so with integrity? What are some practical steps that you can take to “hide God’s Word in your heart”?
3. Why is it important for all believers to “gobble up” and “grapple with” Scripture?
4. How can we help to combat biblical illiteracy?

TEACHING OTHERS: EZRA, SCHOLAR AND PRACTITIONER OF THE LAW

Ezra is the only scribe, that is, doctor of Jewish law, named in Scripture about whom we know much of anything. Ezra was among the Jewish people who came to Jerusalem from Babylonia in the 5th century BC. He was, according to Ezra 7:6, a “scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord the God of Israel had given.” It was Ezra’s passion and ambition to learn, interpret, practice, and teach the law (Ezra 7:10).

The Jewish people who had and were returning from Babylonian exile were not living in keeping with the law. This was due in no small part to their ignorance of the law. Therefore, Ezra (and others) read the law to the people and interpreted for the people. Furthermore, Ezra instructed leaders in the law so that they, too, might live according to its ordinances and encourage others to do the same.

It is possible that your cross-cultural calling will lead you to places where people have no knowledge of or appreciation for the Bible. In such contexts, you, not unlike Ezra of old, will be responsible for helping people to learn about and to live by the Scriptures. In whatever locale you labor, the Bible and the gospel should be central, and you will serve as a scribe of sorts. On one occasion Jesus said to his disciples, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (Matthew 13:52). Yours is the sacred trust of knowing and sharing the Scriptures in such a manner that others will encounter the One we call Master.

All the while we must recall that Jesus reserved his harshest criticism for those scribes (and Pharisees) who failed to practice what they taught (Matthew 23:3). Their sense of their own importance led to pretense and arrogance. Jesus scolds them, calling them “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “blind fools,” “whitewashed tombs,” and “snakes” (Matthew 23:13, 16, 17, 23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 31). If we are to avoid deceiving ourselves and misleading others, we must acknowledge Jesus as Teacher, God as Father, and ourselves as humble students and servants (Matthew 23:8-12).

**REFLECT #5**

1. Recall teachers of Scripture who have shaped you. What was it about them that you valued and would like to emulate?
2. If you are trying to teach a person who knows little to nothing about the Bible, where might you begin and why?
3. Read and reflect upon James 3:1.



## EXAMPLES TO FOLLOW

Biblical interpreters are legion, and interpretive approaches proliferate. Selecting but four examples would be comical if it were not so excruciatingly difficult. I have chosen four interpreters whom I (and hopefully you will!) find to be inherently interesting. The four biblical interpreters I have chosen for us to consider are Julian of Norwich, J. B. Lightfoot, Jerome, and Bruce M. Metzger. Given their unique gifts and contexts, these people are not easily imitated. That being said, we can certainly learn from their lives and work.

### Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-after 1416)<sup>6</sup>

“Little is known of the actual life of the woman who came to be known as Julian of Norwich, an anchoress who spent the latter decades of her life living in an anchor hold, a small cell attached to the parish church of St. Julian’s in Conesford, Norwich [England].”<sup>7</sup> As an anchoress, Julian’s vocation was that of private prayer. She carried out her vocation from a small room, which probably had two windows. Although Julian lived the life of a hermit, she would have had some interaction with others, not least which with those who sought her spiritual counsel and pastoral care.



At the age of thirty, Julian suffered from a severe illness. During this time of illness, she claims to have received a series of sixteen visions or “showings.” Julian reports and reflects upon these visions in her two surviving works. The first, or so-called Short Text, is entitled *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, whereas the second, or Long Text, bears the title *A Revelation of Love*. In neither of these volumes does Julian engage in biblical commentary or exposition per se. She does, however, invite readers to ruminate upon certain biblical texts, including, for example, the Gospel narratives of Jesus’ Passion.

Moving from “bodily facts,” Julian calls her readers to probe a given passage for theological understanding and spiritual insight. She not only enjoins readers to plumb the depths of texts, but she also enables such probing through her meditative, imaginative reflections upon biblical narratives, especially the Passion. In seeking to expound and expand upon “the living meaning of the story,” Julian sometimes cites Scripture and frequently alludes to biblical passages and employs biblical images. Like a gifted preacher, Julian encourages her fellow Christians to “widen the biblical account by bringing the reader face to face...with Jesus Christ...in order to respond to questions about the meaning of the passion, sin, redemption and so forth.”<sup>8</sup>

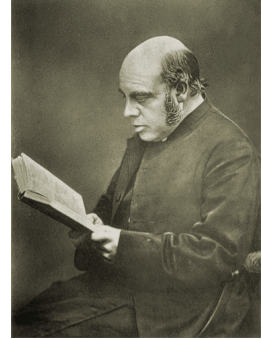
In some respects, Julian’s surviving works are akin to other visionary literature from the medieval period. More than an esoteric exercise, however, Julian’s aim in writing was both theological and pastoral. She employed her visions to offer others “assurance, guidance, and consolation.” In so doing, “Hers becomes a public theology of consolation for those facing suffering, shame, and anguish.”<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, although Julian described herself as “a simple, unlettered creature,” Rowan Williams, presently the Archbishop of Canterbury, considers her to be among “the great theological prophets of the Church’s history” and regards her writings as “the most important

work of Christian reflection in the English language.” Moreover, the influence of Julian upon the likes of C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot is verifiable. Julian stands as a testament to the fact that God frequently uses the simple and sincere to instruct his people about his Word. She knew what we ought to know— “All shall be well. All shall be well. All manner of things shall be well.”<sup>10</sup>

### Joseph Barber Lightfoot (1828-1889)<sup>11</sup>

J. B. Lightfoot was born in Liverpool, England in 1828. At the age of fifteen, he moved with his family to Birmingham, where he enrolled in King Edward’s school. Four years later, Lightfoot enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge. There, he distinguished himself not only as a student but also subsequently as a professor. Graduating in 1851 at the top of his class, he was elected as a fellow of Trinity College in 1852. Later, he was appointed Hulsean Professor of Divinity (1861) and Lady Margaret’s Professor (1875) respectively. After spending twenty-two years in academic pursuits at Cambridge, Lightfoot became the Bishop of Durham in 1879. He served in this ecclesial capacity until his death in 1889 at the age of sixty-one.



Lightfoot was a productive, if not overly prolific, scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity. In addition to commentaries on Galatians (1865), Philippians (1868), and Colossians (1875), he also produced various essays on Paul’s letters (1895) and other biblical materials (1893) as well as on the apostolic age (1892). Furthermore, he published studies on Clement of Rome (1869 [1890]), Ignatius, and Polycarp (1885). This writer can attest to the fact that his careful historical and exegetical work remains invaluable for the student of Scripture.

In his treatment of Lightfoot, James D. G. Dunn, Lightfoot Professor Emeritus at Durham University, maintains that the work of the one after whom his academic chair is named emphasized the primacy of original sources, linguistic meaning in context, historical context, and interpretive restraint. In Dunn’s estimation, Lightfoot’s “commitment to historical inquiry, his expertise in historical texts and the measured quality of his finding mark him out as probably the finest commentator on early Christian texts that Great Britain has ever produced.”<sup>12</sup>

In addition to his considerable intellectual prowess and his significant academic achievements, Lightfoot’s commitment and contribution to the church should be noted. As Bishop of Durham, he superintended the establishment of nearly fifty churches and served as a pioneer in supporting and promoting the ministry of laity, including women, in the Church of England. Far from seeing academic endeavors as divorced from the church, he “showed how faith and critical scholarship can be important allies.” In fact, Lightfoot may be regarded as “the model of scrupulously judicious critical scholarship in service of truth [and of the church].”<sup>13</sup>

### Jerome (c. 340-420)<sup>14</sup>

Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus is more widely known simply as Jerome. Born in the Roman province of Dalmatia, as a teenager he moved to Rome to engage in rhetorical and philosophical studies. During his lifetime, he would also live, among other places, in Antioch

in Syria, Constantinople, and Bethlehem. Jerome was an accomplished biblical scholar who devoted the majority of his life to translating and interpreting Scripture.

Jerome is best known for the version of the Latin Bible known as the Vulgate. Over the course of roughly twenty years, Jerome not only translated the Gospels from Greek into Latin (other now unknown persons appear to have rendered the remainder of the New Testament) but he also translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Latin. The importance of the Vulgate is difficult to overestimate. Indeed, it served as the Bible for the Western Church for well over a thousand years (c. 400-1530). Jerome also translated the works of certain Greek theologians, namely, Eusebius, Origen, and Didymus the Blind into Latin.



In addition to his considerable and influential translation work, Jerome was also a writer of commentaries. Old Testament commentaries written by him (in seeming chronological order) include Jonah, Obadiah, Isaiah, Zechariah, Malachi, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Daniel, Ezekiel, and (portions of) Jeremiah. His commentaries on the New Testament, roughly in chronological order, are as follows: Philemon, Galatians, Ephesians, Titus, Matthew, Mark, Luke (in part), Revelation, and the prologue to John.

For Jerome, the role of the biblical interpreter was “to discuss what is obscure, to touch on the obvious, [and] to dwell at length on what is doubtful” (*Commentary on Galatians* 4.6). He also thought it incumbent upon the commentator to “repeat the opinions of many...so that the judicious reader...may judge which is the best and, like a good banker, reject the money from a spurious mint” (*Apology Against Rufinus* 1.16). Even if we can never attain Jerome’s learnedness, we have much to learn from the one who remarked, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (*Prologue to the Commentary on Isaiah*).

#### **Bruce Manning Metzger (1914-2007)<sup>15</sup>**

Pennsylvania-born biblical scholar Bruce M. Metzger “was seen by most of his colleagues as the greatest textual specialist of the New Testament that the United States has produced.”<sup>16</sup> After having studied Latin, Greek, German and French at Lebanon Valley College, Metzger enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1935. After graduating in 1938, he stayed on at the seminary to pursue a master’s degree in theology. Then in 1939, he began to pursue a Ph.D. in classics at Princeton University.



He earned his Ph.D. in 1942. Upon completion of his terminal degree, he continued to teach New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he had begun to serve as instructor in 1940. (Previously, he worked for two years as a teaching fellow for the Seminary.) As it happens, Metzger would spend his entire career at Princeton Seminary, where he moved through the academic ranks. For the last twenty years of his teaching career, he served as the Collard Professor of New Testament Language and Literature. Taken together, Metzger taught forty-six years at Princeton Seminary.

While Metzger worked all his life at Princeton, his life’s work was to study, translate, and share

the Scripture, particularly the New Testament. Metzger expended much of his energy and devoted much of his skill to the production of various editions of the Greek New Testament and to offering commentary thereon. He also played a leading role on the translation committees that produced the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version. In addition, it was Metzger's love for the Bible and his desire to place it in the hands of rank and file people that led him to serve as the editor of the *Reader's Digest Condensed Bible*.

During the course of his illustrious career, Metzger also produced a number of scholarly studies, wrote a serviceable introduction to the New Testament, and published lay-friendly commentaries on Galatians, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. Like Jerome, Julian of Norwich, and J. B. Lightfoot, Metzger "crafted his scholarship for the service of the believing and worshipping community." For him, the Bible was "an object of empirical scholarly analysis but also divine revelation that fed his soul with consolation and inspired his spirit with transcendental truth."<sup>17</sup> For all of their differences, the four examples treated here shared the belief that the Bible was of inestimable worth because of the witness it bears of a Lord who is more precious than silver, costly than gold, and beautiful than diamonds.

### **Paul: Interpreter of Scripture, Student of Culture**

One of the best examples of an interpreter of Scripture is the Apostle Paul. Among other things, we tend to think of Paul as a writer of letters that were later regarded as Scripture. And so he was. The apostle was also, however, an interpreter of Scripture as some of his letters clearly indicate. Paul regarded Scripture, more than less analogous to our Old Testament, to be of ongoing significance and value for his largely Gentile churches. For example, Paul writes the following in Romans 15:4: "*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope*" (see also 1 Corinthians 10:11). Furthermore, Paul saw Scripture as more than a human record of divine revelation. He perceived Scripture as an active force and relevant resource for life in Christ (note Galatians 3:8, 22).

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As a cross-cultural missionary, the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles sought to bring biblical insights to bear on various challenges and controversies that arose in the churches that he planted. For example, in Corinth, some believers, the so-called "strong," believed that it was perfectly acceptable to continue eating meals (especially meat) in the temples of deities, referred to by Paul as idols. Other Corinthian believers, however,

the so-called "weak," were scandalized by such a suggestion, not to mention by such action. Paul's task (and ours!) was to apply the Bible and the gospel to this matter arising. How did he seek to do so? We learn how from 1 Corinthians 8–10.

In the first instance, Paul concurs with the strong who maintained that idols only exist in the imagination of individuals. Paul thought and taught that there is only one God and one Lord (8:4-6). That being said, Paul was also aware that pride comes before the fall and that those who think they stand should take heed lest they fall. Indeed, the Bible is full of examples—not least Israel—of those who succumbed to temptation and stumbled so as to fall (1 Corinthians 10:1-13). Therefore, Paul counsels the Corinthians to recognize that "*the earth and its fullness*

are the Lord's" (1 Corinthians 10:27 quoting Psalm 24:1). As a result, they may eat meat without asking about its origins. However, they should refrain from wittingly eating meat sacrificed to idols for the sake of the conscience of weaker believers (1 Corinthians 10:27-28). Furthermore, the strong should avoid frequenting temples and consuming temple meals (meat) altogether (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). Christian freedom, Paul insists, is to be tempered by the wellbeing of other believers (1 Corinthians 9).

As one who will bear witness for Christ in a cross-cultural context, you will do well to take a page out of the Pauline playbook. The apostle was aware of cultural customs and patterns and was simultaneously attuned to the needs and the concerns of his converts. Furthermore, he was able to apply biblical passages and theological principles to issues arising. Paul was a missionary theologian. We are called to be the same.

**REFLECT #6**

1. Are there certain "teachers of the church" whom you enjoy reading? Who are they, and why do you gravitate toward them?
2. Can you think of other instances in Paul (or elsewhere in Scripture) where biblical and theological convictions are applied to particular congregational or missional problems?
3. Recall a situation where you or someone you know has responded to a pastoral / missionary challenge or need with the aid of the Bible and the gospel.

## BECOMING A STUDENT AND TEACHER OF SCRIPTURE

It is my prayer that the Bible will be foundational for your life and ministry. In concluding this lesson, I would like to offer a number of suggestions as to how this lofty and worthy goal can be realized.

- *Become a reader of Scripture.* Do you read the Bible regularly? Have you ever read the Bible through in its entirety? Have you read all of the New Testament? Do you have a plan for daily, systematic Scripture reading? Do you know the books and basic contents of the Bible? Do you have a hunger for Scripture? I trust that you can answer all of these questions with a resounding yes. In the event that you cannot, press on until you can.
- *Hide Scripture in your heart.* Mediate and ruminate on portions on Scripture. Read them aloud. Turn them over time and again in your mind. Seek to memorize passages that are particularly meaningful to you and your ministry. If you had no access to the Bible in printed or electronic form, how much Scripture would you have at your disposal?
- *Secure resources that will enable you to be a more faithful student of Scripture.* The building of at least a basic biblical study library is helpful for in-depth study. If at all possible, seek to have electronic access to multiple Bible translations, an exhaustive concordance, a Bible atlas, dictionary, and encyclopedia, and commentaries. In building your biblical study library, consult a trusted pastor or teacher. A basic rule of thumb is this: do not purchase items that you intend to read or use just once.
- *Listen to and learn from other interpreters and proclaimers of Scripture.* Identify ministers and missionaries who incite in you a passion for the Bible. "Sit at their feet." Let them teach you so that you might better teach others.
- *"Preach the Word."* There is no substitute for actually teaching and preaching the

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Bible. Preparation and presentation of lessons and sermons will stretch you to become a more skilled and more sensitive student and steward of Scripture. Remember, “God can hit a good lick with a crooked stick.”

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### SO WHAT?

The following suggestions should help you to know best how to become a better and more faithful interpreter of Scripture, as you prepare to serve cross-culturally.

#### **Imagine**

Imagine that you are with a group of new believers in a place with very few Christians and limited resources. They come to you with a culturally specific issue related to how they will live faithfully in their city. How will you go about providing a biblically informed response? How will you teach them to read and interpret Scripture for themselves?

#### **Lifestyle**

Prayerfully consider if you are applying to your own life what you know and understand Scripture to teach. In what ways are you not “walking the walk,” only teaching but not doing the Word of God? Take time to be alone this week and note in what areas you are “*a hearer of the word and not a doer*” (James 1:23).

#### **Formation**

Aside from what you hear in public worship and preaching, are you reading, meditating on, and memorizing Scripture? Part of your and my discipleship is deciding to turn down the volume of the media around us and turn up the volume of the divine revelation so that we might hear God speak to us. This does not just happen but must become a habit of life.

#### **Life-on-Life**

As has already been mentioned, Scripture is to be read and interpreted in the context of community. Are you reading and studying Scripture with others? Do you have teachers and friends with whom you are able to discuss and pray about how best to understand and apply Scripture?

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## PRINCIPLES AND SUMMARY

A number of principles from the lives of these Bible interpreters should help us as we seek to faithfully interpret and apply Scripture. Even though we may not be a seminary professor or be able to read Greek and Hebrew, we still have the responsibility of “*accurately handling the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15), so what principles should guide us?

- We should approach Scripture prayerfully, asking that the Holy Spirit guide us as interpret and apply it to our lives.
- We should use every tool available at our disposal to interpret Scripture.
- We should call upon the writings and services of those whom God has gifted to the church as skilled interpreters of Scripture.
- Scripture must be viewed as more than ancient document but divine revelation.

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- In order to faithfully apply Scripture to life situations, we must be aware of cultural customs and patterns.
- The study and interpretation of Scripture are best done in the context of ministry.
- “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”

The Bible is a cherished guide for our lives as believer and the basis upon which we live our lives and minister in Christ's name. It is supremely important that we do more than cherish the Bible but that we faithfully read it, interpret its meaning, live by its commandments, and lead others to do the same.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 231.

<sup>2</sup>C. S. Lewis, “The World’s Last Night,” in *Fern-Seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1975), 65-85 (on 79).

<sup>3</sup>Jewish Bibles include the books of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Tanakh (commonly referred to by Christians as the Old Testament). Most modern Jewish Bibles are comprised of twenty-four books. Although Protestant Bibles mirror the contents of Jewish Bibles, the order and what constitutes certain divisions and books differ. In Jewish Bibles, the Prophets follow the Torah and precede the Writings. In addition, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are counted among the Prophets, whereas Lamentations and Daniel are classified Writings. Finally, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the “minor prophets” are each counted as one book.

Orthodox and Catholic Bibles not only include the Old and New Testaments, but they also contain the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament. In both the Orthodox and Catholic Bibles, Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach), Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Additions to Daniel (Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon), 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees appear. Furthermore, in Orthodox Bibles, the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, 1—3 Esdras, and 3—4 Maccabees appear.

<sup>4</sup>Although frequently beautiful, I do not recommend the King James Bible for two primary reasons. First of all, the language, if poetic, is archaic. Secondly, and to me more importantly, the translation is based upon inferior Greek manuscripts known as the Textus Receptus (“received text”). The New King James Version presents a double bind: it lacks the beauty of its predecessor while retaining the Textus Receptus. A readable, online orientation to English Bible translations may be found at <http://www.kencollins.com/bible/bible-t2.htm>.

<sup>5</sup>Online Bible study tools can be found at <http://www.biblestudytools.com/>.

<sup>6</sup>Information for this entry is gleaned from Mark S. Burrows, “Julian of Norwich,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 581-85.

<sup>7</sup>Burrows, “Julian of Norwich,” 581.

<sup>8</sup>Burrows, “Julian of Norwich,” 583.



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<sup>9</sup>Burrows, "Julian of Norwich," 583.

<sup>10</sup>Burrows, "Julian of Norwich," 584.

<sup>11</sup>See further James D. G. Dunn, "J(oseph) B(arber) Lightfoot," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 661-65.

<sup>12</sup>Dunn, "Lightfoot," 662.

<sup>13</sup>Dunn, "Lightfoot," 664.

<sup>14</sup>For a fuller introduction to Jerome, see Dennis M. Brown, "Jerome," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 565-71.

<sup>15</sup>See now J. Harold Ellens, "Bruce Manning Metzger," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 728-33.

<sup>16</sup>Ellens, "Metzger," 730.

<sup>17</sup>Ellens, "Metzger," 731.

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