

Scripture Engagement Compared to Bible Study

Scripture engagement is not the same thing as studying the Bible. It is a *complement* to deep study of the Scriptures. In the process of promoting Scripture engagement, the last thing I want to do is to detract from the importance of studying the Scriptures. Let me be very clear here, **studying the Scriptures is absolutely essential to the Christian life**. [2 Timothy 2:15](#) tells us that we are to come to the Bible as a “worker,” one “who correctly handles the word of truth.” Teachers of the Scriptures are a gift to us from God ([1 Corinthians 12:28](#)). Jesus came as The Teacher ([John 13:13](#)). The Apostle Paul was a scholar ([Acts 22:3](#)). The inductive study of the Bible, the process of observing, interpreting, and applying the Bible, is how we understand what the Bible means. We must know what the Bible means if we are to have an accurate understanding of God as we meet with him.

Though I am deeply committed to Bible study (I teach a class on the Inductive Study of the Bible at the University level), just studying the Bible is not enough. It is possible to study the Bible so that it becomes a mere academic exercise, studying in a way that ends up not impacting spiritual growth. You have probably met people who have head knowledge of a topic without heart or life change, a kind of empty scholasticism.

On the other hand, the goal of Scripture engagement is not to be overly subjective with the Bible, thus moving away from the original meaning of the passage. A basic tenet of Bible study is that the passage can’t mean something totally different to the modern reader than it did to the original writer. The sole question can never be, “What does the passage mean to me?” It is possible to engage/reflect on what isn’t true, on what the passage doesn’t mean. Doing this is irresponsible subjectivism. We have all seen people base their actions on what they think is Biblical but in fact is not what the Bible is saying.

Scripture engagement calls us to both analyze and apply the Bible, having knowledge of a text and a personal insight about that text. Scripture engagement encourages us to listen with our minds and with our hearts. It is a process of *Discovery Learning* (see educational psychologist Jerome Brunner for this idea). The ideal process in my mind is to come to the Bible working hard to study what it means, then to reflect, in the power of the Holy Spirit, on the meaning of the passage for your own life and community. Reflection will bring up more questions about the meaning of the text and drive the learner back to study, which will then lead to the need for more reflection. A cycle of study-reflection-study-reflection, which leads to a deepened relationship with God and a changed life, is the most powerful process for developing spiritually.

But does the reflective process in Scripture engagement really need to be taught? Few would disagree with the need to teach people how to study the Bible; learning the principles of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics), understanding the historical and cultural settings of the Bible, and learning the meanings of words in the original Biblical languages are all critical in understanding the meaning of the Bible. But aren’t people naturally reflective? Once they understand what the Bible says intellectually, won’t they act on that understanding? The reality is, for the majority of us, it just doesn’t work that way. Understanding isn’t equal to spiritual growth. In some ways, understanding the Bible intellectually is the easier of the two processes. It is the reflection process, the place where we are mostly likely to meet God and be changed by him, that we especially need to learn.

Why is reflecting on the Scriptures often so difficult? One reason is that people have a natural tendency to avoid anything that will cause them to change. Meeting and knowing God is always a life changing process and is always for our good, but it involves a death to ourselves which can be intimidating ([Matthew 16:24](#)). Studying the Bible for information can be done in the spirit of trying to master the text so that we are the ones who

control the Bible instead of putting ourselves under the authority of God's Word (think of the Pharisees). Meeting with God will change our lives. Being willing to admit that we need change ([Mark 2:17](#)) is a critical first step in Scripture engagement. Our sinful/prideful natures fight against yielding to God's renewing work in our lives.

Scripture engagement is also difficult because reflecting on Scripture is a "whole person" process. To read the Bible spiritually we are engaging our intellect and our emotions. As we reflect on a passage we should contemplate personal and community life changes. Using our intellect, our emotions/attitudes, and our behaviors/actions together in the presence of the Holy Spirit is a powerful way to grow spiritually. It engages the whole person by exposing all areas of our lives to God's Word. This is much more difficult than just using one corner of our brains to skim the surface of a Bible passage, preventing it from penetrating our lives.

In the same way we learn more about studying the Bible from good teachers and scholars, most of us have more to learn about reflecting on the Bible for spiritual growth. There are techniques and practices that the church has learned over the years that can benefit each of us. Think what it is like to play soccer (football, for much of the world). The basics of soccer are fairly simple: "kick the ball in the goal." Children can even play the game, but with practice and good coaching kids can grow up to be brilliant World Cup level athletes, masters of the game. It is the same with engaging Scriptures. You probably already engage the Bible at some level. But perhaps we can admit that with practice and coaching we will grow in the life-changing skills of Scripture engagement. The prayer of those of us at Bible Gateway and the Taylor University Center for Scripture Engagement is that this website might be a meaningful tool to connect you with good "coaches" who train you in Scripture engagement skills, leading you into a deeper life of love and obedience to God.