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TRAINING THE MEMBERS OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
OF COMMERCE, OKLAHOMA, TO ENGAGE THE
BIBLE FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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To the people of FBC Commerce.

May this work help you become more like Jesus, together.

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PREFACE

The completion of this project has been exceedingly challenging and rewarding. The project was intended for the discipleship of the people of First Baptist Commerce, but it had profound effects on me as well. As much as ever, I am passionately committed to the Lord, his Word, and the discipleship of this people. I am well aware that this project could not have been completed without the support of many.

First and foremost, I am thankful to God who called me to this work and has been faithful to carry me through it. In his wisdom, he used this process to bring me to the point of utter dependence on him. Without his love and grace this project would have never been attempted or completed.

Second, I am thankful to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as an institution that has deeply changed my life through its biblical training for ministry. I am especially thankful to my supervisor, Dr. Joseph Harrod, who has been a faithful friend and has provided wise guidance every step of the way.

Third, I am thankful to my church family at First Baptist Church Commerce, many of whom have been supporting me and praying for me since I was a child in their student ministry. It is one of the deepest joys of my life to be their pastor.

Finally, I am thankful to my wife, Whitney, and our children, Jayvn, Judah, and Eliza. Through the chaos and grind of this degree, they have loved me and made my life fulfilling.

Tim Osborn

Commerce, Oklahoma

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the Great Commission, Jesus says to his followers, “All authority on heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18–20).¹ Unlike the disciples who were with him on the mountainside that day, Christians today have not spent years learning directly from Jesus in person. However, Christians today still have everything that Jesus commanded them to pass along in the Bible. Engaging the Bible is intrinsically connected to following Jesus. Based on this vital connection between discipleship and engaging the Bible, the First Baptist Church of Commerce, Oklahoma, needs to ensure that its members can engage with God’s Word for the purpose of spiritual growth.

Context

The First Baptist Church of Commerce, Oklahoma (FBC), is located in the northeast corner of Oklahoma. The town of Commerce has approximately 2,500 residents. The church has been a pillar in the community for many years. The church’s size has fluctuated throughout the years but reached a peak of several hundred in the 1970s. Since then, the number of church members has declined to about fifty members. The average attendance of the worship service at this time is approximately forty adults on a Sunday morning. The church leadership consists of a senior pastor and three deacons.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

As with most churches, discipleship is a core value of the church, explicitly mentioned in the church's purpose contained in its constitution and bylaws. The means by which the church accomplishes discipleship is through Sunday school classes, Sunday morning worship services, Sunday evening small groups, and Wednesday morning prayer meetings. Currently, there is one adult Sunday school class and three student Sunday school classes. The Sunday school program uses a curriculum called *The Gospel Project*, which is designed to take the church through the entire Bible in three years. The Sunday morning worship services consist of a call to worship, three to four songs or hymns, and a sermon that is typically expository. The worship services and the Sunday school classes each last an hour. During the Wednesday morning prayer meeting, the pastor leads the church in prayer and a quick Bible study.

The positive aspect of the current model of discipleship is that the programs in place contribute to the overall goal of making disciples by providing exposure to the Word of God through teaching and preaching. This kind of interaction with God's Word is biblical and should be present in every church. The nature of the Bible ensures it will do the work and bring about spiritual growth and Christlikeness in believers who hear it with a trusting heart. While the current model has merit, some aspects are lacking.

First, the current model lacks intentional progress. The programs that occur on Sunday benefit the congregation but do not have a vision for equipping saints with specific skills for the Christian life. There is not a clear goal in mind as the church ministers to its people. The current model could be improved by implementing a series of classes designed to address all the major aspects of discipleship. Members would be able to track their progress through these classes. These classes could be offered at different times throughout the year, and the members could participate in the classes as their schedules allow.

Second, the current model of discipleship assumes prior discipleship. The church is comprised of two categories of members: senior adults and young families. The senior adults are over the age of 60 and have been in church most of their lives. The

young families are comprised of new converts and new members. Both groups would benefit from an intentionally progressive discipleship plan. The senior adults would benefit from returning to the basics of the faith, while the young adults would benefit from being introduced to the basics of the faith. The church is in a prime place to establish an intentionally progressive discipleship plan, beginning with a course on engaging the Bible for spiritual growth.

Rationale

Based on the church's current situation, the most important opportunity for improvement is to develop an intentional process for discipleship. While many aspects of discipleship need to be addressed in such a process, this project focuses on the foundational aspect of Bible engagement. The ability to engage with the Bible is necessary for discipleship. While members of the church can benefit from worship services and Sunday school classes, these events only happen a few times each week. Bible engagement through personal reading and meditation can happen regularly in the life of a believer and produce spiritual growth. Increasing the frequency and quality of Bible engagement is beneficial to both the older and the younger members of the church in several ways.

First, increasing the frequency and quality of Bible intake provides an opportunity for Christlike transformation in the members of FBC. The mission of God is to create a people that reflect his image and his glory. This image was broken in Genesis 3, but through Christ's work on the cross, man may be conformed to the image of his Son and so fulfill his purpose. The primary tool the Lord has given to humans for the shaping of their spiritual lives is the Bible. Second Timothy 3:16–17 says, "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." As the members of FBC learn to increase their Bible engagement regularly, they will have the opportunity to grow in Christlikeness as well.

Second, increasing the frequency and quality of Bible intake allows FBC members to learn more in the regular meetings of the church, like worship services and Sunday school classes. The church values the Word of God. The sermons are typically expository, and the Sunday school classes are centered on biblical theology. Biblical sermons and curricula are beneficial in and of themselves, but a basic familiarity with the Bible unlocks new potential for learning in these environments. As the members of FBC learn to engage the Bible in regularly, they increase their ability to learn in the church's corporate gatherings.

Third, increasing the frequency and quality of Bible engagement equips FBC members with the ability to volunteer for teaching roles. While the church is not large, there is always a need for teachers in various capacities, like children's Sunday school classes, men's breakfasts, and small groups. While there is a need to be filled, it would be unwise to fill those teaching gaps with people unfamiliar with the Bible. As the members of FBC increase their ability to engage with the Bible on a regular basis, they will be better equipped to teach in these roles.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to equip the members of the First Baptist Church of Commerce, Oklahoma, to engage the Bible for spiritual growth.

Goals

This project was measured by the following three goals. These goals were designed to ensure the purpose of this project was accomplished.

1. The first goal was to assess the current attitudes and practices of Bible engagement among the members of the church.
2. The second goal was to develop an eight-week course on how to engage the Bible for spiritual growth.
3. The third goal was to enhance Bible engagement among a group of church members by teaching an eight-week class.

A specific research methodology measured the successful completion of these four goals. This methodology is described in the following section.

Research Methodology

The first goal of this project was to assess the current Bible engagement attitudes and practices of the members of the church. This goal was measured by surveying the congregation through the Bible Engagement Survey.² The survey was designed to provide a picture of the current Bible intake habits of the church members, along with any hindrances that keep them from being able to engage with and study the Bible. This goal was considered met when twenty members of the church completed the survey.

The second goal was to develop an eight-week course on how to engage the Bible for spiritual growth. This goal was measured by submitting the course to a review team consisting of three individuals with sufficient expertise in the area of Bible engagement. This team used a rubric designed to measure the biblical faithfulness and clarity of the course material.³ This goal was considered met when the selected team approved the course.

The third goal was to enhance Bible engagement among a group of church members by teaching an eight-week class. This goal was measured by administering the Bible Engagement Survey to the church members again after the course was completed.⁴ A private code was used to cross-reference the group's first and second completions of the Bible Engagement Survey. This post-course survey was similar to the preliminary assessment, but it also considered the frequency of attendance throughout the eight-week

² See appendix 1. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

³ See appendix 2.

⁴ See appendix 3.

course. This goal was considered met when the data from the surveys were compared and analyzed using a *t*-test.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms are used in the ministry project:

Bible engagement. Bible engagement refers to intentional interaction with the Bible which includes, but is not limited to, activities such as reading, hearing, or meditating on the Bible.

Intake lenses. Intake lenses refers to a mental posture one assumes during Bible intake activities like reading or hearing the Bible.

Three limitations applied to this project. First, the size of the congregation limited the number of potential participants. Second, the personal schedules of participants limited the options for meeting times. To mitigate these limitations, I scheduled the course meeting times to occur on Sunday, which is a day already set aside in the schedule of most members of the congregation. A third limitation was the willingness of the congregation to engage with the surveys honestly. This limitation was mitigated by making the surveys anonymous to make people feel comfortable answering honestly.

Two delimitations applied to this project. First, this project focused on the adult members of FBC. The reason for this delimitation was to allow meaningful follow-up after the completion of this project. Second, the length of the curriculum was limited to eight weeks. The reason for this delimitation was to increase the probability of participant completion.

Conclusion

The Lord has tasked the church with making disciples of all nations. The Bible is the church's primary tool for making disciples. The following chapters examine the role of Bible engagement in discipleship. Chapter 2 will focus on the biblical argument for regular biblical engagement, and chapter 3 will explore the role of biblical

engagement habits in the lives of evangelicals, from the inception of the movement to modern day evangelicals.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR BIBLE INTAKE

A core characteristic of Christianity is its belief in a speaking God. The idols fashioned by the hand and the false deities concocted in the mind are mute. They cannot communicate their character or commands to followers because they do not exist. Yahweh, on the other hand, the biblical Creator God of the universe, invented communication. He created speech, and speaks to create. He created all things with meaning and purpose, including his crowning creation, humans.

The fundamental purpose for every human is conformity to the image of their creator. While humans have rejected God's commands and refused to reflect his image, God has made a way for hopelessly sinful men and women to be reshaped into his image. He accomplished this by sending his Son, "the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb 1:3), into his own creation to die sacrificially for humanity so that they might be forgiven for their sin and "be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29). Jesus commanded his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19–20). Simply put, a disciple is a human who has been redeemed and is seeking to conform to the image of Christ. Thus, the purpose of the people of God is to increase in Christlikeness.

God has not left his people without resources for growing in Christlikeness. The Bible is the primary aid God has given to his people. As mentioned, God is a speaking God who has perfectly encapsulated his character and commands in Scripture. The Bible speaks of itself as "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 Tim 3:16–17). God has given his Word to his people that they might be trained in

righteousness and be equipped for every good work. When Christians are trained in righteousness and equipped for good works, they are conformed to his image. Without regular engagement with the Bible, Christians will struggle to be conformed to his image. Because of the transformative nature of the Scriptures, engagement with God's Word has been a fundamental spiritual discipline for God's people throughout redemptive history.

In this chapter, the importance of Bible engagement in the life of God's people will be demonstrated by an exegetical examination of three passages of scripture, each addressing a different means of Bible engagement. Nehemiah 8 will display the importance of hearing the Word read and explained, Psalm 1 will demonstrate the importance of meditating on the Word, and Psalm 119:9–16 will show the importance of memorizing the Word.

Hearing the Bible: Exposition of Nehemiah 8

The first means of Bible engagement to be explored is hearing the Bible. Considering that Christians did not possess personal copies of the Scripture for most of early Christian history, hearing the Word of God read aloud in public worship was the primary means of taking in the Bible.¹ Combine this with the prevalence of illiteracy throughout history and the world today, and one can see that hearing the Word of God read aloud would likely be the primary means by which someone could engage with the Scriptures. An example of the importance and power of hearing the Word read and explained is found in Nehemiah 8 when Ezra reads the law before the assembly of God's people in Jerusalem upon the completion of the wall and the registering of God's people.

Canonical Context

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the return of the Jewish exiles from captivity. The Babylonian Empire had captured the exiles, but during their captivity the

¹ Justo González, *The Bible in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2022), 66.

Persian Empire, led by King Cyrus, overthrew the Babylonians.² King Cyrus issued a decree to allow the Jewish people to return to their homeland (Ezra 1:1–4). The exiles returned and began to rebuild their society in the land God had given them (Ezra 3). Those who were not taken as prisoners had intermarried with the surrounding nations (Ezra 9); an act the Lord had forbidden (Deut 7:3–4). The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and restoring Israel’s commitment to the Lord.

In the book of Nehemiah, the book’s namesake, Nehemiah, leads the effort to rebuild the wall, and his counterpart, Ezra, leads the people to recommit to their covenant with the Lord. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes (Neh 1:2) and was emboldened by the Lord to request permission from the king to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it (Neh 2:11–8). Ezra was a descendant of Aaron the chief priest (Ezra 7:5) and was a “scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6). God used these two men and their unique stations to renew the nation of Israel physically and spiritually.

The significance of the book of Nehemiah—the rebuilding of the wall and recommitment to the covenant—is enhanced when considering the reason for exile. The author of 2 Chronicles explains that “all the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful,” which led to the Lord bringing “up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword . . . [and] burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem . . . [and] took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword” (36:14–20).

The destruction of the temple and city and the exile of the people were a result of the unfaithfulness to the covenant God had cut between himself and the Israelites.

The two leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, sought to push the people to rebuild the temple and the city physically and to recommit spiritually to the covenant God had graciously given them (Exod 24), a covenant that allowed Israel to enjoy the presence

² This is evidenced by the storyline of the book of Daniel which references the Babylonian reign in Dan 1–10 and later established Medo-Persian reign in Dan 10–12.

and promise of God. Their efforts not only provide a remedy for the problem of exile but seek to prevent further exile through covenant renewal.

Context within the Book

The first portion of the book of Nehemiah describes Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the wall surrounding Jerusalem. The road to rebuilding the wall was met with many obstacles and opposition, but by the end of chapter 6, the wall was finished. God then led Nehemiah to create a genealogy of the inhabitants of the land to help with the just repopulation of the city of Jerusalem.³ This list of the people of God is found in chapter 7, which ends with the final number of the people and acknowledgment of the settled state of the people living in their towns. In chapter 8, the book shifts focus from Nehemiah's effort to rebuild the wall to Ezra's effort of spiritual renewal. Up to this point, the story was told from the first-person perspective of Nehemiah, but now shifts to the third-person perspective of both Ezra and Nehemiah.

The story thus far sets the stage for what is about to happen in chapter 8. The temple had been rebuilt by Jeshua and Zerubbabel, and the walls were rebuilt by Nehemiah. The people had been identified and enlisted in the genealogy by Nehemiah, but there was still work to be done. The return to the land was not complete. The next step was the renewal of commitment to the covenant of God expressed in the Scriptures.

Hearing the Bible as a Corporate Action

The first words of this portion of Scripture state that the people of Israel gathered as "one man." The phrase "as one man" occurs elsewhere in the Bible and often denotes a unified purpose. For example, 2 Samuel 19:14 says, "And he swayed the heart of all the men of Judah as one man, so that they sent word to the king." The phrase here applies to the heart of all the men of Judah in that they were unified in their feelings and agreed to

³ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New American Commentary, vol. 10 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 219.

send word to the king collectively, showing a unified purpose. T. J. Betts affirms this interpretation of the phrase: “Except for a couple of exceptions in the Old Testament, in the meager nine times the phrase “as one man” appears in the Old Testament, it inherently points to the unity of God’s people.”⁴ So the use in Nehemiah 8 is the same, showing that the people of God gathered with a unified purpose of hearing from the law.

It is noteworthy that, while Ezra is the one who reads and explains the law to the people, the people actually initiated the event. Nehemiah 8:1 says, “And they [the people] told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.” The fact that the people called for the reading of the Law further signifies that the congregation was united in their desire. Not only did the people call for the reading of the Word together as one assembly, but they also responded as one. In Nehemiah 8, the people wept together (v. 9), rejoiced together (v. 2), and celebrated the feast of booths together in obedience to the Law (vv. 13–18). These responses will be examined later in this chapter, but the point here is that the response was unified and collective.

Based on these observations, the act of hearing the Bible was a corporate action initiated and carried out by the entire assembly of God’s people. This is not to say that a believer must always hear the Bible in a group setting, but it sets the precedent for hearing it as a community.

Hearing the Bible through Exposition

In Nehemiah 8, the exposition of the Word of God plays a vital role in the experience of the people. They asked Ezra, the scribe well versed in the Law, to open the Book of the Law and read it to them that day. Ezra “had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:10), which

⁴ T. J. Betts, *Nehemiah: A Pastoral and Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 103.

made Ezra a prime candidate to read the Law to the people. His heart was set on learning the Law and teaching it to the people Israel. This passion is exemplified in Nehemiah 8. When Ezra opened the scroll to read, he not only recited the words on the scroll, but he and the other scribes also “gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh 8:8). The people who heard the Law read aloud to them also benefited from Ezra’s explanation of it.

What Ezra and other Levites did when they commented on the Scripture is debated. Some suggest that Ezra and the Levites translated the text to the assembly as they read it.⁵ Derek Kidner, on the other hand, suggests that rendering the word as “translating” would be an unusual use of the word, but acknowledges that both translation and clarification were likely being provided at the time of Ezra’s reading.⁶ Regardless, the passage conveys that the people not only heard the text of the scroll read but also heard an exposition of the text.

One cannot separate the reading of the Law of God and the exposition of it in Nehemiah 8. The length to which Ezra and the Levites went to ensure that the people understood the words they were hearing testifies to the value placed on the Scripture in the life of God’s people and the necessity of explaining it for understanding. Hearing the Word of God is good, but there must also be understanding because in understanding the Word of God true transformation happens. Nehemiah 8:12 says, “And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portion and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.” The text does not emphasize the hearing of the law alone, but the understanding of it that resulted in a heart change within

⁵ F. Charles Fensham argues, “The Root *prš* means ‘to break up’ and this may refer to the breaking up of language while it is translated. We must recognize that the Jews who spoke Aramaic needed someone to translate the Hebrew of the law for them in their own vernacular.” Frank Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 50.

⁶ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 116.

the people that day. Nehemiah 8 shows that, while a person can hear the Bible and understand it on their own, it is often necessary for a teacher of the Bible to help bring understanding to the hearer.

Hearing the Word of God read and explained should be seen as a personal spiritual discipline. Nehemiah 8:3 says, “Ears of all the people were attentive to the Book for the Law,” which shows that the people in this scene knew their own responsibility in the event of the reading of the Law and listened intently. The reader of God’s Word and the listener both play a role in the event the public reading of God’s Word.

Hearing the Bible as Renewing Commitment

As one examines the text of Nehemiah 8, it is clear that the passage speaks of the renewal of the Israelite commitment to the covenant. This recommitment is expressed through and stems from the hearing of the Law. This is demonstrated by examining what the Israelites heard that day.

The first aspect of this passage to be examined is what the Israelites heard that day. From their perspective, the Israelites gathered to hear the Word of God, which provided a national identity for them. The passage refers to the work that was read that day as the “Book of the Law of Moses” (8:1), “the Law” (8:2, 7, 9, 13–14), the “Book of the Law” (8:3), the “book” (8:5, 8), the “Law of God” (8:8), the “words” (8:12), and the “Book of the Law of God” (8:18). The initial phrase used to describe the Scripture at this time is the most insightful. Nehemiah 8:1 says Ezra brought “the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.” Kinder argues that this description “makes two important and contested points: first, that what the people called for, and what Ezra ostensibly produced, was no new manifesto but the foundation articles of the faith, laid down at the Exodus: secondly that these were credited with full divine

authority.”⁷ Referring to the Law as the Book of the Law of Moses, the author refers to the formative documents of the people of Israel. It cannot be said with certainty if Ezra read the entire Pentateuch or a portion of it, but it is understood that he read from the Torah. The Torah contained the early history of the world, the origins of the Israelite people through Abraham, and the law given through Moses. Between the promise to Abraham of a land in which his descendants would dwell to the deliverance of Israel out of the hands of the Egyptians in Exodus, the identity of Israel was formed through the Torah. All of this is understood to be inspired by God. This is the document they heard read aloud on that day.

The date of the Israelites’ gathering is also relevant to the discussion. They gathered on the first day of the seventh month, which Leviticus 23:24 declares as a day to “observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation.” The Israelites intentionally gathered on this day because it was a holy day. They did this out of obedience to the Law, recognizing that this was something the Lord had commanded them to do.

The Israelites intentionally gathered on a day set aside as holy. They intentionally listened to a document that they viewed as the Word of God that describes who they are and their relationship to God. While gathering and hearing will produce results that will be discussed later in this work, the act should be seen as a recommitment to the Lord and his Word in and of itself. When the people of God intentionally submit themselves to hearing God’s Word, it is a small gesture of recommitment to him and his covenant.

Hearing the Bible Results in Transformation

Hearing the Bible read and explained had a significant impact on the people of

⁷ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 114.

God on this day, which testifies to the transformative nature and purpose of Scripture. After Nehemiah and the Levites had read and explained the Law to the people, they responded first in repentance. Nehemiah 8:9 says, “The people wept as they heard the words of the Law.” These tears represent remorse for their nation transgressing the Law they are now hearing. This is shown in their later confession in chapter 9, which included both praise for God’s faithfulness (Neh 9:17–19), and confession for Israel’s unfaithfulness (Neh 9:26). Having been exiled, the Israelites would have had limited exposure to the Law of God. Betts explains, “It would be speculative to guess how many times they had heard it before, but in this instance it speaks to them as if it is the first time they hear it.”⁸ When the people were exposed to the truth of the Law, they were moved to respond in emotional repentance. While repentance was the proper response to the Law, their mourning would quickly turn to rejoicing.

In addition to repentance, hearing the Bible also produced rejoicing in the people of God. The people’s initial response was mourning, but the leaders encouraged the people to stop mourning and begin rejoicing in the Lord. The people were commanded to observe the offerings and meals prescribed to them on this holy day mentioned in Leviticus. The change from repentance to rejoicing was proper on two levels. First, the text of Nehemiah 8:12 says they rejoiced because “they had understood the words that were declared to them.” The result of hearing and understanding the Law was rejoicing. They celebrated the fact that they could understand the things spoken that day. Second, their rejoicing was not just a proper emotional response to the Word but was also a response of obedience. The leaders called for the people to stop mourning because the Scripture called for a holy day of celebrating the feast of trumpets found in Leviticus 23. Their rejoicing was evidence of a heart transformed to obey the words they heard. The obedient transformation is further

⁸ Betts, *Nehemiah*, 107.

displayed in Nehemiah 8:13–18 as the people were willing to observe the Feast of Booths, which they found out about in the Book of the Law.

Hearing the Law brought about transformation in the lives of the people of Israel. They were repentant when they realized their actions were not in line with the Law of Moses. They rejoiced and praised the Lord because they understood the Law, and they were obedient to the commands they found in the Scripture. This transformative relationship between the Word of God and his people found in Nehemiah still has application today, as Mervin Breneman points out in his summary of the transformation found in Nehemiah:

The Word of God, when read, has the power to transform lives today just as it had in the time of Josiah and Ezra. The Bible convicts, changes, and guides lives. In the time of Ezra the people realized that the Babylonian captivity was a result of disobedience. Only genuine repentance before God could bring about a real change in the community. The living power of the Word of God still liberates people from their own various forms of captivity.⁹

To see this kind of transformation in the people of God today, they must make hearing the Bible a priority in their lives. As the people of God in Nehemiah's day joined together and called for the Law to be read to them, so should Christians today strive to unite as one body and cry out for the Word of God to be pronounced over them. Furthermore, the pastors of local churches should be ready to provide the people with the Word of God by incorporating ample Scripture in their gathering in addition to the sermon.

Meditating on the Bible: Exposition of Psalm 1

The second means of Bible engagement that will be examined is meditating on the Bible. Meditation has been generally defined as “a form of private devotion consisting of deep, continued reflection on some religious theme.”¹⁰ Walter Kaiser explains that two different Hebrew terms refer to mediation. The first is *hāgâh*, which refers to a soft

⁹ Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 227.

¹⁰ William C. Martin, *The Layman's Bible Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Southwestern, 1964), 510.

murmuring to oneself. The second is *śîah*, which refers to speaking, but when directed toward oneself, it is translated as meditate.¹¹ Both Hebrew words for meditate demonstrate the private nature of this means of Bible intake. The three primary objects of meditation found in the Psalms are God’s Word, God’s works, and God himself.¹² The book of Psalms provides many instructive texts on meditation, but for the purposes of this work, Psalm 1 will be examined.

Canonical Context of the Psalms and Psalm 1

The Psalms as a whole do not pertain to a specific historical event as many of the other books of the Bible do. According to Tremper Longman, the Psalms “came into being over the whole period of time in which the Old Testament was written.”¹³ This means that to understand the context of the book of Psalms, one must understand the individual psalms were produced and used throughout the Old Testament time period. Longman continues, “The key is to see the Psalter as a living, open book during the whole Old Testament period. The Psalter was in constant use individually and corporately from its very beginning. In addition, new psalms were constantly added.”¹⁴ The psalms, therefore, played a crucial role in both the private life of an individual Israelite and the public worship of the nation. Longman summarizes their double use:

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the Psalms were used in the public and private worship of devout Israelites. We might even go a step further and, while affirming that the Psalms were used in private worship, say that most of the evidence for their primary use points to public worship. Indeed, the Psalms have appropriately been called “the Hymnbook of the Old Testament.”¹⁵

¹¹ Walter Kaiser Jr., “What Is Biblical Meditation?,” in *Renewing Your Mind in a Secular World*, ed. John D. Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 40.

¹² Martin, *The Layman’s Bible Encyclopedia*, 510.

¹³ Tremper Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 42.

¹⁴ Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 43.

¹⁵ Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 46–47.

God intended the Psalms to act as a guide to public and private worship for the people of Israel throughout the history of the Old Testament and continue to serve these purposes today for believers.

Many believe Psalm 1 was intentionally placed at the beginning of the Psalter to serve as an introduction to the collection. Allen Ross notes that Psalm 1 plays an important role as the introduction to the Psalter because it exemplifies the basic tenants of wisdom literature. The psalm presents the two potential paths of righteousness and wickedness available to humanity, while making much of God's law through the use of similes.¹⁶ Based on this role, Psalm 1 serves as an adequate example of how meditation upon the law of God can result in walking the path of righteousness.

Meditation Provides Guidance

Psalm 1 shows that meditation upon the law of God provides guidance to the believer. The opening stanza of this Psalm compares two categories of people: the blessed man and his opposite. The author uses parallelism to provide three descriptions of the cursed man. These descriptions are presented as what the blessed man does not do. In Psalm 1:1, the blessed man does not (1) "walk in the counsel of the wicked," (2) "stand in the way of sinners," or (3) "sit in the seat of scoffers." Some argue that there is a progressive nature to the parallelism of the description of cursed man. In the description, the cursed man goes from walking to sitting; from listening to counsel to being seated with the scoffers; and from disobeying God as wicked to scoffing at God. While this interpretation is possible, Willem VanGemeran suggests that the variety in this description is meant to be all-encompassing of the lifestyle of the wicked person.¹⁷ Regardless, the wicked lifestyle is presented as the direct opposite of the lifestyle of the blessed man.

¹⁶ Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 790.

¹⁷ Willem A. VanGemeran, *Psalms*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank El Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 54.

Instead of participating in the wicked ways of life, the blessed man delights in the law and meditates upon it. Thus, meditation upon the law of the Lord guides the blessed man in life and prevents him from participating in the ways of the wicked.

The nature of this provision of guidance from meditation can be understood in three potential ways. First, meditation upon the law might provide guidance by being an alternative to a wicked lifestyle. Instead of participating in wicked behavior, one can meditate on the law. Second, meditation on the law might provide guidance by conveying information. By meditating on the law, a person can become aware of the standards of the law to which they are held and can thereby act accordingly. Third, meditation upon the law might provide guidance by forming a godly character in a person. As a person meditates on the law, God builds his character up in that person. While there may be aspects of the former two options that hold true, the third option is the primary means by which meditation provides guidance.

Meditation Results in Flourishing

In addition to providing guidance through character formation, meditation also results in flourishing. The blessed man is likened to a tree in Psalm 1. The tree is said to be “planted by streams of water,” to “yield its fruit in its season,” and to “not wither” (v. 3). The picture of the flourishing tree is a metaphor for the one who received nourishment from the Word of God that results in a life of fulfillment, purpose, and pleasure in the Lord. As will be discussed, this nourishment from the Word of God is made possible by meditation.

The tree in this passage is said to be planted by streams of water. The waters represent a source of life and nourishment. For the follower of God, the streams of water are the Word of God, which provides life and nourishment for his people. This flourishing is a result of the man of God’s intentional engagement with the Word. Nancy DeClaisse-Walford, Rolf Jacobson, and Beth Tanner explain,

Here, the life grounded in the Lord’s instruction is likened to a vibrant tree whose roots are sunk deep into the life-giving soil of a river bed. The sense of the verb *šātûl* suggests that the location is intentional—the tree has either been transplanted there or was planted as a seedling. This image is well-suited for the life characterized by study of torah.¹⁸

The context of this passage implies that this intentional planting of oneself takes place through constant and continual meditation upon God’s Word.

The results of intentional meditation also include fruitfulness and vitality. The passage states that the tree “planted by streams of water” will produce “fruit in its season and “does not wither” (Ps 1:3). This would mean that the follower of God that stays constantly connected with God would have a life full of godly fruit. The fruit produced in the believer’s life may take many forms, but it will still be fruit that reflects the character of a follower of God. To state it another way, the believer will display righteousness in his interactions in the world, consistent with the character of God. The implications of the metaphor suggest that the soil in which the tree is planted impacts the fruitfulness of the tree itself. DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner explain that this hidden and internal nourishment of the tree results in the external endurance and fruitfulness.¹⁹ This means that the fruit produced in the believer’s life is a direct result of the soil of God’s Word in which they are planted. The fruit produced by the believer is therefore the righteous life described in the various portions of Scripture.

Believers who meditate will also not wither throughout their life. A plant withers when there is a lack of water or the conditions are too harsh for the plant to thrive. Believers will thrive and flourish regardless of the situation because of their nearness to the Word of God.

In summary of the metaphor, the psalmist states that the one planted by the water will “prosper in all he does” (Ps 1:3). This statement brings into question the nature of the

¹⁸ Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 61.

¹⁹ DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 61.

prosperity and fruitfulness that the blessed man receives. The phrase could refer to physical or material prosperity. It may also mean he is successful in life ventures. However, James Waltner proposes an alternate understanding: “To prosper may also mean that as the tree fulfills the purpose for which it was created, so the nature and value of an obedient life are to be found in the fulfillment of the divine will.”²⁰ In other words, as a person meditates and remains close to the nourishing waters of God’s Word, he is able to fulfill his purpose of reflecting God’s glory. This understanding can encompass the proper appreciation of physical and material prosperity but also includes the spiritual aspect of this flourishing.

The metaphor of the tree used for the blessed man is contrasted with the metaphor of the chaff used to describe the wicked. A tree is sturdy enough to endure storms and tends to have a long-life cycle. Trees also have the ability to produce fruit. On the other hand, chaff has no stability to endure any wind and has no ability to produce fruit. These two pictures are meant to display the vast difference between the life of the follower of God and the wicked. This difference is attributed to the fact that the blessed man delights in and meditates on the Word.

Memorizing the Bible: Exposition of Psalm 119:9-16

The final aspect of Bible engagement that will be examined is memorization. Bible memorization is the process of internalizing a passage of the Scripture by committing it to memory for the sake of heart transformation and righteous living. Bible memorization could be seen as one method of meditation. While this is true, memorization is distinct from other methods of meditation and has a unique role to play in meditation. To demonstrate the benefits of the memorization of Scripture and the role it plays in meditation, Psalm 119:9–26 will be examined. This passage will show that Scripture

²⁰ James H. Waltner, *Psalms*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2006), 32.

memorization helps believers resist temptation by allowing the Word of God to be with them in any situation.

The Canonical Context of Psalm 119

The context of the book of Psalms was established in the previous section of this work when discussing Psalm 1. The characteristics of this book discussed there are also relevant to this examination of Psalm 119. The psalms were meant to inform public and private worship of the people of God in the Old Testament and continue to do so for New Testament believers.

It is often noted that Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the psalms, yet this psalm is actually intriguing because of its structure and its context. Structurally, the psalmist arranged this psalm into an acrostic form containing 22 stanzas. Each stanza has eight lines that begin with the same Hebrew letter. The author progresses through the alphabet for the length of the 22 stanzas. The psalm places a heavy emphasis on the Word of God. John Goldingay points out that, of the 176 lines in this psalm, only four lines do not make reference to God's teachings.²¹ Despite the highly structured nature of the psalm, there does not seem to be a theme or argument central to the psalm other than the Word of God. Daniel Estes suggests this structured nature of the psalm points to the fact that the psalm was meant to be used for meditation: "Rather than developing a logical argument, Psalm 119 is more like an impressionistic painting. By this means, the psalmist intends to prompt contemplation and meditation by the reader. . . . By this process of meditation, the one who appropriates Psalm 119 internalizes the message of the psalm."²² Therefore, the structure of this psalm lends itself to meditation.

²¹ John Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 377.

²² Daniel J. Estes, *Psalms 73–150*, New American Commentary, vol. 13 (Nashville: B & H, 2019), 400.

While Psalm 119 lacks an explicit historical context, scholarly consensus is that this psalm is post-exilic due to its Torah-centric content. This psalm is often classified as a wisdom psalm as it contains elements of wisdom literature, such as the exalting of the Word of God and the benefits of knowing and following it. However, Estes reveals that the psalm also contains characteristics of lament, such as confessions, petitions, and claims of innocence. The mixture of wisdom and lament stretched out over the many lines of this lengthy psalm indicates that the psalmist has experienced trouble in his life but has remained faithful to the Lord through meditation upon the goodness of God’s Word.²³ Therefore, when meditated upon, this psalm provides practical applications of God’s Word for the reader of the psalm to internally process.

Memorization Emphasizes the Heart

The *beth* stanza of Psalm 119 begins with a rhetorical question that should pique the interest of any believer. The psalmist asks how a “young man may keep his way pure” (Ps 119:9). Followers of God should be concerned with how they might keep their life free from sin and impurity that would defame God’s character and destroy their life. In response to this question of purity in 119:9, the psalmist points to the Word of God and the heart of the believer. There will be further discussion of purity and the Word of God in the coming paragraphs, but for now this section focuses on the heart. This portion of Psalm 119 shows that the spiritual discipline of memorization, in its essence, aligns with a biblical emphasis on the importance of the heart.

In biblical Hebrew, the word for heart is *lēb*. As in English, this Hebrew word can possess a variety of meanings. The possible glosses for *lēb* include “heart,” “soul,” “seat of the senses, affections, and emotions of the mind,” and “the seat of will and

²³ Estes, *Psalms 73–150*, 400–402.

purpose.”²⁴ For the Hebrew person, the heart is the center of the person. The heart is the focus of many critical biblical texts in the Old and New Testaments. The Jewish people were told to love the Lord with all their heart in the *shemah* (Deut 6:4). Moses exhorted the people to circumcise the foreskin of their heart, which was symbolic of removing a sinful attitude (Deut 10:16). The prophet Jeremiah promised that the Lord would write the law of God on the hearts of the people in the new covenant (Jer 31:33). Ezekiel proclaims that God will remove the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26). And finally, Jesus reiterates the command to love God with the whole heart (Matt 22:37).

The theme of the heart shows up in the passage at hand. The psalmist says he seeks God with his “whole heart” in 119:10 and “stored up [the Word of God] in my heart” in 119:11. The two verses form a synonymous parallel. Psalm 119:10a and 119:11a speak of the heart, and 119:10b and 119:11b speak of sin or wandering from God’s commandments. While seeking the Lord and memorizing his Word are not exact equivalents, the parallelism in these two verses suggests that the psalmist construes seeking God wholeheartedly with storing up or memorizing God’s Word. The result of such seeking and memorizing is the avoidance of sinful wandering from God’s commandments. The parallel verses of 119:10–11 act as further explanation of the answer to the initial rhetorical question of purity found in 119:9. Maintaining purity comes by guarding one’s way, which comes from seeking the Lord with one’s whole heart, which comes, in part, by meditating upon and memorizing the Word of God. The Lord is making it clear through this psalm that purity and obedience are internal affairs; they are matters of the heart.

As noted, Scripture memorization is the process of internalizing a passage of Scripture by committing it to memory for the sake of heart transformation and righteous living. So then, memorization by nature is a practice that directly impacts the heart of a

²⁴ Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, 9th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 427.

human. Based on this understanding, memorization is essential for the heart transformation of the people of God.

Memorization Enables Purity

The heart transformation wrought by memorizing Scripture also results in righteous living. This righteous living is expressed in Psalm 119:9–16 as “keep[ing] his way pure” (Ps 119:9), “not wander[ing] from your commandments” (Ps 119:10), “not sin[ning] against you” (Ps 119:11), and “declar[ing] all the rules of your mouth” (Ps 119:13). Other phrases about delighting in God’s law can be seen as part of living a righteous life but, for the sake of this work, will be seen as internal. This section will focus on the observable actions of the believer. Scripture memorization in this passage proves to be a means by which the believer in God can keep his way pure in several ways.

Memorizing Scripture enables purity by tuning the human heart to the will of God. By memorizing Scripture, the believer can change his wants and desires to better align with the Lord’s. God’s Word is the best tool for producing purity. Charles Spurgeon states, “God’s word is the best preventative against offending God, for it tells us his mind and will, and tends to bring our spirit into conformity with the divine Spirit.”²⁵ Believers who memorize the Word of God know the mind of God. They can discern the things that are pleasing or not pleasing to the Lord.

Also, Scripture memorization enables purity by allowing the Word of God to be readily available to the believer in all situations in life. The psalmist has stored the Word of God in his heart so he will not sin against God. The believer does not need to have a copy of the God’s in his hand to benefit from its power if he has it hidden in his heart. At any moment of temptation, the believer may recall to mind the teachings of the Lord and be exhorted to obey him and resist the urge to sin. Matthew Henry makes the connection between the teaching of Psalm 119:11 with the temptation of Jesus in the

²⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 2:159.

wilderness when he says, “Good men are afraid of Sin, and are in care to prevent it; and the most effectual way to prevent it is to hide God’s word in our hearts, that we may answer every temptation, as our Master did, with, it is written, may oppose God’s precepts to the dominion of sin, his promises to its allurements, and his threatenings to its menaces.”²⁶ If the believer has stored the Word of God in his heart, then he may use the Word at any time and in any circumstance to fight sin and live according to God’s standards, procuring a life of purity.

Conclusion

The goal of believers is that they might increasingly reflect the image of God, specifically the image of God displayed in Christ Jesus. Donald Whitney, a leading voice in the area of spiritual disciplines, concurs as he defines godliness as “both closeness to Christ and conformity to Christ, and conformity that’s both inward and outward, a growing conformity to both the heart of Christ and the life of Christ. This Christlikeness is the goal, the reason we should practice the disciplines.”²⁷ Every Christian should strive to look increasingly more like Jesus.

God has not left the Christian to his own devices. The Christian has been given the Word of God and the Spirit of God so he might reflect the image of God. In the Bible, the Christian has the instruction of the Lord so he can know how God would have him live. The Spirit also dwells inside the believer, so he might be able to live out and obey the Word of God rather than simply hearing it. Christians should make it a priority to engage the Bible in a meaningful and regular fashion so that they might grow into the image of their creator and fulfill their purpose.

²⁶ Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1983), 3:688.

²⁷ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. and upd. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 9.

CHAPTER 3

EVANGELICAL WISDOM FOR ENGAGING THE BIBLE FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Evangelicalism is a spiritual movement in Christianity that emerged in Britain and the American colonies in the 1730s. The beginning of this movement is associated with the “Great Awakening” in the Americas and the “Eighteenth-Century Revival” in Britain. Although significant shifts have occurred in the tradition, evangelicalism extends into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In addition to spanning centuries, evangelicalism also spread across denominational lines with the tradition being found in many protestant groups because the defining characteristics of the movement are not bound to specific denominational doctrines.

David Bebbington (1949–), in his seminal work *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, argues that the four defining characteristics of evangelicalism are conversionism, activism, crucicentrism, and biblicism.¹ Conversionism describes the emphasis on personal conversion of the individual and the new birth. Activism refers to missional desire found among evangelicals to see others converted through the preaching of the gospel. This gospel work was often connected to humanitarian concerns such as the abolition and temperance movements. Crucicentrism is the focus put on the role of the cross in the gospel message and its implications for the individual. Finally, biblicism is the widespread belief among evangelicals that the Bible is the Word of God and the sole source of truth for the Christian. Biblicism is the distinction that sets evangelicals apart as

¹ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 2–3.

an exemplary group to study in search of a model for Bible engagement habits that promote spiritual growth.

Also, evangelicals are an exemplary group for study on the subject of Bible engagement because of their unique position in Christian history. The emergence of this group correlates with the increase in literacy rates and decrease of printing costs in the western world in the eighteenth century. Tom Schwanda observes, “While Scripture has always played a significant role in Christian Spirituality, eighteenth-century evangelicals emphasized devotional reading of the scripture. They benefited from the advancement of printing and low-cost publishing and the increase in literacy to increase the number of people able to read the Bible personally.”² Never before in history did a group of people have such widespread personal access to the Scriptures. This access warrants the study of the evangelicals as they provide a picture of how Christians began to engage with the Bible once the world had more access to personal copies of the Scripture. This newfound access to personal copies of the Scripture led to an increased expectation in personal Bible engagement, setting this group apart as worthy of study.

This chapter will explore the wisdom of the evangelical tradition concerning Bible engagement and spiritual growth. It will begin with an analysis of evangelical beliefs about the nature of the Bible. This analysis will lead into the second section, which outlines several aspects of Bible engagement found among evangelicals throughout the centuries. These aspects of Bible engagement include intake schemes, intake lenses, intake settings, and meditation methods. Exploring these facets of evangelical spirituality should prove beneficial for Christians who desire to engage the Bible in a meaningful way and for spiritual growth.

² Tom Schwanda, ed., *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality: The Age of Edwards, Newton, and Whitefield*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 2016), 5.

Evangelical Beliefs about the Bible

One of the distinguishing characteristics of evangelicalism is its devotion to the Bible. This devotion has been consistent from the eighteenth century forward. Two specific features of the evangelical belief about the Bible emerge as relevant for this study; the Bible is inspired by God and is transformative for the Christian.

First, evangelicals have held broadly to the doctrine of inspiration. This is evident from the very beginnings of the movement. John Wesley (1703–1791) was an Anglican clergyman and the founder of Methodism who lived during the advent of the evangelical movement. Wesley expresses belief in the full inspiration of the Bible in his commentary on the New Testament. In his notes on 2 Timothy 3:16 he says,

All Scripture is inspired of God—The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists those who read it with earnest prayer. Hence, it is so profitable for doctrine, for instruction of the ignorant, for the reproof or conviction of them that are in error or sin; for the correction or amendment of whatever is amiss, and for instructing or training up the children of God in all righteousness.³

Wesley not only exhibits the evangelical belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible, but also the belief in the necessity of the divine Spirit to guide the reader to understanding and transformation.

George Whitefield (1714–1770), a contemporary of Wesley, also believed the Bible to be the Word of God. In a sermon titled “The Duty of Searching the Scriptures,” Whitefield said that the Scriptures “are not of any private interpretation, authority, or invention, but Holy men of old wrote them, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”⁴ He acknowledged God’s use of humans to bring about the Bible, but clearly affirms that the words recorded in the Bible are God’s own. His belief about inspiration did not just apply to certain portions of the canon, but to the entire collection. “By the Scriptures,” states Whitefield, “I understand the Law and the Prophets and all those books which have in all

³ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: John Wesley, 1788), 691.

⁴ George Whitefield, *The Duty of Searching the Scriptures* (London: James Hutton, 1739), 4.

ages been accounted canonical, and which make up that book commonly called the Bible.”⁵ For Wesley and Whitefield, both of whom were present for the inception of evangelicalism, the entire Bible was the very words of God given to man.

The doctrine of inspiration is also present in later waves of evangelicalism that come on the scene in the early years of the nineteenth century. J. C. Ryle (1816–1900), the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, believed the Bible to be breathed by God himself. He states, “God taught the writers of [the Bible] what to say. God put into their minds thoughts and ideas. God guided their pens in writing down those thoughts and ideas. When you read it, you are not reading the self-taught compositions of poor imperfect men like yourself, but the words of the eternal God.”⁶ For Ryle, the words found in the Bible are not the inventions of the writers themselves but originated in the mind of God and were given to the authors through the Spirit of God. Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892), the great Baptist preacher in London, expresses this belief in inspiration in similar wording: “We believe that holy men of old, though using their own language, were led by the Spirit of God to use words which were also the words of God. The divine Spirit so operated upon the spirit of the inspired writer, that he wrote the words of the Lord, therefore treasure up every word.”⁷ Both Spurgeon and Ryle explain their belief about the inspiration of Scripture with similar language. They both acknowledge the involvement of the human, yet neither suggest any kind of dictation theory that would seek to remove the human element. Also, they do not put forward any belief that the truths inspired by the Spirit are to be found behind the text mixed in with the words of the human authors. Spurgeon and Ryle both argue that the Spirit led the authors of the Bible to write down the exact words God wanted them to write, capturing the very heart of God.

⁵ Whitefield, *The Duty of Searching the Scriptures*, 4.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Practical Religion: Plain Papers on the Duties of Professing Christians* (London: James Clarke, 1959), 71.

⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1951), 2:387.

The belief among evangelicals of the divine inspiration of the Bible carried on into the modern eras of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Anglican theologian J. I. Packer (1926–2020) argues that biblical authority is based on and derived from the truth of divine inspiration:

The authority of Scripture is the divine authority of God himself speaking. The Bible is not only Man's word, but God's also; not merely a record of revelation, but a written revelation in its own right, God's own witness to Himself in the form of human witness to him. Accordingly, the authority of the Scriptures rests, not simply on their worth as an historical source, a testament of religion, and a means of uplift, real though this is, but primarily and essentially on the fact that they come to us from the mouth of God.⁸

Packer's words show that the belief in divine inspiration is foundational to the Christian's attitude toward obeying the Bible. Readers of God's Word will only see it as authoritative over their lives if they believe it to be from God himself and not man.

Second, evangelicals believe the Bible is transformative. This thought stems from the previously mentioned belief about the inspiration of the Bible. Schwanda states, "Since [the evangelicals] affirmed the divine nature and inspiration of the Bible, they believed that it contained God's dynamic and transformative word."⁹ This group believed that the Bible had the power to shape and impact the lives of those who engaged with it. The leaders of the movement therefore engaged with the Bible regularly and encouraged others to do the same. Evangelicals appear to understand this transformation to happen on two levels: conversion and sanctification.

As John Wesley ponders the brevity of life, he simplifies the goal of the human experience to the singular thought, "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven." The "way to heaven" is an alternate way of describing salvation or conversion.¹⁰ Wesley goes on to explain that this "way to heaven" is made known by God when he inspired the "the

⁸ J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 103.

⁹ Schwanda, *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality*, 112.

¹⁰ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: W. Strahan, 1746), 1:vi.

book,” by which he means the Bible.¹¹ In a famous quote, Wesley exclaims, “O give me that Book! At any price give me the Book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me.”¹² Wesley is expressing the connection between the Word of God and conversion. For him, the way to salvation has been expressed in the Bible and understanding its message allows for conversion or transformation.

The belief in the transformative nature of the Bible is also found in the works of bishop J. C. Ryle. He refers to “Bible-reading, private prayer, and regularly worshipping God in church” each as a “means of grace.”¹³ Ryle believed that one of the divinely designed methods for Christian spiritual growth was Bible engagement, both private and public. He goes on to state plainly, “No one who is careless about such things must ever expect to make much progress in sanctification.”¹⁴ Ryle argues for the transformative nature of Scripture. He not only claims that Scripture can potentially transform a person, but that Scripture is necessary for transformation, which he calls sanctification. Both Ryle and Wesley serve as examples of the evangelical belief that the Word of God has a transformative nature.

The belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and the subsequent belief that the Bible can transform its reader are major motivations for the Bible engagement of evangelicals and should also serve as motivation for Bible readers today. Christians who truly embrace that the Bible has been inspired by God and has the power to transform their lives should be highly motivated to engage the Scriptures. In addition to providing a motivation for Bible engagement, evangelicals provide wisdom on how one can engage the Bible.

¹¹ Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 1:vii.

¹² Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 1:vii.

¹³ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Leyland, England: 10Publishing, 2019), 33.

¹⁴ Ryle, *Holiness*, 33.

Evangelical Practices of Bible Engagement

While evangelicals were generally aligned on their beliefs about the nature of the Bible and the necessity of the Bible for salvation and sanctification, their Bible engagement practices vary somewhat from person to person. This variety provides several potential approaches for Bible engagement that can serve as examples to follow for modern readers of God’s Word. In this section, four aspects of evangelicals’ Bible engagement practices will be examined: intake schemes, intake lenses, intake settings, and meditation methods.

Intake Schemes

Many evangelicals encourage a regular and consistent reading of Scripture. George Whitefield, for example, says believers should “read the Scripture constantly. . . . Search, therefore, the Scriptures not only devoutly but daily, for in them are the words for eternal life.”¹⁵ Evangelicals viewed Bible intake as import and thus encouraged regular and consistent engagement.

Where evangelicals differ in Bible intake schemes is text selection and length. This is made evident when comparing the intakes schemes of Henry Venn (1725–1797), an evangelical Anglican minister who lived in Britain, and Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813–1843), a minister in the Church of Scotland. In *The Complete Duty of Man*, Venn presents a four-part scheme for reading the Bible. He asserts that Bible readers should “read but a small portion at one time.”¹⁶ His argument is that those who set out to read several chapters in one sitting are attempting to read more than they are able to spiritually process. The better method, Venn maintains, is to “pause and deliberate much on the things signified by the words.”¹⁷ To have sufficient time to properly process the text, one

¹⁵ Whitefield, *The Duty of Searching the Scriptures*, 15–16.

¹⁶ Henry Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Newbery, 1765), 455.

¹⁷ Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, 455.

should select smaller portions of Scripture. He acknowledges that this method will cause the reader to progress slowly through the major parts of the Bible, but also allows the reader to “find the meaning of it beautifully unfolding” and that it will “remain with us, and be our own for use and recollection at all times.”¹⁸ Venn continues his explanation of this Bible intake scheme by addressing text selection. He argues that the reader should “read those portions of Scripture most frequently which relate to subjects of the greatest moment.”¹⁹ What he means by this is that, while all Scripture is inspired by God, some parts of Scripture warrant greater attention than others. He compares Scripture to the human body in that there are parts of the body that are essential for life and others that are for “ease and comfort . . . adornment.”²⁰ His conclusion from this comparison is that, “Our most frequent contemplation must dwell on those parts of Scripture which most nearly concern the glory of God, our own eternal salvation, and the good of others.”²¹ He refers to these topics as the “principal end for which Scripture was given” and argues they should be the reader’s principal focus when reading the Bible.²²

Robert Murray M’Cheyne suggests an intake scheme that is basically the opposite approach to Venn. M’Cheyne created a reading plan he called *Daily Bread*, which guided the reader through the entire Bible, including the Psalms twice, within a year’s time. In his preface to the reading plan he provides his justification for his scheme. His goal for the reading plan was that his congregation would read the whole Bible in a year and that all “might be feeding in the same portion of the green pasture” or reading the same parts

¹⁸ Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, 456.

¹⁹ Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, 458.

²⁰ Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, 458.

²¹ Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, 458.

²² Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, 459.

of the Bible throughout the year.²³ When placed in contrast with Venn’s approach, a few differences emerge. First, M’Cheyne suggests reading every portion of Scripture equally over a year’s time, whereas Venn suggests focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on the principal portions of Scripture. While commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16 and its truth that all Scripture is from the Lord and used by him to perfect the man of God, M’Cheyne states, “If we pass over some parts of Scripture, we shall be incomplete Christians.”²⁴ M’Cheyne therefore produced a method in which his congregation would engage with all parts of Scripture, including the portions Venn would categorize as less essential. A second difference between M’Cheyne’s scheme and Venn’s is in the amount of Scripture read in a day. In M’Cheyne’s plan, for the reader to engage the entire Bible in a year, they will read at least four chapters in a given day, with some days having up to seven chapters scheduled. Venn would disagree with this approach as he suggests that reading two or three chapters in a day is too much for a person to properly process.²⁵ The basic format of the M’Cheyne approach to Bible reading has been used and slightly altered by other evangelicals. D. A. Carson’s (1946–) two-volume devotional series called *For the Love of God* uses essentially the same Scripture calendar, but offers a single-page devotional for each day that typically explores a common theme between the passages.²⁶

Donald Whitney proposes another Bible reading plan. Like M’Cheyne, Whitney suggests reading different portions of the Bible each day in order to systematically read through the entire Bible over a period of time. He recommends starting in five different places in Scripture (Genesis, Joshua, Job, Isaiah, and Matthew) or three different places (Genesis, Job, and Matthew) and to read equal portions each day from each location.

²³ Robert Murray M’Cheyne, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M’Cheyne*, ed. Andrew Bonar (Edinburgh: Murray and Gibb, 1857), 568.

²⁴ M’Cheyne, *Memoir and Remains*, 569.

²⁵ Venn, *The Complete Duty of Man*, 455.

²⁶ Don Carson, *For the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 12–13.

Considering each section is approximately the same size, the reader should finish all the sections around the same time.²⁷ Reading the Bible this way comes with advantages. Whitney explains that one such benefit of this method is variety. “Many who intend to read straight through the Bible,” Whitney says, “become confused in Leviticus, discouraged in Numbers, and give up completely by Deuteronomy. But when you are reading in more than one place each day, the variety makes it easier to keep up the momentum.”²⁸ Another benefit of this method is flexibility. With reading plans such as M’Cheyne, a date is often included with each Bible reading. Whitney’s approach does not include a specific day of the year on which a person must read, which removes the burden of needing to catch up to the plan if one were to miss a day. The reader simply begins reading where they stopped at the end of their previous reading. The flexibility of this plan also applies to the time one takes to read the Bible. Instead of imposing a time frame for completing the Bible, the reader may progress at a pace that is comfortable and attainable for them. Whitney only suggests that, “Even if you don’t read through the Bible in a year’s time, keep record of which books you have read. . . . That way, regardless of how long it takes, or in what order they’re read, you’ll know when you’ve read every book in the Bible.”²⁹

Another intake scheme, which differs greatly from M’Cheyne and slightly from Venn, is presented by James Gray (1851–1935), a reverend in the Reformed Episcopal Church. Gray calls his method the synthetic study of the Bible, which he defines generally as “the study of the Bible as a whole, and each book of the Bible as a whole, and as seen in its relation to the other books.”³⁰ His intake scheme is to select a book and read it in its

²⁷ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. and upd. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 29–30.

²⁸ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 30.

²⁹ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 30.

³⁰ James Gray, *How to Master the English Bible* (Chicago: Wynona, 1906), 31.

entirety repeatedly over a period of time, without consideration of chapter and verse divisions and without the aid of commentaries. He also encourages the reader to do so prayerfully, stating, “The Bible is a supernatural book, it can be studied or mastered only by supernatural aid.”³¹ This approach clearly differs from M’Cheyne’s scheme. Joseph Harrod, a professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who advocates for a similar reading approach as Gray, explains the problem with the M’Cheyne approach: “While [the M’Cheyne] pattern has been helpful to me and countless other Bible readers it does have one drawback, namely splitting up the text and flow of most of the book of the Bible.”³² This synthetic approach to reading allows the reader to engage the Bible in the format in which it was given, not in fragments, but as whole and complete documents.

While M’Cheyne, Venn, and Gray present different schemes for Bible intake, there is a common goal behind all their approaches. They all desire that the reader of the Bible read it consistently, intentionally, and for the purpose of growth. M’Cheyne thought the best way for a person to grow through Bible engagement was to read every part of Scripture, even if that required large portions to be read because he believed God would use every part to grow the Christian. Venn thought it better for a Christian to read select and smaller portions of the Bible even if that meant one would take much longer to read the Bible because he believed God would use those shorter, intentional reading sessions for growth. Still yet, Gray suggests mastering a book of the Bible at a time. The reading schemes of these men speak to the belief held among evangelicals that Bible engagement is a fundamental aspect of the Christian life that should never be neglected or done haphazardly.

These examples of Bible reading schemes are by no means a complete survey of all the various approaches found among evangelicals. Justin Taylor, in his article “Bible

³¹ Gray, *How to Master the English Bible*, 52.

³² Joseph Harrod, “The Problem with Bible Reading Plans (and What to Do about it),” Southern Equip, May 18, 2018, <https://equip.sbts.edu/article/problem-bible-reading-plans/>.

Reading Plans,” gives a larger variety of Bible reading plans, some of which have been previously mentioned here.³³ Taylor’s extensive list is evidence of the plethora of approaches available for readers of the Bible. Some plans may be better options than others for certain personality types and abilities. With such a wealth of options, those seeking to enhance their personal Bible intake should be able to identify a reading scheme that will give needed structure for intentionality and fit their personal reading capacities.

Intake Lenses

A common process found among evangelical leaders’ teachings on Bible engagement is reading with a particular lens in mind. These intake lenses were meant to help the reader pull more meaning and application from the text of Scripture they are reading. While there are a variety of ways these lenses are expressed among the evangelicals, two general lenses are encouraged. Readers of the Bible should read the Bible (1) with the Holy Spirit as their guide and (2) with Christ as their goal or focus. These two lenses, while distinct, often overlap in the mind of the evangelical.

Charles Spurgeon speaks of reading in the presence of Christ in a sermon about how one should read the Bible. In one section of his sermon, he is addressing the issue of Christians who understand doctrinal truths but have no real familiarity with their power. He states, “Be not content with the idea that you are instructed until you so understand the doctrine that you have felt its spiritual power.”³⁴ Spurgeon’s answer to this problem is that Christians should read the Bible as if Jesus were present there with them in the room in which they read. He famously states, “He is here with me in this chamber of mine: I must not trifle. He leans over me, he puts his finger along the lines, I can see his pierced

³³ Justin Taylor, “Bible Reading Plans,” The Gospel Coalition, December 31, 2010, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/bible-reading-plans-3/>.

³⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, “How to Read the Bible,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C. H. Spurgeon, During the Year 1879* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1880), 633.

hand: I will read in his presence.”³⁵ Spurgeon believed that if readers were to view the Bible with this thought in mind, they would reap much more meaning and application from the text. Reading in the presence of Christ was the way to avoid a simple, superficial understanding of doctrine and get to the heart of the Scripture. “This is the way for true students to become wise! You will get at the soul of Scripture when you can keep Jesus with you while you are reading.”³⁶

In this same section of this sermon, Spurgeon not only speaks of reading in the presence of Christ, but also to dependence upon the Holy Spirit for guidance: “O living Christ, make this a living word to me. Thy Word is life, but not without the Holy Spirit.”³⁷ Spurgeon’s statement here is exemplary of the attitude among evangelicals of his time, which held that the Holy Spirit was necessary for the proper understanding the Scripture. His words embody Schwanda’s observation that the evangelicals believed “no one could adequately engage the Bible for reading, preaching, and teaching without depending upon the Holy Spirit.”³⁸

Whitefield presents a similar lens through which to view Scripture. His first suggestion for reading the Bible is to “Have always in view, the end for which the scriptures were written—to shew us the way of salvation, by Jesus Christ. . . . Look, therefore, always for Christ in Scripture.”³⁹ Whitefield argues that having Christ in view as one reads the Bible will allow the reader to benefit from reading both the Old and New Testaments. He also posits that having Christ in view will guide the reader through the Bible and will “unlock to you the wisdom and riches of all the mysteries of the kingdom

³⁵ Spurgeon, “How to Read the Bible,” 634.

³⁶ Spurgeon, “How to Read the Bible,” 634.

³⁷ Spurgeon, “How to Read the Bible,” 633–34.

³⁸ Schwanda, *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality*, 5.

³⁹ Whitefield, *The Duty of Searching the Scriptures*, 8.

of God.”⁴⁰ For Whitefield, the practice of having Christ in view as one reads the Scripture is the key to understanding and applying the Bible in a meaningful way.

Like Spurgeon, Whitefield also encourages the reader of God’s Word to depend on the Holy Spirit for guidance. He states that in order to “search the Scriptures with profit, labor to attain the Spirit by which they were wrote.”⁴¹ Whitefield’s view is influenced by the Scripture as he quotes Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 2 that man cannot discern the words of the Spirit. He believed that since the Bible is a spiritual book, man must seek to understand the book through the Spirit of God.⁴² In practical application of this belief, Whitefield suggests that the reader of the Bible should “pray that Christ according to his promise would send the Spirit to guide you into all truth.”⁴³ He believed that if one did this their heart would be meaningfully impacted by God’s Word.

Evangelicals clearly believed there was a posture one should assume when approaching Scripture, here referred to as intake lenses. One should approach Scripture with the Holy Spirit as the guide and Christ as the goal. Reading the Bible with no direction or intake lenses will prevent spiritual impact and meaningful engagement with the Word of God.

Intake Settings

Thus far, discussion regarding Bible engagement practices of evangelicals has revolved around personal Bible engagement. In addition to the private reading of Scripture, two other settings for Bible engagement are found among the evangelicals: sermons and small groups. This section explores these two settings and concludes with a discussion of a hybrid of these two settings.

⁴⁰ Whitefield, *The Duty of Searching the Scriptures*, 9.

⁴¹ Whitefield, *The Duty of Searching the Scriptures*, 13.

⁴² Whitefield, *The Duty of Searching the Scriptures*, 13.

⁴³ Whitefield, *The Duty of Searching the Scriptures*, 14.

Preaching has been a staple of the evangelical tradition from its beginnings. In preaching, one finds a clear convergence of the evangelical traits mentioned in the opening of this chapter. The preacher expositions the text of the Bible, typically connected to the cross and Christ's sacrifice, for the purpose of conversion or sanctification often expressed in activism. Therefore, listening to sermons is a key way in which evangelicals engage with the Bible.

Charles Simeon (1759–1836), the Anglican cleric, provides an example of the classic evangelical attitude toward the role of preaching. In a university address titled “Christ Crucified, or Evangelical Religion Described,” Simeon explains that, although God has spoken in many ways in the past and can still reveal himself as he pleases, “it is through the written Word only that we are now authorized to expect his gracious instructions.”⁴⁴ He goes on to say that people may hear from God in their personal readings of the Bible, but that God “chiefly uses the ministry of his servants whom he has sent as ambassadors to a guilty world.”⁴⁵ By “ministry of his servants” Simeon means those who are called to preach. Simeon believed that, although God speaks through private Bible reading, he especially designed the preaching moment to convey his Word to his people through the minister. Simeon's belief in the role of preaching and hearing sermons led him to give instruction both to those who preach sermons and to those who hear sermons.

Simeon sought to give aid to those who desired to preach. Charles Smyth (1903–1987) once said that “Simeon was almost the first man in the history of the English pulpit since the Middle Ages to appreciate that it is perfectly possible to teach men how to preach, and to discover how to do so.”⁴⁶ He therefore produced his most

⁴⁴ Charles Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge: University Addresses and Sermon Outlines by Charles Simeon*, ed. Arthur Pollard (London: Inter-Varsity, 1959), 103.

⁴⁵ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 103.

⁴⁶ Charles Smyth, *The Art of Preaching: A Practical Survey of Preaching in the Church of England 747–1939* (New York: MacMillan, 1940), 175.

influential work, *Horae Homileticae*, a collection of over 2,500 sermons and outlines.⁴⁷ In his preface to the work he says he partially created these outlines for the “service of the younger orders of the clergy” and to make their “entrance” and “prosecution” of their calling to ministry easier.⁴⁸ This was a display of not only Simeon’s appreciation for the Word of God preached but also for those who endeavor to preach because he believed in the importance of preaching for the advancement of the gospel and the growth of the listener.

Simeon also desired to help those who listened to sermons regularly. In a collection of sermons and addresses is a message called “Direction How to Hear Sermons,” where he references Jesus’s words in Luke 18:8, which say, “Take heed therefore how ye hear.”⁴⁹ Simeon’s overall point is that those who hear God’s Word in sermonic form should carefully consider how they are doing so. The first half of the message explains why one should consider how he listens. Simeon explains that most people listen to sermons in “an unbecoming manner,” such as always seeking to find fault in the preacher’s words.⁵⁰ He also boldly states that the congregation should consider the minister’s words as God’s Word. He says, “If they preach what is founded on the Scriptures, their word, as far as it is agreeable to the mind of God, is to be considered as God’s.”⁵¹ He finishes this section of his message by telling readers that those who ignore the preaching of the minister bring judgement on themselves as did the Jewish people who ignored Jesus’s preaching in his day.

⁴⁷ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 13.

⁴⁸ Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 1 (London: Richard Watts, 1819), 1:3.

⁴⁹ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 188–90.

⁵⁰ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 188.

⁵¹ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 189.

In the second section of his message on listening to sermons Simeon explains that those who listen to sermons should be “open to conviction,” “desire to profit,” and have a “humble dependence upon the Holy Spirit.”⁵² He ends his exhortation of the hearers of God’s Word preached with the following litany: “That it may please thee to give to all thy people increase of grace, to hear meekly thy Word, and to receive it with pure affection, and to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit.”⁵³ This prayer is a summary of the approach he presents in this work and is an attitude that should be emulated by modern listeners of sermons.

The same emphasis placed on preaching by Charles Simeon can be found among evangelicals in the modern era. John Stott (1921–2011), in his work *Between Two Worlds*, uses similar language to express his views on preaching and how one is to engage with the Bible through it:

God quickens, feeds, inspires, and guides his people by his Word. For whenever the Bible is truly and systematically expounded, God uses it to give his people the vision without which they perish. . . . That is why it is only by humble and obedient listening to his voice that the church can grow into maturity, serve the world, and glorify its Lord.⁵⁴

Evangelicals have consistently seen preaching as not only an alternative means through which to engage the Bible, but a crucial avenue through which God grants the grace of spiritual growth to believers.

Another alternate setting for Bible engagement found among evangelicals is the small group. The shape and function of small groups has changed over time, but small groups can be found among many groups throughout the history of the evangelical movement. Perhaps the most famous proponent of small groups, although not the first, was John Wesley. Wesley believed that Christian holiness was not attained in isolation,

⁵² Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 189–90.

⁵³ Simeon, *Let Wisdom Judge*, 190.

⁵⁴ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2017), 81.

but in a social setting. He once argued against the idea of religious seclusion leading to holiness by saying, “The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”⁵⁵ What he meant by “social holiness” is holiness gained by being in community with others. Kevin Watson explains that this belief in social holiness, which he learned from his interactions with the Moravian Christians, sparked Wesley to develop an approach for communal Christianity that led to early Methodism.⁵⁶ This method consisted of organizing Christians into different sized groupings he called societies, classes, and bands. Wesley described these societies as “a company of men . . . united to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other work out their salvation.”⁵⁷ These groups, while participating in a variety of Christians disciplines, did contain an emphasis of Bible engagement.

The element of Bible engagement within small groups has perpetuated into the modern era as well. Ed Stetzer (1966–) and Eric Geiger argue in their book *Transformational Groups* that small groups provide the atmosphere for community that is necessary for spiritual growth in the life of a Christian: “Growth happens within community because the Bible places community as a critical step of obedience for the Christ follower.”⁵⁸ They include Bible engagement in their discussion of important aspects of the small group setting. The two authors explain the unique benefit of engaging the Bible within the small group setting when compared to sitting through a sermon in a church service: “People are more devoted when they are discussing instead of only listening. Groups should not be monologue or even a dialogue. . . . Group discussion

⁵⁵ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 3rd ed. (London: James Hutton, 1739), viii.

⁵⁶ Kevin Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in the Wesley’s Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (New York: Oxford University, 2014), 2.

⁵⁷ John Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules, of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, and Newcastle upon Tyne*, 21st ed. (London, 1790), 4.

⁵⁸ Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups* (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 15.

involves listening, waiting, learning together, and shepherding the group to understand the author's original context and the applications that flow from it."⁵⁹ So in group Bible study settings individuals have the chance not only to hear teaching on a Bible passage but to ask questions of the text. In addition, participants get the opportunity to listen to the thoughts of others in the group. This allows for individuals to see other possible ways the Scripture at hand could apply to the Christian life. Small groups have played and continue to play a pivotal role in Christian communities, providing an additional setting for God's people to engage with his Word.

Larry Osborne, pastor at North Coast Church, provides a hybrid model for small group Bible engagement that combines the small group with the sermonic experience. He calls this model sermon-based small groups. The process for sermon-based small groups is simply that a leader guides the group to discuss the previous week's sermon. This obviously requires participants to attend the same church and listen to the same sermon each week. Osborne explains the purpose of the sermon-based small group: "The ultimate goal of a sermon-based small group is simply to velcro people to the two things they will need most when faced with a need-to-know or need-to-grow situation: the Bible and other Christians."⁶⁰

The section showed that there are settings outside of personal Bible reading in which a Christian can engage with God's Word, and that these additional settings are beneficial to spiritual growth. Those seeking to experience spiritual growth would do well to intentionally engage with the Bible by listening to sermons and participating in small group Bible studies.

⁵⁹ Stetzer and Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, 23.

⁶⁰ Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 43.

Meditation Methods

Finally, in addition to the intake of God’s Word, evangelicals have exhibited various methods for meditation upon the Bible. As mentioned in the previous chapter, meditation is generally defined as “a form of private devotion consisting of deep, continued reflection on some religious theme.”⁶¹ John Piper (1946–) offers an expanded definition of the discipline of meditation, stating that meditation “is an intentional directing of the mind to think God’s thoughts after him, with earnest prayer that he would grant all the spiritual effects that such a sacred communion can offer.”⁶² These definitions set meditation apart from Bible intake in that meditation is taking time to intentionally allow the Bible to shape one’s heart and soul. A variety of methods are found among evangelicals for Bible meditation. Two such methods will be examined in this section: deep reflection and praying the Bible.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the Congregationalist pastor and Reformed theologian who is considered the greatest mind in the American colonies, provides an example of deep reflection on the Bible as meditation. Edwards recounts some of his early experiences meditating:

I very frequently used to retire into a solitary place . . . for contemplation on divine things, and secret conversation with God; and had many sweet hours there. . . . I had then, and at other times, the greatest delight in the holy Scriptures, of any book whatsoever. Often times in reading it, every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt a harmony between something in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading; often dwelling long on one sentence, to see the wonders contained in it; and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders.⁶³

In Edwards’s account, one can see that there was an element of intentionality in his reflection. He took time to separate himself from the busyness of life and retire to place

⁶¹ William C. Martin, *The Layman’s Bible Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Southwestern, 1964), 510.

⁶² John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 129.

⁶³ Jonathan Edwards, “Personal Narrative,” in *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harold Simonson (New York: Frederick Unger, 1970), 35–36.

where he could be alone with the Lord. In addition to these times of solitude and reflection, Edwards expresses an emphasis on Scripture. He presents the process of slowly pondering over each sentence in the passage of the Bible he was reading. The longer he spent reading each line, the more wonderful the passage would appear to him.

Piper offers helpful insight into how one might reflect deeply on a biblical passage or topic. In his book *Reading the Bible Supernaturally* he discusses a process of asking questions of the text. First, he suggests that readers ask about the relationship each passage and book has to the rest of the Bible. “And as we see the main points of the books,” Piper says, “we ask questions about how the messages of the books relate to each other. In this way, we move toward the main message of the whole Bible.”⁶⁴ Second, he advises the reader to ask what kind of emotional response should be elicited from the passage. He explains, “The authors of Scripture intend for us to feel appropriate emotions in response to everything they reveal about God and man and sin and salvation and holiness and heaven.”⁶⁵ When readers take notice of the intended emotional response, they can be moved by the Scripture in the proper way. Finally, he suggests that the reader ask, “Am I being changed in a way that conforms to what this author intended to communicate?”⁶⁶ One of the main purposes for engaging the Bible is that the reader be changed into the image of Christ. By asking these questions, especially the last one, the Christian can be intentional about engaging the Bible for the purpose of becoming more like Jesus.

Some of the meditation methods found among evangelicals come from combining Bible engagement and other spiritual disciplines. Schwanda explains, “Engaging Scripture was often combined with other spiritual practices, especially prayer

⁶⁴ Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*, 376.

⁶⁵ Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*, 783.

⁶⁶ Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*, 388.

and fasting, to sensitize the readers to the presence of God in their daily lives.”⁶⁷

Combining Scripture reading with another discipline allows the reader of God’s Word to engage it in a deeper and more meaningful way.

George Müller (1805–1898) is one such example of an evangelical combining Bible engagement with prayer. Müller describes the difficulties he faced during his personal prayer life: “I often spent a quarter of an hour to an hour on my knees struggling to pray while my mind wandered.”⁶⁸ He discovered that the answer to the problem of a wandering mind during prayer is to read and meditate upon Scripture beforehand. He states, “As my heart is nourished by the truth of the Word, I am brought into true fellowship with God. I speak to my Father and to my Friend . . . about the things that he has brought before me in his precious Word.”⁶⁹ The change that took place in Müller’s life was so transformative that he was baffled by the fact that he had not seen the connection between meditation and prayer earlier. “It often astonishes me,” says Müller, “that I did not see the importance of meditation upon scripture earlier in my Christian life.”⁷⁰ He explains the relationship he discovered between prayer and meditation: “When we pray, we speak to God. This exercise of the soul can be best performed after the inner man has been nourished by meditation on the World of God.”⁷¹

Don Whitney (1954–), in his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, also presents Müller’s connection between prayer and as an example to follow.⁷² In a summary of his account of Müller’s prayer life, Whitney states, “Meditation is the

⁶⁷ Schwanda, *The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality*, 112.

⁶⁸ George Müller, *The Autobiography of George Müller* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1984), 139.

⁶⁹ Müller, *Autobiography*, 139.

⁷⁰ Müller, *Autobiography*, 139.

⁷¹ Müller, *Autobiography*, 140.

⁷² Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 89–93.

missing link between Bible intake and prayer.”⁷³ Although he agrees with Müller, Whitney also presents praying over a passage of Scripture as a means of meditation itself.⁷⁴ The act of reading a passage and considering what one might pray back to God is itself a process for intentionally meditating on Scripture and can be practiced by someone wanting to enhance both their prayer life and their engagement with the Bible.

Whitney also takes this process of praying a step further than Müller by developing a way of praying systematically through the psalms, which he calls “The Psalms of the Day.”⁷⁵ He explains that the psalms are a particularly good portion of Scripture for prayer because they contain every Christian doctrine and every human emotion.⁷⁶ What is more, Whitney explains that the psalms are fitting for prayer because of the purpose for which they were written. “God gave the Psalms to us,” he writes, “so that we would give the Psalms back to God. No other book of the Bible was inspired for that express purpose”⁷⁷ This truth makes the psalms an easy starting point for a person learning to pray the Bible as well as a deep well for continue Bible engagement.

While there are many other examples of meditation upon the Bible found among the evangelicals, the two methods discussed in this section should suffice to enable a reader of God’s Word to engage it intentionally and meaningfully. The Christian seeking to increase spiritual growth from Bible engagement would do well to learn to think deeply upon the text and to pray through it.

⁷³ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 93.

⁷⁴ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 61–62.

⁷⁵ The exact process for identifying the psalms of the day is not necessary for the purposes of this chapter. For a detailed explanation of his process for identifying the Psalm of the Day see Donald Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 48–50.

⁷⁶ Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 54.

⁷⁷ Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, 47.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the evangelical tradition has been presented as a well of wisdom for Bible engagement from which modern readers of God's Word may draw. From the very beginning of the evangelical movement, the Bible has been a central component of their spirituality and a primary means of sanctification. Evangelicals provide examples of various methods and settings for Bible intake as well as powerful ways of meditating on Scripture. Their motivation for this level of Bible engagement stems from their beliefs about the Bible being inspired and transformative.

The church in every age needs to renew its commitment to the Bible as God's Word because it is the means by which God shapes his people into the image of his Son. It is a tragedy when God's people are not motivated or able to engage with his Word in a meaningful way. Thus, it is imperative that pastors train their congregations to engage with God's Word for their own growth, the good of the church, and the glory of God. Evangelicals can serve as an exemplary model for how to do just that.

CHAPTER 4

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MINISTRY PROJECT

This chapter details the development, implementation, and results of the project designed to train the members of the First Baptist Church of Commerce, Oklahoma to engage the Bible for spiritual growth. This project had three goals: (1) assess the current attitudes and practices of Bible engagement among the members of the church; (2) develop an eight-week course on how to engage the Bible for spiritual growth; and (3) enhance Bible engagement among a group of church members by teaching the eight-week course. The development and implementation of this project began on April 15, 2024, and was completed in three phases over a period of sixteen weeks, ending on July 31, 2024. In the first phase, I developed a curriculum to address the needs of FBC members and promoted it to the church as an opportunity to enhance their interactions with the Bible. The second phase consisted of testing the group that registered for the class and teaching them the material that had been developed. The third and final phase included collecting data via a post-course survey and analyzing that data for information regarding any changes or development in the attitudes and practices of Bible engagement among participants. The following is a detailed explanation of the project from start to finish.

Phase 1: Initial Preparation

Course Development

The first step in phase 1 of this project was to develop a course to address the need of enhanced Bible engagement among the FBC members. My desire as the pastor of this church was to motivate the members to engage the Bible and give them the knowledge to do so. I wanted to give them an explanation of the purpose and nature of Scripture so

that they might understand God's intention for their Bible engagement. The course also expanded the participants' perception and understanding of Bible engagement in order that they might be able to engage the Bible better in various settings and situations in addition to their personal reading of Scripture.

Much of the content and material in the curriculum was inspired by the exegetical work for chapter 2 and the survey of evangelical Bible engagement habits completed for chapter 3. The examination of evangelicals resulted in a harvest of concepts and approaches to Bible engagement that can be implemented by readers of the Bible today. For example, Robert Murray M'Cheyne is a model for Bible engagement as he created a system for intentionally reading through the entire Bible in a set amount of time. This kind of attitude toward Bible engagement is noteworthy and deserving of emulation. One other such example is Don Whitney's method for praying the Bible, which enables the reader of God's Word to also meditate upon it for additional spiritual growth. This approach combining biblical examples and historical examples of the evangelical tradition was used to create the curriculum for the eight-week course.

Course Details

This section provides details of the course development, including the logic and reasoning behind the decisions made in the development of the course. The course was later submitted to an expert panel for review. The course consisted of eight lessons, each designed to address a different element of Bible engagement. This outline reflects the contents for the course:

1. God's Purpose for Engaging the Bible
2. Intentional Personal Bible Intake
3. Meditation Methods, Part 1
4. Meditation Methods, Part 2
5. Engaging the Bible through Sermons
6. Engaging the Bible through Small Groups

7. Engaging the Bible with Family

8. Putting It All Together

Each session was broken into three sections of teaching, discussion, and homework. The section that contained instruction was called “Learn It.” In the “Learn it” section students were presented with a basic outline of the session with blanks to fill. The blanks encouraged participants to remain engaged during instruction. The overall outline was provided so that students could accurately take notes and have a reference on which they could look back. The section designed for discussion was called “Talk about It.” During this part of the session, students discussed the lesson and/or practiced the lesson in groups. This time allowed students to immediately put into practice the various Bible engagement ideas and methods just presented in class. Practicing these techniques and discussing them with fellow participants during class time enhanced the discussion of the class as a whole. Students were more willing to say they needed help or to ask questions when they saw that others were having the same experience. The final section was called “Live It,” and was designed to give participants practical ways they could immediately incorporate the session content into their lives the following week. The following paragraphs are a summary of each session of the course.

Session 1: God’s Purpose for Engaging the Bible

The thesis of the lesson was that God gave humanity the Bible as the primary means to fulfill their purpose of increasingly reflecting God’s image by communing with him. Participants were presented with a brief overview of the narrative of the Bible, connecting the theme of God’s image from the Old Testament and Christlikeness in the New Testament. To establish this thesis, the lesson presented the students with a study of Genesis 1:27, Matthew 28:18–20, Romans 8:29, and 1 Timothy 3:16, which showed the role the Bible plays in Christians conforming to the image of Christ. This session also introduced students to the concept of Bible engagement as compared to Bible intake.

For group work, participants were broken up into groups to discuss and brainstorm various ways to engage the Bible outside of the personal Bible reading. This activity was meant to demonstrate the limited scope of Bible engagement that could exist in the Christian mind.

The homework for this lesson was to read the Bible personally on four separate occasions during the week according to a provided plan. The plan consisted of three chapters per day. On the first day, students read Genesis 1, Matthew 1, and Acts 1. This schedule was repeated for the other three days. This homework activity was designed to introduce students to the idea of reading the Bible intentionally with a scheduled plan, which would be discussed in the following session.

Session 2: Intentional Personal Bible Intake

The thesis of this lesson was that Christians should seek to engage the entire Bible and do so intentionally. Intentionality in Bible reading includes both what to read and how to read during one's personal Bible intake time. Students were introduced to a variety of ways of intentionally reading through the Bible, including examples found among both classic and modern evangelicals. The lesson gave students two approaches to Bible reading: reading through multiple books at a time and reading through single books at a time.

Rather than splitting the group into smaller groups, the class was asked to discuss the pros and cons of each Bible reading. They then discussed which plan would best suit their lifestyle. Homework for the week was to read through a single book multiple times as opposed to the previous week's homework which was to read through multiple books at a time. The book selected was Ephesians.

Session 3: Meditation Methods, Part 1

The thesis of this lesson was that Christians are called to meditate upon God's Word for spiritual growth and godliness. In this lesson, students were guided through a

study of Psalm 1 to expose them to the concept of biblical meditation. Once the nature and purpose of meditation was established, they were given a few meditation methods to use. These methods were (1) emphasizing different words of the text, (2) writing and carrying the text throughout the day, and (3) asking questions of the text.

The group activity was to gather into groups, read a passage, and select a verse upon which to meditate using the method of emphasizing different words of the text. This activity was followed by a discussion with the entire class. The homework for the week required students to continue reading the book of Ephesians multiple times during the week, but this time they should pause to meditate upon a verse or phrase each time they read using one of the suggested meditation methods.

Session 4: Meditation Methods, Part 2

This lesson builds upon the foundation of biblical meditation taught in the previous session. The thesis of this lesson was that praying the Bible is an excellent method for meditation upon God's Word that can be practiced easily by Christians. This session was heavily influenced by Don Whitney's *Praying the Bible*.¹ Students were instructed on how to pray the Bible using Psalm 23.

Instead of a group activity, the students received designated time alone to pray through Psalm 23. After the allotted time, they returned to the group for a discussion of their experience praying the Bible. The homework for the week gave students a list of passages comprised of Psalms 1, 100, 121, 67, and 13 on which they should pray through. These psalms contain a variety of genres and content. By praying through these psalms, students were exposed to praying different genres of psalms, such as psalms of praise and psalms of lament.

¹ Donald Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

Session 5: Engaging the Bible through Sermons

The thesis for this lesson was that Christians may engage the Bible through sermons and should therefore intentionally prepare to engage the Bible during sermons. Students were presented with a brief history of the place preaching and hearing God's Word has held for God's people. This history consisted of the Old Testament example of Nehemiah 8 when the people of God gathered to hear the law read and explained. It also looked at the New Testament example of Jesus Christ himself who spent time preaching to the people. Finally, this lesson presented students with a few examples from church history. Students were given various methods for engaging the sermon such as pre-sermon meditation, post-sermon discussion, and tips for taking notes during sermons.

For the group activity, students gathered into smaller groups to read the passage that was about to be preached the next hour in the worship service. Since this class occurred during Sunday school, they would have the immediate opportunity to engage with the Bible through the sermon during the following service. For homework, students were given the next week's sermon text upon which they should meditate throughout the week before hearing the passage preached.

Session 6: Engaging the Bible through Small Groups

The thesis for this lesson was that Christians benefit from reading the Bible together in community. This session presented students with passages from the Bible that show how Christians can interact with one another through the biblical texts. This included passages such as Colossians 3:16, which states that Christians should teach one another with the Word. Once students had been instructed about the importance of reading in community, they were presented with a framework for small group that included questions to ask of the text together.

For the group activity, students gathered in smaller groups and practiced a small group Bible study using the questions provided. For homework they were challenged to think of potential people in their life with whom they might start a Bible study.

Session 7: Engaging the Bible with Family

The thesis of this session was that family members have a biblical responsibility to interact with one another via the Bible. This responsibility is observed in passages such as Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 5–6. In addition to biblical passages, this lesson instructed them on how to read the Bible with their spouses and children.

For the group activity, students gathered into smaller groups to discuss reading the Bible with their families. They used a set of provided questions to guide their discussion of the difficulties and realities of reading the Bible with their families. Finally, they were asked to formulate a realistic picture of how they could read the Bible with their families. Homework for the week was for students to read the Bible at least once with their spouse and once with their children, if applicable.

Session 8: Putting It All Together

The purpose of this session was to provide students with a review of the first seven sessions of the class and to help them create a personal Bible engagement plan moving forward. They were asked to explicitly write down their plans for intentionally engaging the Bible through the various concepts presented in the class. The purpose of this exercise was to help students embody James 1:22, which encourages Christians not just to hear the Word, but to do as it says. This session did not include group work as students will spend time formulating their own personal Bible engagement plan.

Course Evaluation

To ensure the quality of the course, it was necessary to create a system of evaluation to provide intentional constructive outside feedback with which I could improve

the course before teaching it. This system of evaluation included assembling an expert panel, creating a rubric for evaluation, and using the panel's feedback to improve the course. The following paragraphs detail this process.

Expert Panel

I assembled an expert panel to evaluate the material for biblical accuracy and student accessibility. This panel consisted of three people with the proper skill set, expertise, and situation in life to evaluate a course like this. The panel was selected based on educational background, history of service in ministry, and demographic.

Panelist 1 is the Director of Missions for the Northeastern Baptist Association, which is the local Baptist association in which FBC participates. He holds a Doctor of Ministry degree in Church Revitalization from a Southern Baptist seminary. He has also pastored several Southern Baptist churches in Oklahoma and Arkansas. He was selected for this panel for two reasons. First, he created and implemented a Doctor of Ministry project for his own doctoral project, giving him the ability to properly evaluate the appropriateness of the course as a project. Second, his pastoral experience in ministry in south-central United States and his familiarity with FBC in particular allowed him to evaluate the course material for accessibility to the average church member.

Panelist 2 is a local pastor in Oklahoma who holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Christian Philosophy from a Southern Baptist seminary. He has also been an adjunct professor for Oklahoma Baptist University and Dallas Baptist University. His experience of being a pastor and a professor gave him the ability to evaluate the course material from academic and pastoral standpoints.

Panelist 3 is a Doctor of Philosophy student at a Southern Baptist seminary. She has also served as a Collegiate Ministries Assistant for the Oklahoma Baptists and has been a faithful member of the local church, serving as a women's Sunday school teacher. She was selected as a panelist based on her academic experience and her perspective as a female in the local church.

Evaluation Rubric

In addition to assembling a panel, it was also necessary to create a rubric with which the panel would evaluate the material of the course.² A rubric was necessary to ensure the panelists provided feedback that was relevant to the purpose of the course. The rubric consisted of the following eight criteria:

1. The curriculum is biblically and theologically sound.
2. The curriculum uses individual Scriptures within their proper context.
3. The content of the curriculum addresses the subject of Bible engagement.
4. The curriculum is accessible for the average church member.
5. Each lesson provides opportunities for participants to practice what is taught.
6. The curriculum is clear and well organized.
7. Each lesson has one clear main idea.
8. The curriculum presents multiple ways for engaging the Bible.

Panelists were asked to evaluate the curriculum based on the rubric using a four-point scale ranging from insufficient to exemplary. Each criterion line also included a section for comments, so panelists could explain their assessment if need be. In addition to the criteria given, the rubric also provided a section for other comments to give the panelist the opportunity to provide additional feedback that was not addressed with the criteria provided. This format allowed for the specific feedback I needed for the course while also allowing the panelists to provide useful feedback in areas I had not considered.

Panel Evaluations

Once the panelists agreed to participate, I sent them the course content in the form of a detailed and annotated outline in addition to the rubric. The panelists returned the rubrics after evaluating the course using the sliding scale provided for each criterion.

² See appendix 2.

(1=insufficient, 2=requires attention, 3=sufficient, 4=exemplary) The panelists scored the course material as “exemplary” in all areas except two.³

Panelist 2 gave a “3” rating to the criterion that states, “The curriculum uses individual Scriptures within their proper context.” His reason stated was that I needed to add “passages where people in the Bible engage with the Bible as examples in context.” Panelist 3 gave a “3” rating to the criterion that states, “The curriculum is biblically and theologically sound.” She provided several comments for her reasoning. One such comment was that my use of John 1:14 in session 1 was out of context because that passage “does not by itself communicate all those truths.”

In addition to rating the course with the interval data types, panelists also provided feedback in the “other comments” section of the evaluation. The comments made here were helpful and were used to improve the course curriculum to be more biblical and accessible for church members.

Course Improvement

The course evaluations from the panel of experts proved to be insightful and helpful. While many constructive comments were given in the evaluations, I was not able or willing to make every change suggested. I was, however, able to make several key improvements to the course based on their comments, which will now be discussed.

Panelist 3 stated that “attention needs to be given to how session 7 applies to/can be implemented by singles.” Her comments led me to include examples of how families could involve others in their family devotions. The same panelist also suggested participants consider how to “engage multiple senses” and involve “unique learning styles” into family Bible reading. This resulted in the inclusion of several additional methods of Bible engagement for families. I originally suggested creating a reward system for behaving during family Bible reading, but this panelist led me to include tactile movements

³ See appendix 4.

and artistic expressions as another form of encouraging Bible reading among families. For example, parents might read a Bible passage and ask their children to draw what they heard or create a short skit about the passage.

In his comments, panelist 2 stated, “In the study there are moments that engagement with the Bible could be connected more clearly to engagement with God himself.” This comment was particularly striking and inspired the addition of the concept of communing with God during Bible engagement. Thus far, the course focused on the discipleship aspect of Bible engagement but lacked the aspect of worship. Because of this comment from panelist 2, I placed proper emphasis on communion with God in session 1, which addresses the purpose of Bible engagement.

After evaluation, the course was amended into its final form before teaching it to the FBC members. At this point the course was announced and promoted to the broader church to establish pool of members to participate in the study.

Course Promotion

The promotion of the class began on Sunday, May 19, 2024. This was done during the Sunday morning worship service at FBC. Announcements are usually placed at the beginning of the service, but instead of announcing at the beginning with all the other announcements, I waited until it was time for me to step to the pulpit to preach. I did this for several reasons. First, many people arrive late to the worship services and miss the announcement portion of the service. Therefore, I moved the announcement about the course to the middle of the service to ensure the highest amount of people would hear it. Second, children leave the service just before the sermon to go to children’s church. Announcing the class after the children had left the room likely resulted in more people being able to hear the announcement and all the details. Third, I wanted the announcement to be isolated from all other announcements to remove any additional

mental noise from the other announcements. This also allowed me to spend extra time addressing this announcement about the class.

The vision statement at FBC is “Becoming More Like Jesus Together.” FBC also says that it accomplishes this vision by emphasizing three core values: Word, Community, and Mission. When promoting the class, I sought to connect the class I was teaching and the vision and values as a church. I decided to call the class “Through His Word,” which is a phrase I often use in conjunction with the vision statement. Naming this class “Through His Word” helped church members see that this class would help them become more like Jesus through his Word and fulfill the church’s vision.

The class was promoted for two weeks prior to the first class session. A sign-up sheet was provided in the back of the church for potential participants to enroll. During those two weeks I stood in the back of the church after the service near the sign-up sheet to allow for any questions people might have about the class.

The course would take place on Sunday mornings during the church’s Sunday school hour right before the worship service. I chose this time because it would ensure the highest amount of participation as this is a time most members already have blocked off for attending church.

Phase 2: Implementing the Course

The course began on June 2, 2024, and concluded on July 21, 2024, consisting of eight sessions. Each session was scheduled at 9:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings, which is the regularly schedule hour for Sunday school at FBC. The class began with twenty-six members taking the pre-course survey and ended with sixteen completing the post-course survey and attending or watching at least six class sessions.

Recruiting Participants

Class participants were recruited form the membership at FBC. The course was announced during Sunday worship services for two weeks prior to class along with a

sign-up sheet posted at the back of the church. This allowed for a wide range of potential participants. It was desirable to broadcast widely to the church to increase the likelihood of obtaining survey results that would accurately reflect the attitudes and practices in Bible engagement of the church members. Participants were notified to arrive at the first class by 9:00 a.m. This time was set to provide participants enough time to complete the pre-course survey

Conducting the Pre-Course Survey

A survey was created to measure the attitudes and practices of Bible engagement among FBC members.⁴ This survey was comprised of thirty-one items. These items included four demographic questions, three Bible engagement questions, and twenty-four statements relating to Bible engagement measured with a Likert-scale.

When participants arrived at the first class, they were instructed to create and write a four-digit pin number in the space provided instead of their personal name. This step was taken to provide a level of anonymity so that they would be more willing to share honest answers about their Bible engagement habits. The pin number was also necessary to be able to compare each participant's pre-course survey to a post-course survey that would be given after the completion of the class. Once students finished their surveys, they were collected and stored securely for later use. After the surveys were collected the first session of class commenced.

Teaching the Course

The course was taught for eight consecutive weeks between June 2, 2024, and July 21, 2024. The following list provides the dates and titles of each class session:

1. June 2, 2024: "God's Purpose for Bible Engagement"
2. June 9, 2024: "Intentional Personal Bible Intake"

⁴ See appendix 1.

3. June 16, 2024: “Meditation Methods Part 1”
4. June 23, 2024: “Meditation Methods Part 2”
5. June 30, 2024: “Engaging the Bible through Sermons”
6. July 7, 2024: “Engaging the Bible through Small Groups”
7. July 14, 2024: “Engaging the Bible with Family”
8. July 21, 2024: “Putting It All Together”

A summary of each of these lessons was provided previously in the in the “Course Details” section. The course was altered after the evaluation from the expert panel, but the changes made did not affect the overall content of the course.

The week of each class session followed the same general pattern, both in preparation before the class and instruction of the class. Each week occurred as follows:

1. I spent approximately one to two hours studying the course content and preparing the documents to give to students to use during the session. The time spent on this step varied depending on the content of the lesson.
2. Each Saturday before class I went to the church to print documents or additional handouts needed for the following morning’s class. I also took this time to prepare or rearrange the room for my class session as the room that was used was also used for other events during the week. I also chose to take advantage of this time of solitude and silence at the church as a time of prayer and spiritual preparation.
3. At the beginning of each class session, I set up a recording device to capture the session that would be later posted to a private YouTube channel. Students were provided a link via our church app to access the video.
4. As students arrived, I greeted them and made sure they all obtained a copy of the notes for that session of class. These notes contained the outline of the class for that day with some blanks, instructions for the group activity, and the homework for the following week.
5. Each class session began with prayer and a review of the lesson and homework from the previous week. This was a time when students could share successes and difficulties that occurred during their application of the previous week’s lesson.
6. After a time of review, each lesson was divided into three sections. First, I instructed the students on the new course content. Second, the students were asked to participate in either a group activity or application activity. Finally, students were given homework to complete before the next class session.
7. As soon as possible after the session I uploaded the video and the notes to the private YouTube channel. This upload usually took place on Sunday evenings.

The only deviation from this routine was the final class session that took place on July 21, 2024. During this final class session, there was a review of the content from the first seven sessions. After the review, students were given the Personal Bible Engagement Plan worksheet with which they were asked to put together a plan for their Bible engagement moving forward.⁵ I explained each portion of the plan and students were given time to write down their plans. Students were instructed to make realistic plans and commitments depending on their capacity and situation in life. I added this element to the course so that the students could embody James 1:22, which calls believers to live the Word, not just hear it. After the students completed their Personal Bible Engagement Plan worksheets, they were given the post-course survey.

Conducting the Post-Course Survey

I asked the students to complete the post-course survey after the conclusion of the final class session. This survey was a replica of the pre-course survey except for the addition of eight short answer questions at the end. I instructed the students to complete the survey using their personal pin numbers created at the time of the pre-course survey. All the surveys were collected after completion to be used for comparative analysis with the pre-course survey.

Phase 3: Analyzing the Results

The first and third goals of this project were dependent on an analysis of the attitudes and practices of Bible engagement of a group of FBC members. The first goal was to assess the current attitudes and practices of Bible engagement among the members of the church before taking the course. In addition to facilitating the completion of the pre-course surveys, I also analyzed the pre-course data to observe the frequency distribution of the Likert scale.

⁵ See appendix 6.

The third goal of this project was to enhance Bible engagement among a group of church members by teaching an eight-week class. After the completion of the teaching of the course and the testing of participants I spent time analyzing the data from the project. Upon review of the surveys, I discovered that some surveys should not be used in the final analysis. The course began with twenty-six completed surveys but finished with sixteen properly completed surveys. Surveys were excluded if (1) the participant did not complete the course and therefore did not complete a post-course survey, (2) the participant completed the post-course survey, but missed more than two class sessions, or (3) if the participant completed the post-course survey but failed to answer every question.

The results for the sixteen properly completed surveys were compared and analyzed using a paired *t*-test for dependent samples. This comparison was limited to twenty-one of the thirty-one survey items. The reason for this is that the first seven items did not require a Likert-scale response and therefore cannot be compared with a *t*-test. Also, survey items 29, 30, and 31 pertained to engaging the Bible with family members like spouses and children, which did not apply to all participants. Survey items 1–7 and 29–31 were analyzed differently and will be discussed later in this section.

The results for the sixteen properly completed surveys were compared and analyzed using a paired *t*-test for dependent samples. This comparative test produced the following statistical results: ($t_{(15)} = 3.14003, p = 0.003371151$).⁶

In addition to the statistical analysis, I also evaluated the short answers given by the participants on the post-course survey. These short answers will be discussed further in the following chapter, but the students universally answered in the affirmative to the short answer question, “Do you believe you can engage the Bible better after taking this course?”

⁶ See appendix 5 for additional details.

Conclusion

This project was completed in three phases over a fourteen-week period. The three phases of this project were preparation, implementation, and analyzation. The first phase consisted of the development of the eight-week course and the evaluation of the course. The second phase included testing a group of members, teaching them the course, and testing them a second time for research purposes. Finally, the third phase was dedicated to the analysis of the data to determine the effectiveness of the course. All the effort put forth was to achievement the vision to help FBC members become more like Jesus by learning to engage better with the Word of God.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

This chapter contains an evaluation of the project I conducted to train the members of the First Baptist Church of Commerce to engage the Bible for spiritual growth. This evaluation will include an examination of the project's overall purpose as well as its three goals to determine the project's success. After the purpose and goals have been evaluated, I will discuss the strengths and weakness of the project to determine if any aspects of the project could have been done differently. Finally, I will conclude this evaluation by reflecting theologically and personally upon this project that I conducted with a pastor's heart for the glory of God and the good of his people.

Evaluation of Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to train the members of FBC to engage the Bible for spiritual growth. To evaluate the success of this project, one must first understand the need for this project. FBC has long valued the Bible and has trusted it for guidance. The older members can testify to the biblical preaching and teaching in the church's past. Despite this devotion to God's Word, church attendance had dropped heavily during the 2000s and the 2010s. However, by God's grace, the church has stabilized in attendance and membership over the last five years. Those who have joined the church are mainly younger families and new converts. This has resulted in a congregation that was not exposed to the biblical teaching of the past. As the pastor and shepherd of this flock, I believed the best way to ignite the discipleship of both new and existing church members was to give them the tools to interact with the Bible in such a way that results in personal spiritual growth.

There is biblical support for this project's purpose. A clear reading of Scripture shows that God has created humanity to reflect his image as revealed in Christ Jesus. This is evident in passages such as Genesis 1:27, Matthew 28:19–20, and Romans 8:29. God not only calls Christians to reflect Christ, but he also provides the means by which they are to grow in Christlikeness; namely the Bible. Second Timothy 3:16 speaks of the inspired nature of the Scripture as well as its usefulness for becoming a complete man of God. Out of this understanding of Scripture, I cast the vision before FBC that we are created to “Become more like Jesus, together.” We become more like Jesus through his Word. Therefore, the purpose of this project was proper according to the needs of FBC members and the vision Scripture gives for Bible engagement.

To accomplish this purpose, I determined it would be necessary to create a course on Bible engagement to equip church members with the proper attitude toward the Bible as well as the skills to engage the Bible on their own in a variety of ways. I named this course “Through His Word” to align with the vision and values of FBC. To evaluate if teaching the course made a positive impact on the membership, I created a survey to compare participants' attitudes and practices before and after the class.

Evaluation of Project's Goals

To accomplish this project's purpose, I set actionable and testable goals to allow me to determine the success of the project. These goals will now be discussed.

Goal 1: Assess Current Attitudes and Practices of Bible Engagement

The first goal of this project was to assess the current attitudes and practices of Bible engagement among the members of the church. This goal was set because it was necessary to understand the attitudes and practices of the members before they took the course, so I could compare them to their attitudes and practices after taking the course. It would be impossible to measure the effectiveness of this project without this data. This

goal would be considered accomplished when at least twenty members completed surveys and the data had been analyzed for relevant insights.

To obtain the data, I developed the Pre-Course Bible Engagement Survey.¹ This survey was given to a group of willing participants at the beginning of the first class session before any teaching. These participants were those who responded to the open invitation given to the members of the church. Twenty-six surveys were completed and returned on the first day of class. This number of participants exceeded the established benchmark of twenty participants. The data collected from these surveys was later analyzed after the completion of the course.

I analyzed the data from the pre-course survey using a frequency distribution formula, which provided several helpful insights. First, these results confirmed my theory that most of the participants were not using a structured plan for reading the Bible. The most popular response to item 17 (I follow a structured plan for reading the Bible) was “almost never,” with ten participants marking this response. Likewise, the least popular response among the group was “almost always,” with only one participant marking this response. Overall, twenty-one of the twenty-six participants marked 3 or lower on the survey, revealing that 80 percent of the class “almost never,” “rarely,” or “occasionally” follow a structured plan for Bible engagement, confirming my theory.

Second, the frequency distribution also provided unexpected results. Survey items 8, 9, and 11 focus on purpose of Bible reading and engagement. The responses to these survey items were higher than I expected. The average answer to item 8 (I can identify reasons God wants me to read the Bible) was 5.2, which is equivalent to “agree” on the Likert-scale used. The average answer to item 9 (I have one or more purposes each time I read the Bible) was 4.9, which is equivalent to “somewhat agree” on the Likert-scale used. Finally, the average answer to item 11 (I can explain the connection between

¹ See appendix 1.

Bible engagement and discipleship) was 4.04, which is equivalent to “somewhat agree” on the Likert-scale used. I predicted that students would believe that they needed to read the Bible but would not be able to identify the purpose for reading it. While this survey item does not reveal participants’ purposes for reading the Bible, it does reveal that on average they believed they knew why they needed to read and engage the Bible.

Third, the analysis of the responses to survey item 22 (what I read in the Bible influences the way I pray) revealed an equality in the distribution of answers. None of the responses to this statement garnered more than 25 percent of the responses. Item 22 was the only item to have this level of equality in distribution. These results reveal a wide variety of practices in the area of prayer and Bible reading.

The analysis of this data provided me with helpful information about the attitudes and practices of the members of the church, allowing me to accomplish goal 1.

Goal 2: Develop Curriculum for Bible Engagement

The second goal of this project was to develop an eight-week course on how to engage the Bible for spiritual growth. The course content came from personal experience in Bible engagement as well as the study I did for chapters 2 and 3 of this project. Once the course was written, I gave it to a panel of experts who evaluated the course based on criteria provided in an evaluative rubric. This goal was considered accomplished when the panel approved the curriculum.

The panel of experts approved the curriculum and provided significant and helpful feedback via the rubric.² Their feedback both affirmed the strengths of the curriculum and revealed opportunities for improvement. One such example of affirmation was one panelist’s response to the statement “Each lesson provides opportunities for the participants to practice what is taught.” After marking “exemplary” on the rubric he

² See appendix 4

commented, “I found this to be one of the best aspects of the course. It is very practical for people of any maturity level.” An example of the panel revealing opportunities for improvement was when another panelist suggested adding application for single people in the session on engaging the Bible with family.

Goal 3: Enhance Attitudes and Practices of Bible Engagement

The third and final goal of this project was to enhance Bible engagement among a group of church members by teaching an eight-week class. This goal was accomplished in two phases. First, the approved course was taught to a group of church members during the time span of eight weeks. This first phase was accomplished as I was able to successfully teach the curriculum to a group of church members. Second, I obtained new data from this group by administering a post-course survey to compare their attitudes and practices of Bible engagement before and after the course. In addition to the original set of thirty-one items on the survey, I added eight short answer questions to allow me to have additional information about the participants after the course. Of the original twenty-six participants, sixteen participants completed the post-course survey correctly and attended or watched a minimum of six class sessions. Only data from the remaining sixteen participants was paired with their data from the original survey.

To measure this goal I compared the data for participants from the pre- and post-course surveys, and the goal was met when a t -test for dependent samples demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the survey scores: ($t_{(15)} = 3.14003, p = 0.003371151$). It is noteworthy to observe that the mean score of the group increased from 74.43 to 87.06, which is an increase of 12.63. The t -stat value of 3.140039684 is greater than the t -critical one-tail of 1.753050356. The t -critical one-tail was used because I believed teaching the course content would modify the participants’ attitudes and practices toward Bible engagement. Finally, the $p(T \leq t)$ one-tail is less than 0.05, resulting in the test having at least a 95 percent confidence interval. According to

this data analysis, the course had an impact on the attitudes and practices of Bible engagement among the FBC members.

In addition to the results of the *t*-test, there are other noteworthy comments to be made about the success of the project. First, the average score for each statement increased in the post-course survey, except for items 8 and 9, which remained the same. The smallest increase occurred for statement 14 (talking with others about the Bible is helpful). The increase in the averages for this statement was 0.06. The largest increase occurred in statement 20 (I spend time thinking deeply [meditating] upon what I have read in the Bible) with an increase of 1.0 to the average answer.

Second, the largest increase occurred in the area of meditation. Statements 20, 21, and 22 focused on the area of meditation and were the three highest changes in average score (see table 1).

Table 1. Pre- and post-course survey change for statements 20–22

| Survey Statements | Pre-test average | Post-test average | Change |
|--|------------------|-------------------|--------|
| 20. I spend time thinking deeply (meditating) upon what I have read in the Bible. | 3.31 | 4.31 | + 1.00 |
| 21. I practice one or more specific approaches when meditating upon what I have read in the Bible. | 2.44 | 3.31 | + 0.88 |
| 22. What I read in the Bible influences the way I pray. | 3.88 | 4.75 | + 0.88 |

Not only did the scores increase significantly for these three questions, but the average scores for statements 20 and 22 went from averaging in the negative to averaging in the positive. This change shows the overall effectiveness of the sessions on meditation as the data shows that the majority of class improved in this area.

One of the greatest opportunities for improvement was observed in the area of personal Bible intake. Statement 17 (I follow a structured plan for reading the Bible) and statement 19 (I read entire books of the Bible) were two of the lowest scoring survey items

for the group with these statements having average scores of 2.25 and 1.94 respectively. Post-test results show a slight increase in the average answer for each statement (see table 2).

Table 2. Pre- and post-course survey change for statements 17 and 19

| Survey Statement | Pre-test average | Post-test average | Change |
|--|------------------|-------------------|--------|
| 17. I follow a structured plan for reading the Bible | 2.25 | 2.94 | + 0.69 |
| 19. I read entire books of the Bible at one time. | 1.94 | 2.88 | + 0.94 |

Frequency distribution from the pre-course survey also reveals that statements 17 and 19 equally had the greatest number of “Almost Never” answers with 7 each. In the post-test frequency distribution statement 17 only had 1 “Almost Never” answer. This shows that, while there may not have been a large change in the average for question 17, there was a significant shift in the class as all except one person states that they at least “Rarely” follow a structured plan for reading the Bible.

Regarding some of the survey items that could not be compared using the *t*-test, item 1 (do you consider yourself a believer in Jesus?) revealed that every participant professed to be a believer. Survey item 2 (are you married?) showed that twenty-one of the twenty-six participants (80 percent) were married. Of these twenty-one participants who were married, twelve completed both the pre- and post-course survey. I analyzed this group’s survey responses to item 29 (I read the Bible with my spouse) and discovered that the average response before taking the course was 2.67, but after taking the course was 3.33. This comparison shows that an increase in the frequency with which these participants engaged the Bible with their spouse. Survey item 3 (do you have children under 18 in the home?) revealed that fifteen of the twenty-six participants (58 percent) have children under the age of eighteen in their home. Of these fifteen participants with children, ten completed both the pre- and post-course surveys. I analyzed this group’s

responses to survey item 30 (I read the Bible with my children) and found that the average response before taking the course was 3.0, but after taking the course was 3.4. This comparison shows a slight increase in Bible engagement with children among this group.

In addition to the original Likert scale questions of the pre-course survey, I also included eight short answer questions on the post-course survey.³ The short answers added a qualitative aspect to the project in addition to the data obtained from the Likert-scale questions. Short answers also allowed the participants freedom to identify areas where they perceived to have experienced the most growth having taken the class. Question 36 (what was the most helpful part of this course?) and question 39 (what was the most significant thing you learned in this course?) produced similar answers, revealing a common sentiment for most of the class. A majority of students responded to these questions by mentioning they learned multiple new ways of engaging the Bible. A few such examples are, “The most helpful part for me was learning different methods of reading and engaging the Bible” and “I have a better understanding of how to use different methods to engage [the Bible] so that I do not become overwhelmed.” I was pleased to see these responses because I structured the entire class around expanding their understanding of Bible engagement and to introduce them to alternate ways of interacting with the Scripture.

Based on the statistical data and the qualitative responses of the participants, goal 3 was accomplished. The participants were positively impacted by the course.

Strengths of the Project

The first strength of this project was the relatability of the overall purpose, which was to equip FBC members to engage the Bible for spiritual growth. This purpose clearly spoke to a wide range of members at the church. The Sunday morning worship service typically has approximately forty adults in attendance. Of the regular attenders

³ See appendix 6.

and members, twenty-six members responded to the open invitation to participate in a class about Bible engagement. That is over 50 percent of the church resonating with the purpose of the class. In addition to the large percentage of the church participating, we also had a wide variety of participants. Again, this speaks to the overall appeal of the purpose of the project to a broad audience comprised of people who were single, married, parents, widowed, retired, or working.

The second strength of this project was the content of the course. Most of the participants reported having a new broadened understanding of Bible engagement. I intentionally sought to structure each lesson around particular methods of engaging the Bible. I knew from my pastoral interactions with the members of the church that many of these concepts, such as praying the Bible or family worship, would be foreign to them. Knowing this, I refrained from combining concepts into a single lesson. In fact, I separated meditation into two parts in order to provide extra instruction on a concept that would require more attention. As a result of teaching this content, the majority of participants reported that they learned new ways of engaging the Bible.

A third strength of this project was the element of immediate practice. Each lesson contained two opportunities for participants to put their new-found knowledge into practice. First, students were asked to practice the new concept during the class time itself. An example of this is when students were given ten minutes to prepare to hear the sermon for the day directly after learning how to prepare for sermons. Second, students were given as homework specific ways to apply the content in their daily lives and to report on the homework the following week. This element of immediate practice created the most enjoyable aspect of the class, which was seeing people understand the content. It was a joy to hear participants talk about how the newly learned method of Bible engagement impacted their life over the previous week. I also attribute much of the improvement observed in the statistical data to the element of immediate practice.

The final strength of this project was the element of repeatability. The course produced for this project can be repeated on two levels. First, the class can be repeated on the church level. It could be administered again at a later date at FBC for new members or members who did not participate the first time. This would also provide an opportunity for another teacher in the church to administer the course and add their own insights and practices. Second, the content of this course can be repeated on a personal level. Anyone who participated in this class could take the individual methods for engaging the Bible and teach them to other people in their lives, such as family members or coworkers.

Weaknesses of the Project

While this project was a success and had numerous strengths, it is proper and beneficial to examine the weaknesses of this project. The weaknesses did not prevent the success of the project, but may have prevented further positive effects for both the participants and me. By God's grace, prayerful examination of these weaknesses will lead to potential ideas for improvement.

The first weakness of this project was the disruption in progress that resulted from changes in my life during this degree. After beginning this degree, I transitioned from the associate pastor to the senior pastor at my church. There was an increase in responsibility that I did not anticipate and that I did not manage well at times. This change resulted in periods of delayed progress in this project. In turn, one may observe a lack of continuity between chapter 2, chapter 3, and the final curriculum created for the Bible engagement course. For example, I placed heavy emphasis on Scripture memory in chapter 2 but placed little emphasis on it in the curriculum I developed. Vice versa, the curriculum contained aspects of Bible engagement not discussed in chapter 2, like family worship. This project would have been strengthened by greater cohesion throughout the various aspects of the process.

The second weakness of this project has to do with the timing of the implementation of the course. Due to a variety of circumstances, I was unable to begin

teaching this course until the summer months of 2024. The eight-week course began on June 2 and finished on July 21. I knew that this was not an ideal time to begin a course that required consistent attendance on a weekly basis due to the fact that many church members have busy summer schedules with their children and grandchildren. To mitigate the effect of the busy schedules, I recorded each session and made it available online for those who were unable to attend. While the majority of the class was able to attend or view the minimum requirement of six sessions to qualify for the post-course survey, some participants did not participate in a sufficient number of sessions and I was unable to include their results in the final data. This weakness did not prevent those who attended less from benefiting from the sessions they attended. Neither did this weakness prevent me from obtaining a sufficient sample of church members for a successful *t*-test. However, the timing of the scheduling of the course inevitably limited the opportunity for a larger sample size and additional data.

The third weakness of this project was the length of each class session. I scheduled the class to occur during the Sunday school hour at the church to increase the number of potential participants. This is a time that most people in the church already have blocked off on a weekly basis. We also already had childcare available for parents at this time. Despite these obvious benefits, the class was limited by the fact that we only had sixty minutes to complete each class session. There were also weeks in which we had less than the scheduled sixty minutes because our small church has a culture of not starting on time. The time restriction resulted in limited time at the end of class for further discussion of the lesson for the day.

A fourth weakness of this project was the development and administration of the Bible Engagement Survey. The survey used was sufficient to measure a statistical change among the class. Also, the quantitative Likert-scale results of the survey were confirmed by the qualitative short answers. However, some statements used for the Likert-scale were not worded properly, and therefore did not measure what I originally

intended. For example, statement 15 read, “I find it difficult to read the Bible with my family.” This statement is poorly worded because it is possible for a participant to have both a better attitude toward family Bible reading and increase their frequency of family Bible reading, but still find it “difficult” to do. Therefore, the answer for most participants remained the same on the post-course survey, regardless of if there was an improvement in their attitude or practice of Bible engagement.

A fifth weakness regarding the post-course survey was its administration. At the end of the last class session, I administered the post-course survey. Once participants were finished with their survey, they returned them and were free to leave the room. I did not look at the surveys as they were given to me in order to preserve anonymity for the participants. Once the post-course surveys were collected and analyzed, I realized that some participants did not answer every question on the survey. Unfortunately, this resulted in the exclusion of these surveys in the final analysis of the data. While the data collected was sufficient for the completion of the project, more data would be desirable. In retrospect, I should have asked participants to double check their work to make sure they completed the surveys properly before submitting them.

A final weakness of this project was the lack of midweek communication and accountability. While the majority of participants were able to complete the homework and watch the videos of the sessions they missed in person, some students were not. During some of the discussions about the homework from the previous week, some participants stated that they forgot to do some or all of the homework or watch the video. My communication with the participants mainly occurred during class time with a few exceptions. Other than two sessions, the students were not encouraged to interact outside of class time. Midweek communication may have resulted in more properly completed post-course surveys.

What I Would Do Differently

The weaknesses of this project reveal aspects that could be changed to improve the overall effectiveness of the project. If I were to do this project again from the beginning, I would alter a few aspects. First, I would have scheduled the course to take place at a different time of the year. As mentioned, I conducted the teaching during the summer months. This proved to be a difficult time to implement the course as it is busy for much of the church, including myself. It would have been better to teach this course in the spring or the fall. The schedules of the people in my church are not as busy during these times of the year. Hypothetically, this would have led to more consistent attendance and more proper test samples. More importantly, more participants might have received the training to engage the Bible better.

The second aspect of the project I would have done differently is to do additional research into the development of Likert-scale statements. I initially developed a rough draft of the survey at the beginning of my degree. Once it came time to develop and implement the course, I revisited the survey and made major revisions with the aid of my supervisor. The revisions made were an improvement and allowed for the survey to provide meaningful data. However, when I look back on some of the questions and statements, there was still room for improvement. As mentioned, a few statements did not allow for meaningful change. An example would be statement 14 (talking with others about the Bible is helpful). I used a frequency distribution analysis on this item on the pre-course survey, which revealed that of the 26 participants in the class 16 marked “Strongly Agree,” 8 marked “Agree,” and 2 marked “Somewhat Agree.” While this data does show that the group valued group interaction in Bible reading, it does not capture the essence of the session I taught on reading the Bible in small groups, nor does it provide room for growth as most Christians would say reading the Bible with others is helpful. A better statement on this topic would have been “I read the Bible with others outside of church events” or “I feel confident in my ability to converse about the Bible with others.”

A third aspect I would change is analyzing the pre-test data I obtained before teaching the rest of the course. Before the beginning of the first-class session, I administered the pre-course survey, but I did not analyze the data obtained from the pre-course survey until I compared it with the post-course survey after the conclusion of the course. I should have analyzed this data between obtaining it and the teaching of the second session. While this did not prevent the success of the project, it would have been beneficial to have an awareness of the participants' answers as I proceeded through the course. Despite this oversight, I was able to analyze the pre-course data after the course and it did provide helpful information at that time. Also, while the information gained from analyzing the pre-course data was helpful and could have improved my teaching, it would not have resulted in any major changes to the course content or structure.

The final aspect I would change about this project is to create an accountability and communication system for the participants for the duration of the eight-week course. This system would include midweek reminders about homework. These reminders could have come in the form of text messages or phone calls from me depending on the participants' preference. In addition to a communication system, I might also include an accountability component that would connect participants of the course with another participant of the same gender during the week to encourage more meaningful interaction with the course content and the Bible.

Theological Reflections

As I reflect on the experience of implementing this project, I am struck with a plethora of lessons I learned along the way. In this section I will share the more meaningful theological insights gained from this experience. The first insight gained from this project is reminder of the power of the Word of God. I have always believed in the efficacy and necessity of the Bible for discipleship. God makes it clear through passages like 2 Timothy 3:16 that he means for Christians to regularly interact with the Word in order to grow in Christlikeness. I have taught about the importance of Bible in the life of the Christian many

times from the pulpit and even presented the Word of God as a core value at FBC. I deeply believe in the power of the Word of God, but I was reminded anew of its power during this project several times.

I was reminded of the power of the Word of God as I studied and exegeted passages from the Bible for chapter 2 of this work. The text of Nehemiah 8 displays the simple beauty of hearing and responding to the reading of God's Word. Psalm 1 invites the believer into the practice of meditating upon the Scripture and allowing it to produce spiritual fruit in one's life. I was also reminded of the power of God's Word as I studied the Bible engagement habits of evangelicals for chapter 3 of this work. The leaders from the evangelical movement encouraged personal Bible engagement from the beginning of the movement. Finally, I was reminded of the power of the Word as I saw FBC members learning to engage the Bible meaningfully on their own for the first time in their life. It was beautiful to see these followers of Christ grasp the idea of Bible engagement and various ways they can incorporate the Word of God into their daily lives.

As a pastor who preaches and teaches the Bible multiple times each week, I feel a tendency to become too calloused toward the Bible, forgetting that the book I am so privileged to preach is the mighty Word of God that contains the truth that transforms the sinner to saint. This project affirmed what I have believed for years.

A second theological insight I gained from this project is the beauty and necessity of discipleship. It is possible that the term "make disciples" has become a cliché in recent years because of the heavy emphasis placed on it in evangelical circles, yet this should not detour pastors from devoting their ministries to discipling the people in their church because Christians are starving for discipleship. When I gave the open invitation to the church that I would be teaching a Bible engagement class during the summer, I did not anticipate over half of the church signing up. I also expected the class to be comprised of mainly younger members, but to my surprise several older members participated as well. I believe this is because Christians crave discipleship regardless of age or maturity.

In addition to the overwhelming response to attend the class, I also observed the benefits of direct and intentional discipleship. I was able to witness the growth of participants on a weekly basis because I was in the same room as them, discussing the content and hearing their responses. This is not something I get to do often with a many of our church members as I do not teach a Sunday school class, although I do get to see this through the small group ministry I lead. The group also benefited from the intentionality of the course. Discipleship often suffers because there is no direction. While I know it is not feasible to create a course and conduct a survey for every new Sunday school class, I do believe the discipleship ministry of FBC can be enhanced by including similar intentionality to our teaching.

Personal Reflections

In addition to the theological insights gained from this project, I also learned valuable personal lessons that will change my approach to ministry in the coming years. The lessons I learned spring from both the joys and the difficulties of the experience of completing this project. First, I learned I need to have humility to thrive in ministry. Completing this doctoral project was one of the most difficult things I have ever done. Completing it was not difficult because I lacked ability or interest. The study required was not beyond my mental capacity and the subject matter of Bible engagement is a personal passion of mine. What made this doctoral program so difficult was my unwillingness to show what I perceived as weakness when I began to struggle to keep up with the workload.

When I began this journey, I was the associate pastor at my current church and only a few years removed from obtaining my Master of Divinity degree. My life drastically changed over the course of the next few years in ways for which I am deeply thankful. God blessed my wife and I with a third child and I became the senior and only pastor at FBC. These beautiful changes in my life came with added responsibility to both my family and my church. I did not anticipate the awesome weight of preaching a sermon every single

Sunday and the work that would require of me. In addition to these changes, I also found myself agreeing to other obligations of service within our local Baptist association. The combination of these responsibilities and the workload for this degree plan were too heavy for me to deal with at times and I was never willing to discuss that with the people closest to me.

Once I was willing to discuss my struggles with my wife and others in my life, they were quick to provide support. They gave me encouragement and offered to help in other areas so that I had time to focus and finish my work for this project. I found that letting others help bear my burdens was not as detrimental as I expected. Actually, it provided opportunities for others to gain experience in ministry as they taught or led in my place at times. I believe this will be a valuable lesson for me in the future.

The second personal lesson I learned in this project is my need to practice personally the lessons I teach publicly. There were times during this project when I was tempted to believe that I did not have time to engage the Bible personally because I needed to prepare to teach others how to do it. However, during the eight weeks of project implementation, I was reminded of my need to participate in the actions I was calling others to do. In doing so, I was able to resonate deeply with the people I was discipling. I was also reminded that I still have room to grow. No believer reaches the end of their Bible engagement journey until glory.

Finally, I have a renewed commitment to my calling to the pastorate and to making disciples. Over the course of this doctoral degree, particularly during the project implementation phase, I have seen growth in myself and in the members of my church as a result of increasing Bible engagement in our lives. I want to continue to put forth the same intentional effort and planning for discipleship that I have over the recent months for the glory of God and the good of his people in FBC.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to train the members of the First Baptist Church of Commerce to engage the Bible for spiritual growth. By the grace of God, this purpose was accomplished and the members of FBC have been equipped to use the Bible personally in their lives to grow spiritually. My pastoral heart prays that the effects of the project will continue to empower FBC members to become more like Jesus through his Word.

APPENDIX 1

PRE-COURSE BIBLE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

The following instrument was designed to measure attitudes and habits of Bible engagement before they received training in this area.

PRE-COURSE BIBLE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

This research in which you are about to participate is designed to assess the current Bible engagement attitudes and practices of the members of the First Baptist Church of Commerce, OK. This research is being conducted by Tim Osborn for purposes of doctoral project research. In this research, you will complete the following survey. Any information provided will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.* By completing this survey, you are giving consent for your responses to be used in this research.

- I agree to participate in this survey. (Create a 4-digit ID#: _____ - _____ - _____ - _____)
 I do not agree to participate in this survey.

Part 1: General Information

1. Do you consider yourself a believer in Jesus?
 Yes, if so, how long? _____
 No
2. Are you married?
 Yes
 No
3. Do you have children under 18 in the home?
 Yes
 No
4. What is your employment status?
 Full-time
 Part-time
 Homemaker
 Unemployed
 Retired
 Student
5. How often do you attend the weekly worship service of the church?
 Every week
 Almost every week
 Twice per month
 Once per month
 Once every few months
 Almost Never

6. How often do you read or engage the Bible outside of church?
 Once a day
 Couple days a week
 Once a week
 Once every few weeks
 Couple of times a month
 Once a month
 Once every few months
 Almost Never
7. Have you ever taken a class on reading the Bible?
 Yes
 No

Part 2: Bible Engagement Attitude

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat, AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA Strongly Agree

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 8. I can identify reasons God wants me to read the Bible. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. I have one or more purposes each time I read the Bible. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I have a hard time deciding which part of the Bible to read. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. I can explain the connection between Bible engagement and discipleship | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. I find it difficult to focus when I pray. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. I have a hard time benefiting from a sermon. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. Talking with others about the Bible is helpful. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. I find it difficult to read the Bible with my family. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Part 3: Bible Engagement Practices

AN = Almost Never, R = Rarely, OC = Occasionally, OF = Often, F = Frequently, AA = Almost Always

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 16. I make time to read the Bible. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 17. I follow a structured plan for reading the Bible. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 18. I read small section of the Bible at a time (1–2 chapters). | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |

| | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 19. I read entire books of the Bible at one time. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 20. I spend time thinking deeply (meditating) upon what I have read in the Bible. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 21. I practice one or more specific approaches when meditating upon what I have read in the Bible. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 22. What I read in the Bible influences the way I pray. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 23. I prepare for a sermon by <i>reading</i> the Bible passage beforehand. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 24. I prepare for a sermon by <i>meditating</i> upon the Bible passage beforehand. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 25. During a sermon, I feel like an active participant. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 26. I am aware of God's guiding presence during a sermon. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 27. I reflect on a sermon after I have heard it. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 28. I follow a method for reflecting on sermons that I have heard. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 29. I read the Bible with my spouse. * | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 30. I read the Bible with my children. * | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 31. I follow a plan for engaging the Bible with my family. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |

*Leave response blank if question does not apply.

APPENDIX 2

POST-COURSE BIBLE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

The following instrument was used to measure attitudes and habits of Bible engagement among participants after they completed the course training. This survey is a replica of the pre-course survey in all areas except the addition of eight short answer questions at the end of the survey.

POST-COURSE BIBLE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

This research in which you are about to participate is designed to assess the current Bible engagement attitudes and practices of the members of the First Baptist Church of Commerce, OK. This research is being conducted by Tim Osborn for purposes of doctoral project research. In this research, you will complete the following survey. Any information provided will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.* By completing this survey, you are giving consent for your responses to be used in this research.

- I agree to participate in this survey. (Create a 4-digit ID#: _____ - _____ - _____ - _____)
 I do not agree to participate in this survey.

Part 1: General Information

1. Do you consider yourself a believer in Jesus?
 Yes, if so, how long? _____
 No
2. Are you married?
 Yes
 No
3. Do you have children under 18 in the home?
 Yes
 No
4. What is your employment status?
 Full-time
 Part-time
 Homemaker
 Unemployed
 Retired
 Student
5. How often do you attend the weekly worship service of the church?
 Every week
 Almost every week
 Twice per month
 Once per month
 Once every few months
 Almost Never

6. How often do you read or engage the Bible outside of church?
 Once a day
 Couple days a week
 Once a week
 Once every few weeks
 Couple of times a month
 Once a month
 Once every few months
 Almost Never
7. Have you ever taken a class on reading the Bible?
 Yes
 No

Part 2: Bible Engagement Attitude

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat, AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA Strongly Agree

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 8. I can identify reasons God wants me to read the Bible. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. I have one or more purposes each time I read the Bible. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I have a hard time deciding which part of the Bible to read. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. I can explain the connection between Bible engagement and discipleship | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. I find it difficult to focus when I pray. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. I have a hard time benefiting from a sermon. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. Talking with others about the Bible is helpful. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. I find it difficult to read the Bible with my family. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

Part 3: Bible Engagement Practices

AN = Almost Never, R = Rarely, OC = Occasionally, OF = Often, F = Frequently, AA = Almost Always

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 16. I make time to read the Bible. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 17. I follow a structured plan for reading the Bible. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 18. I read small section of the Bible at a time (1–2 chapters). | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 19. I read entire books of the Bible at one time. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |

- | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 20. I spend time thinking deeply (meditating) upon what I have read in the Bible. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 21. I practice one or more specific approaches when meditating upon what I have read in the Bible. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 22. What I read in the Bible influences the way I pray. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 23. I prepare for a sermon by <i>reading</i> the Bible passage beforehand. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 24. I prepare for a sermon by <i>meditating</i> upon the Bible passage beforehand. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 25. During a sermon, I feel like an active participant. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 26. I am aware of God's guiding presence during a sermon. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 27. I reflect on a sermon after I have heard it. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 28. I follow a method for reflecting on sermons that I have heard. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 29. I read the Bible with my spouse. * | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 30. I read the Bible with my children. * | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |
| 31. I follow a plan for engaging the Bible with my family. | AN | R | OC | OF | F | AA |

*Leave response blank if question does not apply.

32. How many session did you attend in person? _____
33. How many session did you watch online? _____
34. How many session did you miss? _____
35. Do you believe you can engage with the Bible better after taking this course?
36. What was the most helpful part of this course?
37. What additional content do you wish was covered in this course?
38. How could this course be improved?

APPENDIX 3

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

The following instrument was designed to evaluate the curriculum created to enhance Bible engagement among the members of FBC. The evaluation was completed by a panel of reviewers with expertise in Bible engagement.

BIBLE ENGAGEMENT CURRICULUM EVALUATION

Name of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____

| Biblical Intake Curriculum Evaluation Tool | | | | | |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| 1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary | | | | | |
| Criteria | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Comments |
| The curriculum is biblically and theologically sound. | | | | | |
| The curriculum uses individual scriptures within their proper context. | | | | | |
| The content of the curriculum addresses the subject of Bible engagement. | | | | | |
| The curriculum is accessible for the average church member. | | | | | |
| Each lesson provides opportunities for participants to practice what is taught. | | | | | |
| The curriculum is clear and well organized. | | | | | |
| Each lesson has one clear main idea. | | | | | |
| The curriculum presents multiple ways for engaging the Bible. | | | | | |

Other Comments:

APPENDIX 4

EXPERT PANEL EVALUATION RESULTS

Table A1. Expert panel evaluation results

| Criteria | Panelist 1 | Panelist 2 | Panelist 3 |
|---|------------|------------|------------|
| The curriculum is biblically and theologically sound. | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| The curriculum uses individual Scriptures within their proper context. | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| The content of the curriculum addresses the subject of Bible engagement. | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| The curriculum is accessible for the average church member. | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Each lesson provides opportunities for participants to practice what is taught. | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| The curriculum is clear and well organized. | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Each lesson has one clear main idea. | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| The curriculum presents multiple ways for engaging the Bible. | 4 | 4 | 4 |

APPENDIX 5

PRE- AND POST-COURSE SURVEY EVALUATION:
T-TEST FOR DEPENDENT SAMPLES

After completing the pre- and post-course survey, I compared the results using a *t*-test for dependent samples to determine if the training produced a change in the attitudes and practices of Bible engagement among the participants. The *t*-test results reveal that the training made a statistically significant difference in the participants' attitudes and practices of Bible engagement ($t_{(15)} = 3.14003, p = 0.003371151$). The following is a summary of these results:

Table A2. *t*-test paired sample results

| | |
|------------------------|--------------|
| Number of Participants | 16 |
| Pre-Test Mean | 74.4375 |
| Post-Test Mean | 87.0625 |
| t-Stat | -3.140039684 |
| P(T<=t)one-tail | 0.003371151 |
| t Critical one-tail | 1.753050356 |

APPENDIX 6

POST-COURSE SURVEY EVALUATION: SHORT ANSWER RESPONSES

The following is the collection of the responses to the short answer questions at the end of the post-course survey arranged by question.

35. Do you believe you can engage the Bible better after taking this course?

- All participants answered “yes” or similar.

36. What was the most helpful part of this course?

- The most helpful part for me was learning different methods of reading and engaging the Bible.
- Taking a verse at a time.
- Learning how to focus on the text.
- Learning different methods to engage in the Bible.
- Learning new methods to engage with the Bible.
- The methods that were given for us to use and apply to our lives
- Getting a plan together on what to read.
- Group study. Different ways to study.
- Learning how to study the Bible.
- All of it, techniques learned.
- The different ways to engage with the Bible.
- All the different ways to engage the Bible.
- Discussing and practicing different ways to engage the Bible.
- Learning how other people engage the Bible.
- Seeing that everyone faces similar challenges in being disciplined on an

everyday basis.

- Having and learning the different ways and having them broke down for me.
- Learning engagement strategies to help study. i.e. – Praying the Bible, studying with others, etc.

37. What additional content do you wish was covered in this course?

- Where to start or maintain a reading plan using the method of reading a book in its entirety.
- Comparing old and new lessons that apply to a study.
- I don't believe there's any additional content needed. It was a great beginner's class.
- Importance of prayer
- Ways to involve others to read and engage with the Bible.
- I felt the content covered was good at covering many different topics.
- None, it was great.
- How the Bible helps you recognize your God given gifts of the Spirit.
- Not sure.
- Topical study methods.
- Can't think of anything, he did a great job.

38. How could this course be improved?

- I think refresher courses would be helpful.
- Doing #37.
- I thought the class was great. No improvements needed.
- Offer it more.
- Don't know; it was a good study.
- None, it was great
- Spend more time on each session. 2 weeks for each.

- Make mandatory. I do better with accountability that way.
- Maybe expand the study methods to include a topical methodology.
- Again, I can't think of anything because he did a great job.

39. What was the most significant thing you learned in this course?

- How to engage the Bible while reading.
- How to remember and focus.
- Reading the Bible needs to be intentional.
- How 1 time of Bible reading a week could affect kids for a lifetime.
- Being able to find new ways to engage in the Bible.
- I remember the Bible better reading it several times.
- Being intentional of following a reading and meditating plan.
- Praying the Bible – Very helpful. Further confirmation that reading books of the Bible is my best way to engage he Bible.
- Different ways to study the Bible, some I had never considered.
- Emphasizing different words.
- Ways to engage the Bible.
- How God just wants to love us and for us to get to know him.
- Meditation.
- The different ways to interact with the Bible.
- The variety of methods to engage the Bible at your own comfort level.
- How to better read and understand God's Word.
- The importance of engaging the Bible as it applies to my own growth.
Also, the importance of discipleship within my children and the need for community in my studies.

APPENDIX 7

BIBLE ENGAGEMENT COURSE OUTLINES

The following outlines were used to teach the course on Bible engagement to the members of the First Baptist Church of Commerce from June 2, 2024–July 21, 2024.

Through His Word...

Becoming more like Jesus by engaging the Bible for spiritual growth.

Course Objectives:

- Discover the importance and purpose of Bible engagement
- Expand understanding of Bible engagement
- Build the habit of engaging the Bible regularly
- Learn to benefit spiritually from Bible engagement

Course Map:

- Session 1: God's purpose for engaging the Bible
- Session 2: Intentional personal Bible intake – Getting a plan
- Session 3: Meditation Methods pt. 1 – Thinking Deeply
- Session 4: Meditation Methods pt. 2 – Praying the Bible
- Session 5: Engaging the Bible through Sermons
- Session 6: Engaging the Bible through Small Groups
- Session 7: Engaging the Bible with family
- Session 8: Putting it all together

Session 1: God's Purpose for Bible Engagement.

Summary:

In this session, participants will discover the importance of having purpose when engaging the Bible. Having purpose includes properly understanding what the Bible is and what it was designed to do. Students will also be exposed to various Bible engagement methods that will be explored later in this course.

LEARN IT...

Discuss Question: What makes reading the Bible difficult? What makes anything difficult?

(People find it easier to endure something or accomplish something when they know the purpose behind the action.)

*“Discipline without direction is drudgery.”
-Don Whitney*

Bad Reasons to read the Bible

1. The Genie in a bottle approach – To get God to Bless you
2. The Social Ladder approach – To get others to praise you
3. Chicken noodle Soup for the Soul approach – To feel better about yourself
4. Fortune Teller Approach – To find out specific details about your future
5. The weapon closet approach – To find a proof text to win an argument
6. The Reference Book approach – To find a quick answer to a question

Discussion Question: Which of these approaches are you most prone to take?

God's reasons for reading the Bible

God's purpose for you reading the Bible is to enable you to fulfill the purpose for which he created you: To increasingly reflect his image through communion with him and to help others do the same!

Let's look at the story line of the Bible:

- Genesis 1 – God made man in His image and told man to spread that image in the world.
- Genesis 3 – Man sinned and rebelled against God, distorting God's image in mankind.
- John 1:14 – Jesus, who was God in human form, came to earth to display God's true image.
- Titus 2:14 & 2 Corinthians 5:15 – Jesus death not only forgives us but changes us.
- Matthew 28:19-20 – Jesus told his disciples, those who seeking to reflect his image, to go and make more disciples throughout the world.
- Romans 8:28-29 – God's plan all along is to create a people who are made in his image and the image of his Son.

So we can see that your purpose for existing is that you would bring God glory by becoming more like his Son through a relationship with him and by helping others do the same. We could summarize it like this:

KNOW, GROW, SHOW

Let's see how the Bible helps us accomplish these three aspects.

1. **KNOW:** The Bible helps us know God for his Glory
 - a. Knowing God vs. knowing about God.
 - b. Psalm 19
 - i. General revelation and Special revelation
 - ii. The Bible is God's very words given to humanity
 - iii. The Bible is meant to tell us about God, his character, his thoughts, his desires, his will in order that we might fellowship with him and worship him.
 - c. The Bible itself shows that our ultimate goal in reading the Bible is that God's infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot worship of the blood-bought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation.¹ -John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*.
 - d. As Christians engage the Bible, they should seek to know God which should fuel their worship of him.
2. **GROW:** The Bible helps us grow to become more like Jesus for his Glory
 - a. 2 Timothy 3:16
 - b. Again, the Bible is God's very Words given to humanity.

¹ John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 39.

- c. It is useful for *Teaching, Reproof, Correction, Training*
- d. That we may be *complete*.
- e. As Christians engage the Bible, they should seek to allow their lives to conform to the shape of Christ found in the Bible.
- f. Bible study will only give enjoyment if conforming to our Creator in belief and behavior, through trust and obedience, is its goal. Bible study for our own pleasure rather for God ends up giving pleasure neither to Him nor to us.² – J.I. Packer, *God has Spoken*.

3. **SHOW:** The Bible prepares us to help others know and grow for God’s glory.

- a. 2 Timothy 4:2 – Preachers are called to preach the Word as they lead their churches to be more like Christ.
- b. Colossians 3:16 – Believers are called to let the Word dwell in them and guide them as they teach one another.

***So when you read the Bible, you are taking intentional steps toward fulfilling your God-given purpose for life.

***If the Bible is this important, we don’t want to just READ the Bible we want to interact with the Bible in every possible way to get as much out of it as possible. This is what we call **Bible Engagement**.

TALK ABOUT IT...

If engaging the Bible is this important, we need to find as many ways to engage it as possible.

Break up into groups of 3-4 and make a list of every possible way of engaging the Bible. Try to be exhaustive.

(Give groups about 5-10 minutes to think of ways to engage the Bible)

We’re going to discuss the following Bible engagement methods in this course:

- Engaging the Bible through personal Bible intake.
- Engaging the Bible through meditation.
- Engaging the Bible through sermons.
- Engaging the Bible through small groups.
- Engaging the Bible through with families.

LIVE IT...

² J. I Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 9.

For this week, let's start engaging with the Bible more by intentionally reading through a few passages of Scripture using the schedule below. To keep it easy, let's shoot for reading at least 4 days this week. Doesn't matter what days.

Day 1

Genesis 1
Matthew 1
Acts 1

Day 2

Genesis 2
Matthew 2
Acts 2

Day 3

Genesis 3
Matthew 3
Acts 3

Day 4

Genesis 4
Mathew 4
Acts 4

Session 2: Intentional Personal Bible Intake

Recap & Check-up:

Last week we learned about God's purpose for Bible engagement and discussed a few different ways that we can engage the Bible.

How did homework go this week?

Summary:

In this session, we will explore various approaches to reading the Bible intentionally. This will include discussing Bible reading plans as well and the posture one should assume when reading the Bible.

Learn it...

Stop the Flop-And-Stop!

What is the most common plan for reading the Bible??? The Flop-and-Stop plan!

This is when you open your Bible randomly because you have time, flop around in it from page to page, portion to portion, and look for something to read. Then you randomly stop somewhere for some reason and start reading. When you're done, you close (or turn off) your Bible and put it up until the next time you feel like you should read again. This is the Flop-and-Stop plan.

Obviously, this is a bit of a caricature, but if many of us are honest, our Bible reading plan is something similar.

Discussion Question: What are the cons of an approach like this?

Failure of the Flop-and-Stop

1. You will never read in context
2. You will (likely) never read the entire Bible
3. You will never know if you have read the entire Bible if you do.
4. You will always waste time picking a passage to read.

2 Plans and a posture

Since the flop and stop plan is clearly an unacceptable plan, let's look at 3 possible approaches to reading the Bible.

1. PLAN 1: Reading multiple books at a time

This method allows the reader to read intentionally through multiple portions of the Bible at a time. There are 3 ways to do this method:

a. Using a Calendar

- i. Made famous by Robert Murray M'Cheyne.³
- ii. (See handout of the RMM method)
- iii. One reads the specific passages assigned to a specific day of the year.

b. Using Bookmarks⁴

- i. This divides the Bible into equal sections. Then the reader works their way through each portion at an equal pace.
- ii. 5 Bookmarks: Genesis, Joshua, Job, Isaiah, and Matthew
- iii. 3 Bookmarks: Genesis, Job, and Matthew.
- iv. Simply, move through these sections at an even pace and keep track of what you've read.

c. Using Genre⁵

- i. The Bible has multiple different genres of books.
- ii. This method has the reader read from a certain genre on a certain day of the week.
- iii. Here is the method:
 1. Sundays: Poetry
 2. Mondays: Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy)
 3. Tuesdays: Old Testament history
 4. Wednesdays: Old Testament history
 5. Thursdays: Old Testament prophets
 6. Fridays: New Testament history
 7. Saturdays: New Testament epistles (letters)

Discussion Question: What are the pros and cons of these methods?

2. PLAN 2: Reading single books at a time.

This method has the reader select one book of the Bible and read through it multiple times, preferably in one setting if possible, for about 10-20 times. Then repeat this process for each book of the Bible.

³ Robert Murray M'Cheyne, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew Bonar (Edinburgh: Murray and Gibb, 1857), 568.

⁴ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. and updated ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 29-30.

⁵ Margie Haack, "Bible Reading Plan for Slackers and Shirkers," Ransom Fellowship, January 3, 2008. <http://ransomfellowship.org/article/bible-reading-program-for-slackers-shirkers/>

Here are some tips for using this method:⁶

- a. Pick shorter books and work your way up.
 - i. There are 33 books of the Bible that can be read in less than 30 minutes by most readers.⁷ (See handout for list)
- b. Read at a normal pace
 - i. Reading reverently doesn't mean reading at an extremely slow pace.
- c. Skip the verse and chapter divisions
 - i. The verse and chapter divisions, while helpful, are man-made and can often breakup the flow of the book.
- d. Skip the commentaries (at first)
 - i. Commentaries can be great, but there is also benefit in engaging the Bible on your own for a time before consulting others.
- e. Stick to the process
 - i. This will become boring at some point, but don't stop. There is a blessing coming from the repeated, redundant reading of Scripture.

Discussion Question: What are the pros and cons of this method?

3. A Posture

Regardless of which plan you choose, do the following when you read:

- a. Before you read, **PRAY**⁸
 - i. I, Incline my heart to your testimonies (Psalm 119:36).
 - ii. O, Open my eyes to see wonderful things (Psalm 119:18).
 - iii. U, Unite my heart to fear your name (Psalm 86:11).
 - iv. S, Satisfy me in the morning with your steadfast love (Psalm 90:14).
- b. While you read, **THINK**
 - i. Be conscious of your need for the Holy Spirit
 - ii. Be conscious of the goal of Scripture – Jesus!
 - iii. Be conscious of the portion of Scripture you're reading
 1. What covenant?
 2. What genre?
 3. What context?
- c. After you read, **MEDITATE**
 - i. We will talk more about meditation in the next few weeks

⁶ Joe Carter, "How to Change Your Mind," The Gospel Coalition, December 22, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-change-your-mind2/>.

⁷ Joseph Harrod, "My Secret for Reading Half of the Bible in Just 30 Minutes," Southern Equip, June 1, 2018. <https://equip.sbts.edu/article/secret-reading-half-bible-just-30-minutes/>

⁸ John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God* (Wheaton, IL: 2004), 51–52.

- ii. But for this week, just take time after you have read to think about how this verse should change your life.
- d. (Bonus) After your read, **SHARE**
 - i. It's always ok to talk to other people about what you've read in the Bible. Ask questions, encourage people, spread the Word!

LIVE IT...

For this week's Homework, take the book of Ephesians and read through it at least 3 times. You should be able to read it in one sitting in less than half an hour. If you can't do that, break it up and read 3 chapters in one sitting and 3 chapters the next sitting.

Session 3: Meditation Methods pt. 1 – Thinking Deeply about the Bible

Recap & Check-up:

Last week we learned about being intentional with our Bible reading. You were challenged to read through the Book of Ephesians a few times last week. How'd it go???

Summary:

In the next two sessions we will learn about practical tools for meditating on Scripture. This will include selecting what to meditate upon and also a few methods for meditating on that scripture.

Learn it...

Discuss Question: Have you ever walked away from your Bible reading feeling a little unsatisfied? Why do you think this happens? What is missing?

The Missing Link

“The reason we come away so cold from reading the Word is because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation.”⁹ -Thomas Watson, as quoted by Don Whitney

What is biblical meditation?

1. Meditation is different than reading
 - a. Literally: Biblical Hebrew Word: Hagah – a muttering under one’s breath
 - b. “Deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture or upon life from a scriptural perspective for the purpose of understanding, application, and prayer.” – Don Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*.¹⁰
 - a. Reading the Bible is exposure to Scripture; meditation is the absorption of Scripture.
 - b. ILLUSTRATION: Hot Tea

Read Psalm 1

2. Meditation is intentional
 - a. Meditation is not a passive activity that happens automatically

⁹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 50.

¹⁰ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 46.

- b. It's a discipline that as to be learned and practiced.
- c. "Blessed is the man that walks not...but meditates"
- 3. Meditation is continual
 - a. It happens throughout the day
 - b. "Meditates day and night"
- 4. Meditation is fruitful
 - a. "Prosper in all he does"
 - b. "Yielding Fruit in season"
 - c. "Leaf doesn't wither"
- 5. Meditation is doable.
 - a. This something the people of God have been called to do long before people had personal bound copies of the Scripture.
 - b. This means poor, uneducated people with no personal Bible were able to meditate on the Scripture.
 - c. You can do it!!

How to meditate

Meditation is the missing ingredient to most people's Bible engagement. Here is a process for meditating.

1. Select a portion for meditation

- a. After doing your normal reading plan, pick something to meditate upon. This can be a verse, a phrase, or even one word.
- b. ****General Rule: Read broadly, meditate narrowly**
- c. But how do you know what to pick? Look for the following:
 - i. Something interesting – Maybe something new that you learned that you never know before or something that you might want to know more about.
 - ii. Something needed - Maybe you come across something that you need to hear. Is there a verse that speaks to a struggle you're having, a sin you're fighting, a truth you're learning?
 - iii. Something important – Maybe you pick the main point or an important point of the passage. This is probably the simplest way of selecting something to meditate upon.

2. Select a method for meditation

IN THE MOMENT MEDITATIONS

a. Emphasizing different words of the verse

- i. Read through the verse several times, emphasizing a different word each time.
 - 1. **I** am the resurrection and the life.
 - 2. I **am** the resurrection and the life.
 - 3. I am **the** resurrection and the life.

4. I am the **resurrection** and the life.
 5. I am the resurrection **and** the life.
 6. I am the resurrection and **the** life.
 7. I am the resurrection and the **life**.
- ii. This will allow you to see the verse from several different perspective
 - iii. Like looking at a diamond from different angles.

b. Ask questions of the text:¹¹

- i. Similar to emphasizing different words, this method allows you to think about the passage in different ways.
- ii. You can do this with two different sets of questions

iii. First, interpretive questions:

1. What sinful condition is addressed in this passage?
2. What does the author say is the answer to this problem?
3. How does person or work of Jesus solve this problem passage?
4. How does this relate to other parts of the Bible?
 - a. Does the author use other parts of the Bible?
 - b. Does it seem to confirm other parts of the Bible?
 - c. Does it seem to contradict other parts of the Bible?

iv. Second, application questions:

1. Make a list of areas of your life: job, family, hobbies, responsibilities, roles, struggles, etc...
2. Then ask how this passage applies to each area of your life.
3. Example: Ephesians 4:29 teaches we should speak words that build people up, not tear them down.
 - a. How do you apply this to your marriage?
 - b. How do you apply this to your parenting?
 - c. How do you apply this to your hobbies like golf or gaming?
 - d. How do you apply this to your phone calls at work?

THROUGH OUT THE DAY

**Illustration: Finish these songs lyrics or movie quotes

- “Amazing grace how sweet the _____, that save a _____.”
- “I wanna know, have you ever seen the _____.”
- “Life is like a box of _____, You never know _____.”

a. Memorize it in your heart

- a. Psalm 119:11
-

¹¹ John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 376.

- b. This is the simplest way to keep the Word of God with you throughout the day.
- c. While it may seem hard, it can be done. You just demonstrated it!

b. Carry it in your hand

- v. After picking your verse, find some way to carry it throughout the day with you so you can frequently go back to read it. This could include:
 1. Writing it on a piece of paper and putting it in your pocket.
 2. Making it your lock screen on your phone
 3. Memorizing it!!!
- vi. This allows you to meditate upon it “Day and Night” or throughout the day.
 1. If you have selected a passage that helps you with a certain struggle at work, then taking the verse with you and reading it during your break may help you through that struggle that comes up during the day.

c. Post it in your vision

- i. Put the verse in places that you look at frequently

PRACTICE IT...

Pick one of the follow passages: Psalm 100, Romans 5:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20, Micah 7:18-20.

Read through the passage and pick a verse to meditate upon as a group

Use the “Emphasis different words” method to meditate

Share your insights with the class when we come back together.

LIVE IT...

Here’s your homework for the week!

Read the book of Ephesians 2 times again this week. But this time, meditate on a portion of your reading each time using each of the methods we discussed today:

- Emphasizing different words of the verse.
- Carrying the verse with you.
- Asking questions of the verse.

Remember, read broadly but meditate narrowly!

Session 4: Meditation Methods pt. 2 – Praying the Bible

Recap & Check-up:

Last week we learned about meditating on the Bible. You were challenged to read through the Book of Ephesians a few times again, but to meditate this time.

How did adding meditation change your experience engaging the Bible this week?

Summary:

In this session, we continue with meditation methods. This meditation method is praying the Bible. This session is based off of Don Whitney's book, *Praying the Bible*.¹² In this session we seek to establish a connection between Bible intake and prayer that results in another method of meditation and a more robust prayer life. We will also learn different ways we can use this method of meditation.

LEARN IT...

Let's be honest about prayer.

Everyone agrees that prayer is important. No one would deny this truth. We know God wants us to pray.

But if we're honest, prayer can be a little....difficult at best...boring at worst?

- What makes prayer difficult?
- What makes prayer boring?

So what is the problem???

- Is prayer the problem? No, it's commanded in Scripture
- Are you the problem? No, prayer is not too hard for any Christian.
- Is the problem what you pray about? No, we pray about a limited number of things on a regular basis.
- Is your method the problem? YES! You need a new method for energizing your prayer!

¹² Don Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

Here's the method:
"When you pray, pray through a passage of Scripture"

How to pray the Bible

"When you pray, pray through a passage of Scripture, particularly a psalm"

1. Read a line or verse of scripture
2. Pause and pray about what comes to mind, using the language found in this verse.
3. Repeat this process until the passage is done or you run out of time.
4. ** "Basically, what you are doing is taking words that originated in the heart and mind of God and circulating them through your heart and mind back to God."

What it looks like: Psalm 23

If you were reading Psalm 23 your prayer time might look like this:

- a. 1 – God thank you that you are my shepherd. You have shepherded me through difficult times, and I know that you have always watched over me. Thank you that my family has not been in want for these last few years. God, I pray that one day my children will be your sheep and that they will make you their shepherd. Please guard them from the dangers that the evil one presents.
- b. V. 2 – God, would you give me the opportunity to take a nap today and just lie down. Would calm the chaotic waters of my heart and make my heart calm like still waters.
- c. Etc...

Tips for praying the Bible

1. You are not interpreting verses...you are praying the verses
 - a. For example: Psalm 23:3 says, "He restores my soul." This is about the believer having their joy in salvation restored. This is not about someone becoming a believer. But if, when you read this, you think of your friend who needs to know Jesus, it is perfectly fine to pray, "God would you restore my friend's soul to yours"
2. Difficult portions of scripture
 - a. Imprecatory Psalms – Direct the anger toward sin
 - b. Narrative passages – Don't pray microscopically, but pray with the big picture in mind.
3. Don't get worried if..
 - a. You don't find much to pray – every passage and every day is different.
 - b. You run out of time – You don't have to finish the passage.

PRACTICE IT...

We're going to take a few minutes to put this into practice.

Read and pray through Psalm 23.

Pray through as much as you can in each verse before you move on to the next. After some time, I'll call you back and we'll talk about your experience.

Discussion Questions:

- How was praying the Bible?
- Did you finish the whole psalm?
- Have you ever prayed that long before?
- Did you pray about anything that you normally wouldn't pray?
- Did you use language in your prayer that you normally wouldn't use?
- What are some different ways you could use this system?
 - At the beginning of your quiet time
 - After a quiet time
 - Before dinner
 - On a quick lunch break
 - Before bed
 - At the beginning of a worship service, Sunday school class, or small group.

LIVE IT...

For homework this week, let's take time to read and pray through the following psalms:

- Psalm 1
- Psalm 100
- Psalm 121
- Psalm 67
- Psalm 13

Take note of how different each of the psalms are and how they lead you to pray in unique ways.

You can do this as your regular Bible engagement for the day or you can do this with other people in your life.

Session 5: Engaging the Bible through Sermons

Recap & Check-up

Last week, we learned to pray the Bible. How did it go this week with praying through those 5 different psalms?

Summary

We begin to explore ways to engage with scripture outside of personal Bible engagement. In this session, we look examine engaging the Bible through Sermons. This will include obtaining an understanding of what preaching is. This session will also include ways one may intentionally listen to sermons for spiritual growth.

LEARN IT...

What is preaching?

1. **The Place of Preaching** - Preaching has always been a central aspect of worship and ministry for believers.
 - a. Nehemiah 8:1-8; 12
 - b. Jesus
 - i. Mark 1:14 – Jesus came proclaiming
 - ii. Matt 5-7 - Sermon on the Mount
 - c. The apostles
 - i. Peter
 - ii. Paul
 - d. The Church Fathers
 - i. Justin Martyr – (2nd century) – And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writing of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of the good things. As quoted in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*.¹³
 - ii. John Chrysostom – (late 4th century) – Like our human body, Christ’s body is subject to many diseases, medicines, correct diet, suitable climate, and adequate sleep all help to restore our physical health. But how shall Christ’s body be healed? “One only means and one way of cure has been given us...and that is the teaching of

¹³ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2017), 4.

the Word. This is the best instrument, this is the best diet and climate;” As quoted in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*.¹⁴

- e. The Reformers
 - i. Martin Luther – I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word; Otherwise I did nothing. As quoted in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*.¹⁵
 - f. The Puritans
 - g. The Evangelicals
2. **The Purpose of preaching** – Before preaching is for conversions, before preaching is for discipleship, preaching is for the glory of God.
 3. **The Process of preaching** - A definition: Preaching is when the man of God speaks the words of God to the people of God for the glory of God and the good of his people.
 - a. The preacher submits to the Word of God as he prepares
 - b. The people submit to the Word of God as they listen.

Listening to sermons with intention

1. Preparing for sermons

- a. Begin on Saturday!!
 - i. Go to bed early
 - ii. Set out clothes
 - iii. Make Sunday afternoon plans
 - iv. Set your coffee maker the night before
- b. Bring a Bible
- c. Bring a pen and paper
- d. Read through the passage before
- e. Pray for your preacher
- f. Prayer for your church members
- g. Pray for you and your family

2. Participating in sermons

- a. Remove distractions
 - i. If your phone distracts you, don’t use it as a Bible
- b. Take notes
 - i. This can be in a journal, the back of the bulletin, or in the margins of the Bible itself.
 - ii. Insights – What is something new you learned about God, the Bible, yourself, etc...?
 - iii. Application – How should your life be different after hearing this passage?

¹⁴ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 6.

¹⁵ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 9.

- iv. Questions – What doesn't make sense? Did the preacher say something that needs more explanation? Did the preacher skip something that you want to explore?
- c. Observe how the preacher uses the Bible
 - i. Notice how he interprets
 - ii. Notice how he uses context
 - iii. Notice how he follows the flow of the text

3. Processing sermons

- a. Respond to the sermon in the moment
- b. Talk about the sermon on the drive home or at lunch
- c. Look back on the sermon early in the week
 - i. Listen again on the app
 - ii. Look over your notes
 - iii. Read the passage again

TALK ABOUT IT...

Break up in to groups of 2-4 and take time to prepare for today's sermon (this is done during our Sunday School hour right before the service).

- Read the passage that will be preached
- Discuss what the main point of the passage is.
- Discuss a few questions you hope to get answered.
- Pray for the preacher who will preach the Word
- Pray for yourself that you would be receptive to God's Word.

LIVE IT...

Home work this week will be to do ONE of the following techniques for intentional listening during sermons:

- Spend time reading the passage before the next sermon
- Spend time praying for yourself, the church, and the preacher before the next sermon.
- If you don't already take notes, take notes.
- If you do take notes, do so with the three categories of insights, applications, and questions.
- Talk about the sermon afterward with someone
- Look back on the sermon a few days later by reviewing notes, re-reading the passage, or listen to the sermon on the FBC Connect App.

Session 6: Engaging the Bible through small groups

Recap & Check-up

Last week, we discussed engaging the Bible through sermons. How did preparing for a sermon impact how you engaged with the sermon?

Summary:

In this session, we continue to discuss how to engage with Bible beyond personal reading and meditation by discussing small group Bible engagement.

LEARN IT...

There is not command in the Bible to do small groups. But we do find biblical, historical, and practical warrant for engaging the Bible with others and being involved in the lives of others.

1. Biblical Warrant for engaging the Bible with others

- a. Christians read the Bible with one another
 - i. Acts 13:14-15 - but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.”
- b. Christians teach one another
 - i. Colossians 3:16 – Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
- c. Christian hold one another accountable
 - i. Hebrews 3:7-14 – ¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.
- d. Christians read the Bible with Non-Christians
 - i. Acts 8:29-34
 - ii. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

- iii. “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

- iv. ³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

- e. **These things cannot be done unless believers are spending time with one another, discussing the Bible and how it applies to their lives.

2. Practical Benefits of small groups

- a. Accountability for reading the Bible
- b. Calibration for interpreting the Bible
- c. Help in applying the Bible
- d. Opportunity to build someone up with the Bible

A process for Small Group Bible Engagement

1. Identify your group

a. *For discipleship*

- i. A group of believers that want to read together and help one another grow.

b. *For evangelism*

- i. You can also do small group Bible study with a group of non-believers for the purpose of exploring the Bible.

c. *When selecting a group for small group and setting

- i. **Consider gender** – If the group is smaller and meeting in private, it is better to keep it to one gender. If the group is larger and part of a public meeting like a Sunday school class, the group can be mixed gender. There are benefits from both single-gender and mixed-gender groups.

- ii. **Consider availability** – choosing people that are close to you geographically and have similar schedules is best.

2. Select your passage

- a. As a group, decide what portion of the Bible you will read.
- b. Remember our love for whole books of the Bible. Consider reading through a whole book in one setting

- i. There are 33 books of the Bible that can be read in 30 minutes or less¹⁶
- ii. (See handout for list)
- iii. If you don't read through whole book at a time, consider working through a whole book over a few meetings.

3. Engage your passage

- a. Take turns reading through the passage
- b. Take turns sharing insights using the “Swedish Method”¹⁷ categories:
 - i. **Lightbulb** – anything that shines in the passage. What is most important?
 - 1. What is emphasized or repeated?
 - 2. What statement does everything else point to?
 - 3. What is the resolution of the story?
 - ii. **Cross** – where do you see Jesus in this passage?
 - 1. Does this point to his life? His death? His resurrection? His coming?
 - 2. Does this passage prophesy about Jesus?
 - 3. Does a character's life have the same shape as Jesus?
 - 4. Does the story foreshadow Jesus?
 - iii. **Question Mark** – anything that is difficult to understand or needs more explanation
 - 1. A word you don't understand?
 - 2. A concept that you don't understand?
 - 3. How this passage fits with the rest of scripture?
 - iv. **Arrow** – anything that applies to the reader's life.
- c. Pray for each other to live these truths.

PRACTICE IT...

Break up into groups of 3.
 Read 1 John 2:11-24,
 Use the “Swedish Method” to discuss the passage.

LIVE IT

Create a group of 3 people from this class that you can meet with sometime this week to do a small group Bible reading. Use the skills and methods that we have learned in this session.

¹⁶ Joe Harrod, “My Secret for Reading Half of the Bible in Just 30 Minutes,” Southern Equip, June 1, 2018, <https://equip.sbts.edu/article/secret-reading-half-bible-just-30-minutes/>.

¹⁷ David Helm, *One-to-One Bible Reading* (Sydney: Matthias, 2011), 43–45.

Session 7: Engaging the Bible with Family

Recap & Check-up

Last week we learned about the importance of engaging with the Bible with other people. You were challenged to do a small group bible reading. How'd it go??

Summary:

In this session, we will discuss the process of engaging the Bible with one's family. Much of the material here comes from the Don Whitney's book *Family Worship*.¹⁸

Learn it...

Like small groups from our last session, there isn't a command to do family worship, but there is biblical warrant for it

Biblical passage about the Bible and family

1. Deut. 6:4-9
2. Psalm 78:1-8
3. Ephesians 5-6
 - a. Husbands, you have a responsibility to talk with your wife about the Bible.
 - b. Women, you have a responsibility to talk with your husband about the Bible.
 - c. Parents, you have a responsibility to talk to your children about the Bible.

Historical Quotes about the Bible and Family

1. Charles Spurgeon (1839-1895)
 - a. He was the pastor of a massive church in one of the busiest cities in the world at the time. London Metropolitan Tabernacle and about 5k members
 - b. He was famous for his preaching and social activism and theology.
 - c. But listen to what one man said about him after visiting:
 - i. One of the most helpful hours of my visits to Westwood was the hour of family prayer. At six o'clock all the household gathered into the study for worship. Usually Mr. Spurgeon would himself lead the devotions. The portion read was invariably accompanied with exposition. How amazingly helpful those homely and gracious comments were. I remember, especially, his reading of the twenty-fourth of Luke: "Jesus Himself drew near and went with them." How sweetly he talked upon having Jesus with us wherever we go. Not only to have Him draw near at special

¹⁸ Don Whitney, *Family Worship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

seasons, but to go with us whatever labour we undertake. . . . Then, how full of tender pleading, of serene confidence in God, of world-embracing sympathy were his prayers. . . . His public prayers were an inspiration and benediction, but his prayers with the family were to me more wonderful still. . . . Mr. Spurgeon, when bowed before God in family prayer, appeared a grander man even than when holding thousands spellbound by his oratory.” As quoted in Don Whitney.¹⁹

2 Levels of Family Bible Engagement

1. Reading with your spouse

- a. Read through a book of the Bible together.
- b. Read through a book of the Bible separately and talk about it.
- c. Discuss applications that are specific to your family:
 - i. How does this apply to our parenting? Our finances? Our family relationships? Our entertainment choices? Our marriage?

2. Reading with your kids/grandkids

- a. **Be intentional** – What are you going to read?
 - i. Read through books of the Bible together.
 - ii. With younger children stick to narrative passages.
 - iii. With younger children you may choose a Children’s Bible.
- b. **Be Consistent** – When are you going to read?
- c. **Be Fun** –
 - i. Create a reward system
 - ii. Have them act out the scene
 - iii. Have them draw or do an art project of the scene.
 - iv. Sing a song about the passage or make up a song about the passage
- d. **Be Brief** – especially with younger children
 - i. 5 minutes is plenty of time to make an impact
 - ii. How much time does one swing of an axe take?
 - iii. How much progress does one swing of an axe make?
 - iv. But if you hit the same place over and over, eventually the tree falls.
 - v. RELEVANCE: continual small exposure to the Word of God will impact a child’s spiritual life.
- e. **Be Flexible** – You may need to change your time or location from time to time
 - i. On the road to a ball game
 - ii. Around the dinner table

¹⁹ Whitney, *Family Worship*, 39.

- iii. At bed time
- iv. Saturday mornings before the day starts

f. Be Patient -

- i. Sometimes, kids won't want to sit.
- ii. Sometimes, kids won't want to read.
- iii. Sometimes, kids won't answer questions.
- iv. Sometimes, it won't feel like you've done anything.
 - 1. Strive for faithfulness in family worship, not immediate results. I fully understand that what you may see night-after-night, week-after-week, month-after-month, year-after-year in family worship may be uneventful. Just realize that the effects are rarely immediate. Usually they're cumulative.²⁰

g. Be Inclusive – You can include others in your family worship.

3. Isn't this really what you want?

- a. A story about faithful family worship
- b. Dad, I can't think of learning to read, reading, or books without thinking about you. I remember how encouraging you were when I first learned to read. I would finish those little books, so proud of myself, and you would encourage me to start another one right away. I remember you reading to me when I was little and telling me how exciting it would be when I learned to read and could read to you. For as long as I can remember, you've been bringing home books from used bookstores for me to read and enjoy. By the time we moved from Kansas City, I had four or five bookcases full of books that you had lovingly brought home for me. Reading has always been such an important part of us as a family. Dad, the way you have so consistently led us in family worship every single night of the week for every night of my life is so meaningful and inspirational for me. [Note: Although every night was our goal, her memory certainly failed her here, for we were far less consistent than I wanted.] I'm going to cherish those moments together for as long as I live. You have been a wonderful, loving, spiritual leader for my entire life. Not only our time reading the Bible or Christian books together, but also our time reading classic books will be something I'll remember forever. Thank you so much, Dad, for making that such a huge part of our time as a family.²¹

²⁰ Whitney, *Family Worship*, 66.

²¹ Whitney, *Family Worship*, 66.

TALK ABOUT IT...

Pair up with your spouse, or a few people in the same situation in life as you (Grandparent, single, etc...) and make a plan to engage the Bible with your family. Use the following questions:

1. How often could our family realistically read the Bible each week?
2. What time of the week would be best for reading?
3. What level of Bible reading can our family handle? (Whole books, Narrative stories, Children's Bibles)
4. What are some ways our family can make Bible reading time fun?
5. What obstacles will we encounter as we read the Bible together?

LIVE IT...

Homework for the week!

Engage the Bible with you family at least 2 times this week. If you're married and have children, try engaging the Bible once with your spouse and once with your children.

Session 8: Putting it all together

In this final session, we review the first 7 weeks of the Bible engagement course. We discuss successes and difficulties in implementing the various Bible engagement strategies discussed in this course. We also take time to formulate personal Bible engagement plans for each participant.

TALK ABOUT IT...

Lord willing, you have discovered a deeper appreciation for engaging with God's Word and found new ways of doing so. Let's review last 7 weeks

Looking back on the course

1. God's Purpose for Bible Reading
2. Personal Bible intake
3. Mediation methods pt. 1
4. Mediation methods pt. 2
5. Engaging the Bible through sermons
6. Engaging the Bible through small groups
7. Engaging the Bible with family

Discussion questions about the course

1. Which lesson had the biggest impact on your Bible engagement? Why?
2. Which lesson is the hardest for you to implement? Why?

PRACTICE IT AND LIVE IT...

Put together your personal Bible engagement Vision using the hand out provided

Bible Engagement Vision

As you cast a vision for your Bible Engagement make sure that you remain realistic, honest, and flexible.

Personal Bible Reading

1. Write how the purpose of Bible engagement applies to your life personally.

2. Which personal Bible reading approach is the best for your plan?

- a. Reading multiple books at a time

- i. If you choose this approach, what plan will you use?

1. A calendar plan
2. A bookmark plan
3. A genre plan

- b. Reading a single book at a time

- i. If you choose this approach, write the first 5 books you plan to work through.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

3. Which meditation method will you practice most often? Write when you will use this method next to your choice

- a. Emphasizing different words _____
- b. Carrying the text with you _____
- c. Questioning the text _____
- d. Praying the Bible _____

4. How will you engage with sermons? Choose at least one thing you will do weekly to engage with sermons at our church and write it here.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

5. List 3 people you could potentially start a small group Bible reading with. These people do not have to be in this class or even in this church.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

6. Based on your current family situation, what is your plan for family Bible engagement? Will you use the Bible or a children's Bible? How often will you aim to do Bible reading as a family?

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ABSTRACT

TRAINING THE MEMBERS OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF COMMERCE, OKLAHOMA, TO ENGAGE THE BIBLE FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024
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This project sought to equip members of the First Baptist Church of Commerce, Oklahoma, to engage for spiritual growth. Chapter 1 presents the ministry context of First Baptist Church and the goals of this project. Chapter 2 provides an exegesis of three passages of Scripture (Neh 8; Pss 1; 119:9–16) to show the prominent role of Bible engagement in discipleship. Chapter 3 presents the evangelicals as models for Bible engagement. Chapter 4 describes the implementation of this project, which was a course on Bible engagement. Chapter 5 evaluates the efficacy of the project based on the completion of the specified goals. This project trained believers to engage the Bible in a meaningful fashion in order to grow as disciples of Christ.

VITA

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