

INTRO

During the Reformation of the 1500s, the phrase *sola scriptura* (Latin for “scripture alone”) arose on the church scene, thanks to Martin Luther and his insistence that scripture is the authority for Christian faith. Among Luther’s greatest achievements was the full translation of the Bible into common German. For the first time, everyone literate could read the Bible for themselves, rather than depend on educated, Latin-reading elites. Luther thought that readers would read the Bible just as he did. Perhaps unsurprisingly to us, many did not read it just like Luther.

Peruse church websites for their “About Us” pages on how they read the Bible, and you’ll find modern examples of diverse and conflicting readings of the Bible. Words like “inerrant” and “literal” and “inspired” appear, as will key Bible verses and phrases used to back up (sometimes poorly) theology, social stances, and their view of the Bible.

In short: the Bible is complex. How should we read it?

This Crafted Conversation begins with a nifty little warm up (if we do say so ourselves): *Imagine that you’ve just sat down at a coffee shop. In a nearby bookshelf, you see a folded piece of paper sticking out from between two books. You remove it, unfold it, and find a hand-written note that reads, “I hope you find this meaningful.” If you wanted to learn more about this note, how would you go about that? What would you examine, study, investigate, or observe?*

THE BIBLE: How to Read? Library & Lenses

a Brewed Theology
conversation starter*

The hope is for this Brewed Theology to introduce, suggest, or reaffirm a studious approach to the reading of scripture. Rather than a singular, monolithic book that dropped from the sky, the Bible is more of a library of works written over ~1400 years by something like 40 authors in three languages. While we hold it to be inspired and authoritative, we also approach it with openness to interpretation, contextual curiosity, and reverent wonder. Whether you’re brand new to the Bible, or it’s been your lifelong companion, let’s discuss it.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

What is the Bible? How would you describe or explain it? (Try this: imagine a friend asks you what the Bible is. What do you say? How do you describe it? Where should they start reading, and how?) What are your earliest memories of the Bible? What were you taught about it? How were you taught to read it? How willing are you to accept words like “infallible” or “inerrant” when it comes to the Bible? How willing would you be to unlearn or deconstruct that understanding? How has your approach to reading scripture grown or changed? How well do you know the Bible? Would you describe your understanding as limited? full? broad? deep? shallow?

BIBLE BASICS

Read these passages from scripture, about scripture. **IMPORTANT!** Try reading them with **the 4-fold method from *Book of Faith*** in the Homework below. (i.e., read them Devotionally, Historically, Literarily, Traditionally.)

- **Psalm 1:1-12** – The first Psalm, and an introduction to the book.
- **Deuteronomy 4:1-2** – Deuteronomy, a book of teachings, on not adding or removing anything from laws.
- **2 Timothy 3:16** – All scripture is “inspired.” Look up other translations – what do they say?
- **Luke 16:14-17** – Jesus says that the “law” will remain, even when all else falls away.
- **Revelation 22:18-19** – Final instructions from the final book of the Bible.

ESSENTIAL READINGS and LISTENINGS

START WITH YOUR BIBLE (if you have one. If you don't, ask a church, pastor, or library for one.)

[No link for this one!] Look at any good old, physical, paper and ink Bible. What Version is it? (KJV, NIV, NRSV, etc.?) Read the version and/or translator notes. Notice the table of contents. Is there an index? glossary? study notes? map section? Are there commentators or footnotes throughout? What else is in the back of your Bible? Ever noticed any of these things? (For a digital Bible, try the NRSVUE).

BOOK OF FAITH (& four methods)

A resource from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA, Augsburg Publishing). Browse their material, but note their “4-fold” methods of reading scripture: Devotional, Historical, Literary, and Theological (tradition, or Lutheran for BoF). Try using these to read the suggested scripture above.

ENTER THE BIBLE (enterthebible.org)

An enormous resource on the Bible, from general questions, to topical issues, to contextual dives in to books of the Bible. Produced by seminary professors from Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota).

(Note: your Brewed Theology writers are Luther Seminary trained, and consider Enter the Bible a top tier resource: theologically, academically, and faithfully sound. We recommend EtB as a strong companion to Bible study. Compare and contrast this with Got Questions below, and see the “Important Note” there.)

GOT QUESTIONS (gotquestions.org)

A wide resource that seeks to offer answers from the Bible. Self-proclaimed “Christian, evangelical, theologically conservative, and nondenominational” (from their About page). Considers scripture to be “inspired, infallible, and authoritative,” “inerrant,” “God-breathed,” and “without error or omission” (lots of words to unpack). An understanding of the Bible, by a particular part of the Body of Christ.

Important Note: We (at Brewed Theology) don’t usually offer overt critique of a Homework source, but in this case, especially since this subject is in our area of expertise, we raise a caution flag. GotQuestions has a large internet presence, and probably has a pulse on a swath of American Evangelical Christian perspective. However, we don’t recommend subscribing to GotQ’s as the only or final authority on scripture, particularly for reading on certain social issues, and their sometimes too-convenient clarity on such social and/or partisan issues. We include GotQuestions as a reference, not an endorsement. Browse with care for their particular perspective, then reflect on your own, or with help from Enter the Bible.

THE BIBLE PROJECT

A “nonprofit, crowdfunded organization” that makes free media to teach about the Bible. Check out their animated videos, especially their “How to Read the Bible” series. Created by Tim Mackie and Jon Collins, Bible Project proposes that “The Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus.”

THE ART PASTOR

Steve Thomason is “The Art Pastor” and a professor. His website offers several illustrated resources for study. See especially his exploration of the Bible in “The Bible Book Shelf” for some interactive learning. Lots here.

MARK ALLAN POWELL ON “HOW TO READ A GOSPEL TEXT”

Retired seminary professor Mark Allan Powell (Trinity Lutheran Seminary), expands on one strategy for reading the Gospels – specifically, “how the implied readers or intended audience of the work would be expected to understand it, be affected by it, or, indeed, respond to it.” It’s academic in nature, but a New Testament scholar and theologian’s take on reading a Gospel very contextually.

We at Brewed Theology claim no authorship or ownership of suggested readings, the links provided, or their host websites.

Links below connect to their original sources. If a link is broken, please contact your facilitator or report it to brewedtheology@gmail.com. Homework readings are proven (at least in our minds) to boost thoughtfulness and conversation. While not required, they are highly suggested.