

Core
Christianity

LEADER'S EDITION



How to
Read the Bible

Andrew Menkis

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How to Read the Bible: Leader's Edition
by Andrew Menkis

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Contents

05 INTRODUCTION Why This Study?

08 LESSON 1 What Is the Bible?

18 LESSON 2 Understanding the Big Themes of the Bible

30 LESSON 3 Interpretation and Application:
Reading Scripture with a Redemptive Focus

40 LESSON 4 Understanding the Pentateuch and Historical Books:
Genesis–2 Chronicles

50 LESSON 5 Understanding the Psalms and Wisdom Literature

62 LESSON 6 Understanding the Prophets: Isaiah–Malachi

72 LESSON 7 Understanding the Gospels and Acts

84 LESSON 8 Understanding the Epistles

94 LESSON 9 Understanding Revelation

106 LESSON 10 Reading the Bible

116 RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Why
This
Study?

Introduction

To begin, we would like to thank you—students, congregants, church leaders, elders, pastors, and churches—for supporting and using this Bible study. We hope it enriches your Christian life, challenges your heart, and builds up your faith to the glory of God.

Why This Study?

If you're a new Bible reader, this study will introduce you to its history, key concepts that help tie the Old and New Testaments into one cohesive whole, along with key ideas from main sections. You'll finish this study more confident in your ability to read the Bible with understanding. If you're a seasoned reader of the Bible, this study includes nuggets of insight you may have never considered before. It will help refresh your understanding of Scripture as one book, and you'll be equipped to help others grow in their own knowledge of God's word.

All of our studies are designed with several things in mind:

1. TO ADVANCE THE GOSPEL.

The Pew Research Center reports a rapidly changing religious landscape in the U.S., with the percentage of those identifying as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" up nine percent in just the last 10 years.¹ Almost 60 percent of our youth leave their churches as young adults, and this number is growing

Despite this unsettling news, the core message of Christianity—the gospel—is still capable of renewing our lives and the church.

Rather than worrying or acting out of fear and self-preservation, the best hope for Christians, the church, and people who feel pressure to abandon their faith is the historic Christian faith, the gospel announcement of what God has done through Jesus Christ for the world.

2. TO SPEAK TO HONEST QUESTIONS.

Many in our evangelical, Baptist, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican churches have honest questions about faith and life that they may be afraid to ask. We shaped this study to address the concerns of long-time Christians, new Christians, Christians with wavering faith, and skeptics alike.

3. TO ENGAGE THE DRAMA OF SCRIPTURE, TEACH THE DOCTRINE OF HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY, MOVE US TO DOXOLOGY (WORSHIP), AND ENABLE HEALTHY DISCIPLESHIP.

Our studies are written to show how doctrine naturally arises out of the Bible's narrative of Jesus Christ and his saving work. We designed the reflection and discussion questions with a practical emphasis to help you engage the material in a prayerful way that should inspire worship and lead to a fuller understanding of how to live as a disciple of Christ.

¹ Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An update on America's changing religious landscape," October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

4. TO BE USEFUL IN A VARIETY OF SETTINGS.

We wrote this study thinking of Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, informal gatherings among friends, and individuals who want to learn more about the Christian faith. Each lesson includes a series of short sections containing a reading and a set of reflection questions. The leader's edition of this study has group discussion questions so that Christians can come together to share insights, ask questions, pray together, and be equipped to share what they're learning with friends and family.

We recommend you work through one lesson per week. If meeting with a group, we suggest reading the lesson and answering the questions on your own first.²

Note to Leaders (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Again, thank you for supporting and using this Bible study. Here are some tips for doing this study with a group:

- Encourage every group member to get their own copy of the Bible study so they can read the lesson in advance and answer the reflection questions in preparation to share their thoughts with the group each week.
- Prepare in advance to lead the discussion. Your leader's edition has additional sections (highlighted with gray boxes) to help you lead your time together. It also contains page numbers for the study book to help leaders cue the correct page.
- Though it's common for discussion to stay at the intellectual level, the questions in this study are aimed at being practical. Help and encourage your group members to think about how the truth of God's word intersects with their daily lives by modeling your own personal reflection and application.
- Be patient with your discussion time. Leading a group discussion is hard! It takes practice, and it can take time for people to feel comfortable sharing. It can also be frustrating when people come unprepared, but your grace and patience will help people to continue showing up.
- Invite people to participate by asking for volunteers to read a passage of Scripture or a section of the study, or by closing in prayer at the end. Welcome their thoughts and reflections. Invite questions. The more people participate in the study, the more they will enjoy their time, and the more they will learn.
- Keep in mind that you don't have to follow the lesson exactly as it's written. The written materials are designed to aid you, not lock you into a certain mode. Feel free to change things to fit your context and level of experience in teaching.

Ultimately, remember that it's God who is at work in his word, and he is faithful!

² Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

"ALL SCRIPTURE IS BREATHED OUT BY
GOD AND PROFITABLE FOR TEACHING,
FOR REPROOF, FOR CORRECTION, AND
FOR TRAINING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS, THAT
THE MAN OF GOD MAY BE COMPLETE,
EQUIPPED FOR EVERY GOOD WORK."

2 Timothy 3:16

What *Is*
the Bible?

Pray (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Dear God, as we start this study, whether we have read the Bible for years or this is our first time opening it up, we ask that you would give us openness to grow, diligence to study, and a heart to seek after the truth found in your word. We thank you for the Bible and that through it you communicate everything we need to know about salvation and how to live as you created us. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Read Together: 2 Timothy 3:16–17

(LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Opening Reflection Questions (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. How comfortable do you feel with reading the Bible and why?
2. How do you feel about Paul's statement to Timothy that all of the Bible is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness?
3. What kinds of tools or knowledge do you think would help you read the Bible?
4. At the end of this study, what would you like to come away with?

Read Isaiah 53:1–12; Luke 23:32–46; Revelation 5:1–14 (BIBLE STUDY P. 10)

The Diversity of the Bible

The Bible is an amazingly unique book. In fact, one of the first things to note about the Bible is that it is actually sixty-six different books that have been put together in one collection. This collection of writings is divided into two parts. The first thirty-nine books are called the Old Testament and the other twenty-seven books are the New Testament. The diversity within the books of the Bible is staggering. They are written by about forty different authors (the authors of a few books are unknown or unidentified). The authors come from a variety of places around the world, and the events they write about take place on three different continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. The authors are not only diverse geographically, but they also come from a variety of different times in history spanning from the 1500s BC to the first century AD. Furthermore, the books of the Bible were written in multiple languages. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (with a few small sections in Aramaic) and the New Testament in Greek. The authors wrote in a variety of genres including history, poetry, prophecy, Gospel, Epistle, and apocalyptic literature. From this list of genres alone, it is clear to see that the Bible is anything but monochromatic and bland. It is a vibrant and engaging collection of books!

The Unity of the Bible

We could stop here and marvel at the diversity of the books in the Bible. We could see the Bible as a complex document with great historical and cultural significance, but nothing more. However, the Bible itself claims to be more than an artifact of human history. It claims to be “breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). This Bible asserts that the authors of each book were inspired by the Holy Spirit. To be inspired means that the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, worked organically with each author, ensuring that everything they wrote, including each word they chose, was ultimately communicating God’s word and God’s message. Even though the Bible is an extremely diverse collection of writings, it is still one unified book because there is one greater author behind all the human authors.

The Bible is God’s message to humanity. Although it is an ancient book, it is still relevant for all people of all times—a book we need today, because it contains the words of our Creator. The heart of God’s message in the Bible, no matter what page you turn to, is this: God the Father saves sinners through his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Both the Old and New Testaments teach us about who God is, who we are in relation to him, and how we can be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God. Thus the Bible is not a random collection of books. Despite the diversity of the books, they are not unrelated. Rather, they are deeply interconnected by God’s plan of redemption, which is carried out in history and then recorded and explained in the Bible. At this point, it would be natural to wonder how this collection came to exist. How did we arrive at the sixty-six books that are in the Bible, and why did other books not get included? To answer these questions, we must understand the concept of “canon.” But before we discuss the canon, let’s take a few moments to see some examples of both the diversity and unity of the Bible.

Questions for Reflection (BIBLE STUDY P. 11)

1. Isaiah was an Old Testament prophet, Luke wrote his Gospel as a historical narrative based off of his research, and John records an apocalyptic vision he had in the book of Revelation. What differences did you notice between each passage in content and style?
2. What similarities or connections do you notice between these three very diverse sections of the Bible?
3. How does God's plan of redemption unify these passages?

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1–16 (BIBLE STUDY P. 11)

The Formation of the Canon

The word *canon* is a Greek word that can be literally translated as “ruler.” A canon is a measuring stick or standard. When this word is applied to the Bible, it means that the sixty-six books of the Bible are the standard for what Christians believe and how they should live. Just as a ruler establishes how long an inch or centimeter is, the Bible is our “rule of faith and practice.”¹ Christians evaluate or “measure” what they believe by the teachings of the Bible. Likewise, Christians measure their actions by what the Bible says about how to live a good life. So, the canon of Scripture is simply the list of books recognized as authoritative over our belief and over the way we live. The concept of a canon is fairly straightforward, but there are many questions about how the canon was formed. In other words, how did we end up with the specific collection of books that are in the Bible? Why are they considered as canon while many other religious books are not?

First off, there are two main ways to answer this question. One common view is that the church met together in councils, evaluated the books being read and circulated by Christians, then picked which ones would make up the canon. Once the church decided what was in the canon, those books were given

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology Volume I: Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 152.

authority over faith and practice. The other view argues from the premise that the books of the Bible are the inspired word of God. As such, they have intrinsic authority. Such authority cannot be bestowed upon the books by the church; rather the church can only recognize God's word when it is encountered and we submit to its inherent authority. It is clear that the focal point of this debate is the question of where authority lies. Does the church have the authority to declare what constitutes the Scripture? Or does Scripture have authority over the church, such that the church can only recognize the canon and not decide what goes into it?

For a couple of reasons, it seems clear that Scripture has inherent authority over the church, which can only recognize and acknowledge it. First, the inherent authority of the Bible is soundly established by the fact that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. If the books of the Bible are indeed God's words to humanity, then they have authority because of whose words they are. God is creator and therefore Lord over all creation. Just as painters have a natural authority over their paintings (they can paint how they like, keep or sell their artwork, destroy it, or paint over it), God has a natural authority over his creatures. Thus as creatures we must listen to and obey the words of our creator. We are compelled to listen, but it is also wise to do so. This is why the Bible is a canon, or standard of faith and practice. God tells truths about his creation and how he designed us to live and flourish in the pages of Scripture. The Bible has authority in and of itself because it is God's word. That is true whether or not the church or anybody else says so. Just as the word of parents has authority regardless of whether or not their child decides they have authority, the Bible's authority cannot be given or declared; it can only be recognized.

The second reason why it seems clear that the Bible has authority over the church is that Scripture creates the church. To understand this claim, it is necessary to first define what we mean by "the church." Both in the Old and New Testaments, the church is described as an assembly called by God. In Hebrew and Greek, the word for church is related to the verb "to call." The church, then, is the group of people God has called out of the world to follow him. The church is made up of those who hear God's voice and respond in faith. So, it is clear that the church is created and grows when God calls, or speaks, to sinners. God's word is powerful. As the prophet Isaiah wrote,

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isa. 55:10–11)

In this metaphor, Isaiah compares the relationship between water and plants with the relationship between God's word and his creation. Just as water causes plants to grow, God's word will cause his desired effect to occur. This is true not only of creation, as in Genesis 1 where God creates by speaking, but also of salvation. God uses his written word, the Bible, and the preaching of that word to call sinners to repent and believe in Jesus Christ for their salvation and entrance into the church.

A clear example of this reality is seen on the day of Pentecost. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came in power upon the apostles, and Peter preached an inspired sermon. Using several Old Testament passages, he explained that Jesus Christ was the savior God had promised the Israelites. In response to this message, many repented of their sins and were baptized. In other words, they became part of the church. At the end of this story we read, "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). It was through the teaching and preaching of God's word that the church grew. It was his word that God used to draw, or call, people into the church.

From these passages we can conclude a few things. First, because it is the word of God that calls

people out of their sin and into the church, we can conclude that the church (the assembly of these people) is created by the word. Second, if the word creates the church, then it follows that the authority of the word is higher than that of the church. How can the church have authority over the word or to create the canon if it wouldn't exist apart from God's word? Third, we can conclude that the church does not give authority to Scripture by deciding what is considered canon; rather the church simply recognizes the inherent authority of God's word. The church is under the authority of God's word and must submit in belief and practice to what the word of God teaches.

Recognizing God's Word

If the canon was not formed by the church or any council of humans but merely recognized, then the logical question to ask next is how God's word was recognized in the first place. In a nutshell, the books used and collected by the church—but especially those read aloud in church—constituted the canon. From very early on in the history of the church, there was consensus about which books were the inspired and authoritative word of God. These books claimed to be inspired and bore marks of divine authorship. In the case of the New Testament, they were written by the apostles who had lived with Jesus, or a writer had direct connections to the apostles.

These are some of the factors in the recognition of the canon. The canon wasn't something decided on at a council, but something that was agreed upon and passed down from the earliest days of the Christian church. The canon emerged organically as Christians heard the voice of God through his inspired writings. The early church disagreed about many things, but as theologian Michael Horton explains, "There was a core canon that was read publicly in all the churches and used as the final authority in doctrinal and ethical disputes."² The councils that came later and published lists of canonical books were not producing anything new; rather they were confirming officially what was already functionally understood and used by the church.

Questions for Reflection (BIBLE STUDY P. 13)

1. What is the wisdom that Paul is sharing, and why does he call it "secret and hidden"?
2. How does Paul say he gained this wisdom?
3. What does Paul claim about his writings in this passage?

² Michael Horton, "Is Our Bible Too Small?," *Modern Reformation*, July/August 2020, <https://www.whitehorseinn.org/article/is-our-bible-too-small/>.

4. If the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the books in the Bible, then how should that impact how we read them?

5. What distinction is Paul making between the “spiritual” and the “natural” person, and what does that teach us about reading the Bible?

Questions for Discussion (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. What did you like about this week's study? Was there anything you didn't like or disagreed with?

2. What are your beliefs about the canon, and how did you arrive at them?

3. What do people turn to other than the Bible to create their own “canon” for life?

4. What kind of authority do you believe the Bible has, and how does that impact you on a practical level?

5. After this discussion, what questions do you still have that you would like answered?

Going deeper into the word of God

With sixty-six books written over more than a thousand years by multiple authors, the Bible is more like a library than a book—and because of this, many people struggle to make sense of it. Whether you're a new believer or have been walking with Christ for decades, Core Christianity's *How to Read the Bible* study is a great way to grow in understanding the meaning and significance of God's word for your life.

At Core Christianity, we strive to help people understand the core truths of the Christian faith. Every time we answer a caller's question on our daily radio show, every article we run on corechristianity.com, and every resource we produce seeks to help people gain a clearer understanding of the gospel—the core message of Christianity.

We wrote this study thinking of Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, informal gatherings among friends, and individuals who want to learn more about the Christian faith. Designed for groups to move through in 10 weeks, this study is perfect for a semester or quarterly study. Each weekly lesson includes selected passages from the Bible, explanations of the key themes revealed in that passage, and reflection questions.

We pray this study will help you to enjoy a deeper understanding of God's word, experiencing firsthand how "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" so that they may be "equipped for every good work" (1 Tim. 3:16–17).

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“FOR NO PROPHECY WAS
EVER PRODUCED BY THE
WILL OF MAN, BUT MEN
SPOKE FROM GOD AS THEY
WERE CARRIED ALONG BY
THE HOLY SPIRIT.”

2 Peter 1:21

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