

Engaging with the message of the Bible by Durk Meijer

It is special to be able to enjoy group Bible studies, conference devotions, sermons, as well as individual time spent engaging with the message of the Bible. Yet, what are the best methods?

One day I was in church enjoying the preaching, but when I left, I only remembered the anecdotal cultural stories that were told and how they reminded me of some good moral principles. When scripture is only a supplemental factor or not even part of the sermon, then there might be value in this approach. But, if the purpose is to learn from and engage with the message of the Bible, then that is not a good method.

Many people have their own ideas about what is the best method to help people engage with the message of the Bible. I believe that there are many great methods, but we would be wise to keep certain principles in mind when exploring methods.

The first principle is to ***allow the message of God to speak for itself***. After all, we believe that God is the author of the message and we know that He wants us to engage with Him. He created us for His glory and pleasure and, in that context, for fellowship with Him. So, when He relates to us through the Bible, it should speak for itself clearly. Since the Eternal one is also all knowing and all wise, we can also accept that translations of the Bible should be good enough for any of us to engage with and that they should need no interpretation. As such, there is no need to make God's Word come alive. R.C. Sproul, a well-known theologian, jokingly said:

'You want me to make the Bible come alive? I didn't know that it had died. In fact, I never even heard that it was ill. Who was the attending physician at the Bible's demise?' No, I can't make the Bible come alive for anyone. The Bible is already alive. **It** makes me come alive" (R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977], 14-15).

Does allowing God's message to speak for itself imply that all of us simply can understand everything of the message that God gave to us? I don't think so, since it has far more meaning than any one of us ever could discover in our lifetime. In that context I am suggesting another principle; ***Keep focus on the passage***. Since there is so much meaning in the Bible, we tend to complicate things by bringing in lots of additional information and interpretation of a given passage. Such information doesn't necessarily help us understand more of the Bible. It might bring in information that is reflecting our opinions or the opinions of others. We easily start to judge what is right and wrong. God

told us from the beginning that we are unable to judge what is right and wrong, yet in our sinful condition, it is a natural part of who we are and what we do. The issue is not that additional information is wrong or that help from teachers is wrong. On the contrary, the Bible has many examples where God uses teachers and even appoints teachers. But we too often allow those teachers to become our primary source of information in helping us engage with God. He wants us to engage with Him personally. We complicate things by considering all kinds of teachings as more valuable than learning directly from the message of God. Such opinions can easily misguide us, instead of us simply embracing the truths directly from the message the Eternal one has given us.

This leads to the next principle that ***we should only accept the message as it is***. Only teaching that actually will draw us into understanding the message more clearly is valuable. There is a lot of teaching that actually takes us away from the message or starts to change the message. It is evidenced by the many different denominations, each with its own doctrinal statement which often include extra Biblical or even unbiblical teaching. For example, in Namibia there is a denomination that has taken one small passage in the Bible to become the foundation of their approach to understanding God's message. They use the following passage: "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men." The people, that are part of this group, wear white robes to reflect the whiteness of the color of the kind of salt they know. Being like the salt of the earth, they would spray salt water in the eyes of people who have sinned in order to help them repent from their wrong doings.

Among another group in Northwest Botswana there is a denomination that has a doctrinal statement demanding each member (literate or not) to sign a document that includes accepting the extra biblical teaching of one of their people, who is considered a prophetess. Her teaching is considered as it were Biblical truth. Some denominations consider that only their pastors have the authority to interpret the Bible and that their teaching is then considered as having equal or even greater authority than the Bible. Even though we may think that we would never consider any of these kinds of practices, we should look at how we voluntarily often may embrace one or more of those ways. For example, when we teach children to pray, most of us would say that the proper way to pray is to close our eyes and fold our hands, while some will add that we actually should kneel as well. I don't mean that this may not be a good practice, but it is not a Biblical requirement in any way. I have also met many people who respond in a discussion about the meaning of a Scripture passage by saying; but our pastor, our church, or our denomination believes this or that. They may never even consider what

the message of the passage really is. One excuse is that after all the pastor studied the scriptures, so he should know its meaning.

One more principle I would like to mention is that ***we should look at a passage in its relevant Biblical context***. Words and phrases draw their entire meaning from the context. Normally the context gives a clear indication of what a word, phrase or even a story means. When we ignore the proper context we can easily use a word, phrase, or story and start to give our personal meaning. We can do this for example, when we defend a particular teaching. At other times we may desire a certain outcome and find words in Scripture that will make it look like God is ordaining what we want to see happen. Sometimes this may be done with the best intentions, but it can be very destructive.

Once I was helping as a volunteer in France with a congregation where some of the people shared direct personal revelation from God, sometimes using Scripture as the source of their prophecies. On one of those occasions a person was claiming healing from Scripture and telling about the healing that would happen of a dying family member that we had prayed for. It was completely out of context and a more mature person was bold enough to correct this prophecy, defusing the false expectations that had been created.

In a similar situation in South Africa, the sick person was actually attending the meeting where healing was pronounced over her. She, in contrast, knew in her heart that God was ready to bring her home to be with Him in Heaven, but claiming a healing from Scripture confused her. I talked with this young woman and she was so relieved to hear that someone would accept what she knew in her heart would happen. A few weeks later she did die and the those who claimed the healing were left in confusion about God not fulfilling His promises.

Another situation happened with a close friend in the USA, who believed from Scripture that if one just would believe, that one would be healed. When this didn't happen, the issue became that people were not praying in faith, like Scripture tells us we should. When that didn't help, others quoted Scripture that she must have sin in her life and that she should confess that to receive healing. Next someone with a gift of healing was pronouncing healing over her and this didn't make any difference either. Eventually she died and her husband clinging to his believe of healing, shared that after her heart stopped beating in the hospital, that she was revived when she told him her desire to stop suffering and to let her go. He interpreted this even as a healing, where his wife then made the choice to die anyway. Often many of these people really love God, but

they are simply deceived. The fear, pain and confusion that is caused by faulty application of the message of God's Word worldwide is probably far greater than any of us can imagine.

Additionally, ***we should look at a passage in context of the overarching message of the Bible.*** There is always an immediate context, but the Bible also has an overarching message that help us to understand a broader picture. If we don't consider this overarching message, then we can easily miss-interpret a passage. Sometimes things in the Bible may seem to conflict. Yet, we just should not try to solve the conflict, but look at the overarching message of the Bible and wait for God to reveal more as we grow. In some cases, He may never give us an understanding of the conflict or help us to resolve it. We should not make it our purpose to try to help God out. He knows what he is doing and we may just not be capable to understand. So, we simply should accept and obey.

In turn, the Bible itself is equally part of a much larger worldwide picture of history too, but the pieces that form the message of the Bible are the parts that God intended for us to have. We should therefore not interpret beyond what God shared with us, at the risk of making God say what we would like Him to say.

Finally, we need to recognize that ***the message of God's Word transcends every culture and worldview.*** To think that it was given to us only or primarily as a message to people who were living 2000 or more years in the past doesn't make sense. It becomes even more senseless when we try to re-construct the thinking and life of people this far back, except for what is clearly in the message as God has given it to us. We can't talk or interact with any of the people from these eras, nor do we have original records that are in their heart language. While their descendants still follow ways of life that may help them to relate to many issues in a different way than the rest of the world, the lessons learned are almost always the same. One big challenge is, that at times traditions or local cultural values have influenced the understanding of the message, but this was not only by the Jews, since throughout history people have given meaning to certain passages that have become traditions. As such these passages tend to be translated in light of those traditions, making it difficult for people to accept what the passage is actually or potentially communicating.

Another issue to consider is that the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament documents are typically written in Greek, but the people that God used to share through were Israelites, whose natural language was Hebrew. Written words provide the most condensed and reduced form of information. Over time, meaning of words in the same

language even changes significantly and when it is expressed in another language we lose even more meaning if we put the focus on just translating words and not the meaning of an overall message. Parts of the New Testament have been preserved in more manuscripts than any other ancient work, having over 5,800 complete or fragmented Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin manuscripts and 9,300 manuscripts in various other ancient languages including Syriac, Slavic, Gothic, Ethiopic, Coptic and Armenian. As time goes on, more New Testament manuscripts handwritten in the original Greek format are discovered. One of the latest substantial finds was in 2008, when 47 new manuscripts were discovered in Albania.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_manuscript) Since God is sovereign, He is well able to preserve the message across translations. As such the large amount of manuscripts and consequent translations provide an excellent foundation for good translations in any language today. This doesn't mean that we as humans have not made any errors. On the contrary, even the early manuscripts contain many differences, but not to the extent that it would hinder producing a good meaningful translation.

Next, I would like to share some samples of how we can engage with the message of God.

- We can engage as with a story by simply internalizing a passage. In other words, we actually want to make the passage/story ours. This means that we can relate deeply to people and issues in the story. This should result in us being able to share the story with the greatest understanding and applying any relevant principles we learn to our own lives.
- We can engage by meditating on a passage. God can speak to us through His Spirit living in us, but there are many other things that influence our thinking as well. We need to be very careful with the things we learn this way. Sometimes lessons may be specific for me as an individual and also sometimes the specific meaning could be for others too. It is a very subjective way of engaging with the message and one key principle that should be considered is that the truths learned do not conflict with the overarching story of the Bible. It is easy to be influenced by our own human desires. We should not just name things and then make our personal claims about it.
- We can engage with a passage through a systematic study where we put a high emphasis on understanding Biblical concepts. The danger comes when we focus too much on the usage of specific words and their typical context, where we make a lot of assumptions about the meaning of words and a context that we may know only a little about. If we focus on the overall meaning of the message, then we can

easily internalize the truths we observe instead of only gaining a mental understanding of the message or technical aspects of the message.

- We can engage with a passage by hearing a specific perspective or teaching about that passage. The biggest challenge is that often we only are given the teaching or perspective, without us actually engaging with the passage. We may be engaging with whatever the teacher is communicating, not even knowing if it is right or wrong. Besides that, we have to accept the teaching of our teacher and we are not discovering any truths for ourselves. If we don't discover truths for ourselves, it will make it more difficult to own these truths and defend those truths.