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## Does My Bible Read Me?

The story is told of a woman in East Africa who always carried a large, oversized, Bible with her wherever she went. People snickered at her and children taunted her. Finally, the people asked her why she always carried her Bible with her. Why not some other book? She replied, "There are many books I can read. This is the only book that reads me."

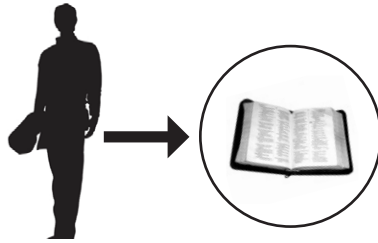
Hermeneutics deals with how we read the Scriptures, and there are a variety of hermeneutics. When I open the Scriptures, there is, in reality, a committee involved in the process: my age, nationality, gender, denomination, political leanings, education, etc., etc. In fact, this committee determines the books I read and the verses that I select. My faith community has a strong interest in eschatology and so the books of Daniel and Revelation rank high. Early in my (then somewhat combative) years of ministry I was tempted to think that some books "belonged" to certain denominations.

In my later (and less combative) years of ministry, I became more reflective and realized that Bible study was, at its best, actually a dialogical activity.

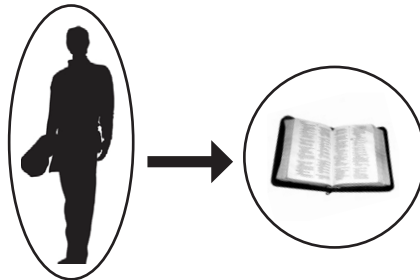


This picture represents the simplest form of Bible reading, common to many of us most of the time. I read the Scriptures and attempt to understand them. I ask few questions and receive few answers. It is quite

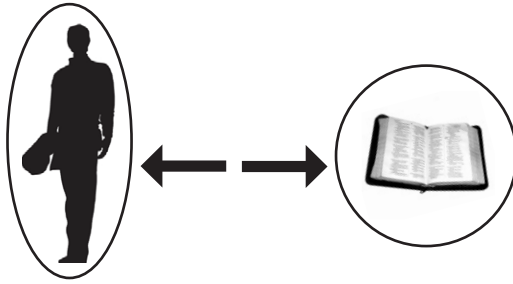
simplistic: “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that’s that.” On face value it sounds very spiritual and good, but it is actually very dangerous.



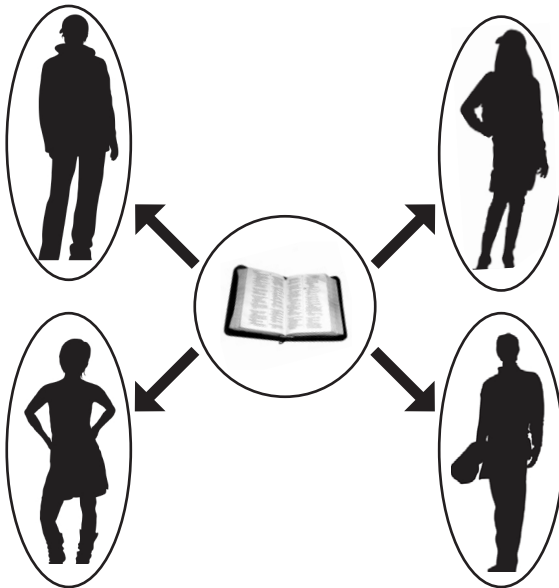
In this picture we draw a circle around the Scriptures. This means that I recognize that the Bible was written in a certain context, or rather contexts. This means that I must understand the time in history it was written, to whom it was written, the original language and thought patterns, etc. All of this refers to the various cultures (Patriarchal, Davidic, Babylonian, Palestinian, Greek, and Roman) involved in the lengthy writing process of these books. All of a sudden the Bible becomes a much more complex and interesting (even exciting) book. I begin to discern between prose and poetry, prophecy and counsel, narrative and legal documents, history and apocalyptic literature. Knowledge of what was happening in the world at that time enriches my reading and understanding.



In this picture we draw a circle around me, indicating that I, too, have a context, both subjective and objective. These are, subjectively, my current feelings and stresses, my frustrations, and my immediate goals. Objectively, it alerts me to that committee I mentioned earlier, my education, age, gender, politics, economics, etc. I am a complex person. We all are. The fact is, none of us read the Bible innocently. We all bring something of ourselves to the table with us.



Now we draw circles around both the Bible and me. We also see arrows pointing in both directions indicating that while I am reading the Scriptures, they are “reading” me. Not only do I make certain judgments about the Bible and what it is saying, but the Bible is critiquing me. It is asking questions about my “committee,” why do I feel and think the way I do? Are these thoughts and feelings consistent with the teachings of the Bible? If they are not consistent or in agreement, then what might need to be adjusted? This becomes a serious dialogue, especially if I give critical authority to the Scriptures, that is, if I maintain that the Bible is the standard by which my own thinking and behavior is judged.



But wait, there are other people reading the same Scriptures and disagreeing with my interpretation. It is not that they are bad or incorrect in

their interpretations, but they are different. I am forced to realize that this is both possible and inevitable. After all, they have different “committees” than I do. They may have lived in a different world (historically) than I do.

I have often referred to the story of the European teacher in a class full of Africans, reading the story of Joseph. The European saw the great lesson as Joseph’s faithfulness to God. The African pastors saw the great lesson as Joseph’s faithfulness to his family. In reality, both interpretations are correct. The difference is in the cultures of the teacher and the students. When my wife and I read the story (Mark 12:18-27) of the woman with seven husbands, we read it differently. I look at it theologically, while she feels for the poor woman being passed on down.

What is necessary is to draw arrows back and forth between the four people. This is a wonderful opportunity for discussion and deeper learning. The greater the diversity in the study group, the greater the opportunity for deeper learning and larger understanding. Everyone in the group needs to ask each other why they read it the way they do? Everyone needs to identify their “committee.”

In some cases, as with the Joseph story, both understandings may be correct. In other cases, it may make more of a difference, even a doctrinal difference on how one reads and interprets a certain passage. When differences arise with the faith community there are three options that God’s people have followed: (1) study more (see Acts 15:1-29), (2) agree to disagree graciously (see Acts 15:36-40), or (3) as with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-40), go our separate ways graciously. While unity is desired in the Body of Christ, uniformity is not.



Exercise: consider the graphic above. Assume you are one of the figures. Who do you know and regularly interact with that reads the Bible quite differently than you do? In a loving spirit, find out what you do agree upon. Find out why you disagree?



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