

How to Make Sense of the Bible

-some practical **‘top tips’**

The international Scout movement, founded in 1908 by Robert (later Lord) Baden-Powell, is well known for the emphasis it places on the outdoors and survival skills. But so that scouting is fit for a rapidly changing world it has announced that it is now promoting a Digital Citizen Badge.

The idea is that scouts will be taught how to spot fake news on social media, to watch out for hard sales techniques, to protect their personal data and to manage cyber bullying. Developing such skills for life as it is today, scouts have been given three ‘top tips’ for spotting fake news in particular. They are as follows: 1. look at the source, 2. ask questions and, 3. evaluate the evidence.

Perhaps this common-sense advice need not be limited to scouting but could possibly be used in others respects, such as when we read our Bibles. Those top tips might just be useful in making sense of what the Scriptures are really saying. Whereas we don’t expect the Bible to contain fake news, it is not always clear as to how we should understand its central message let alone work out what more difficult passages are getting at. So using these three suggestions might go some way to helping us to get to grips with Scripture.

1.Looking at the source as far as the Bible is concerned means carefully reading a passage and asking what the author intended to say, what the passage actually says and what was written down a long time ago has something to say to us living in the world today.

Discovering the plain meaning of any Bible passage always requires some prayerful thought on our part.

To take one of the best known verses in the New Testament, it begins: ‘For God so loved the world...’ Thus the author of St. John’s Gospel wants to pass on to us an amazing fact. It is that the Creator of the world actually loves each one of us. And how do we know that? It is because ‘he gave his only Son’, Jesus. But what does that mean for us today? It is ‘so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’. In other words a response is expected of us. As another text puts it: ‘we love [that is, God, other people and ourselves] because He first loved us.’

Of course we are likely to come across many less straightforward passages in the Bible. And this is where explanatory sermons, talks and group Bible studies come in. There are also many helpful books to assist us. But the search for the

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plain meaning of any Biblical excerpt usually involves careful consideration of what is actually said and prayer to be shown how what it says applies to our individual circumstances at the present time.

So, close attention to the source is essential in understanding the Bible.

2. **Asking questions** of what we read in our Bibles is important too. For instance, being informed that God loves the world (His own creation) may of course be interesting but to find out that He loves **us** is far more so. Yet how do we know that it really means us? It is by reading further and discovering that the promise refers to ‘everyone’. That is, to all who without exception believes.

And what, we may ask, is the outcome of this faith? It is the gift of life which will go on for ever instead of eternal loss. That of course remains to be seen but meanwhile we can take it on trust and begin to enjoy eternal life even now. Why? Because God gave His only Son and the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the proof that God keeps His promises. What more could He do to win our trust?

St Paul may have been thinking of what we find in the Old Testament when he wrote the following but it also applies to the teaching we come across today in the New Testament: ‘For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope’ (Romans 15, v.4).

Asking questions of the Bible is the way to find out if it makes sense- and if it does we go for it!

3. **Evaluating the evidence** in respect of the Bible is asking ‘does it work?’ Does what it teaches, warns and promises really change lives?

When one of the Psalms declares: ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path’, do we find that Bible teaching indeed guides us in the way we should live? Another Psalm invites us to ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’ and assures us that ‘happy are those who take refuge in him’. So in other words, is our experience of putting God first making a positive difference to our personal wellbeing and sense of purpose?

St Paul writing to encourage a Christian young man, told him to greatly value Scriptural teaching. For, he informed him, ‘All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in

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righteousness'. The Apostle also referred him to 'the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ' (2 Timothy 3, vv.14 and 16).

Finding out through personal experience that a thoughtful, regular reading of the Bible gives us true and accurate knowledge about God, the way of salvation and how we are meant to live as His people is a test we may use to evaluate its relevance and truthfulness. Thus we try it out by allowing it to inspire, inform and instruct us in our everyday living -even in this digital age!

To benefit from using these 'top tips' as we faithfully read our Bible each day (and even memorise verses from it), practical schemes are available to assist us from such organisations as the Bible Society, the Bible Reading Fellowship and Our Daily Bread.

A simple but meaningful few lines by an anonymous writer puts the value of Bible study this way:

The Bible, the Bible! More precious than gold;

Glad hopes and bright glories its pages unfold;

It speaks of the Father and tells of His love,

And shows us the way to the mansions above.