



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

“Let justice roll down”

“Unless man’s worship of God is matched by his just and fair treatment of his neighbor, then ceremonies, rituals, observances, and sacrifices are nauseating to God. And they are highly dangerous to the worshipper because he is attempting to stifle his moral and social conscience by all the ‘business’ of religion. He is, in fact, attempting to bribe God.” ~ J. B. Phillips, “Four Prophets,” *The Newborn Christian: 114 Readings* (Collier Books, 1978), 28-29

“Above all ... power”

“For the truth of Christ’s supremacy over all the powers in the universe is one which modern man sorely needs to learn. He is oppressed by a sense of impotence against merciless forces which he can neither overcome nor escape.” ~ F. F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1977), 79

“But I, O LORD, cry to you”

“Faith and lament are not antithetical. In circumstances of distress, lament may well be the only possible form of faithfulness to God.” ~ Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (United Church Press, 1999), 18

“Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense before you.” ~ Acts 22.1 CSB

To Know the Things of God On Going “Back to the Bible”

David Anguish

In March 2014, N. T. Wright visited Oklahoma Christian University to present a general lecture and participate in a forum with other scholars regarding his just completed tome, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.¹ In connection with his visit, Lynn McMillon interviewed him for *The Christian Chronicle*.

Among the questions McMillon asked was, “How viable is the Restoration, or ‘back to the Bible,’ message today?” Wright, an Anglican, replied that, while a valid undertaking, “constant reformation in the light of Scripture is more complicated than it often appears.” As for restoration, he observed that such movements often end up becoming what they seek to correct. But he also stated unequivocally that,

The task of each Christian generation is to go “back to the Bible,” to try to hear in fresh ways *what questions the early Christians were asking and what answers they were giving* to those questions. That is what every wise church tries to do (my emphasis).²

Having read several of his writings, I was not surprised by his answer. One need not agree with all his conclusions to appreciate that he urges his readers to evaluate the biblical text in the context of the larger New Testament world. He seeks to discern what the biblical text meant to its original readers before trying to determine how it should be applied now. To do that, one must go “back to the Bible.”

How serious he is about this is revealed in his answer to another question: “What advice do you offer Christians who want to become better Bible students?” After recommending they learn Hebrew and Greek and regularly read each, even if just beginning with the languages, he said,

Just as an actor gets to know Shakespeare or a musician knows Beethoven, there’s no reason why any Christian should not get to know the Bible very well indeed. Read it right through, in English if necessary, at least once every year. (Always have at least two quite different English translations at hand—none of them are perfect!) Learn key sections by heart (the Sermon on the Mount, the shorter

“This is eternal life ...”

“What makes life worth living is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has, in a way that no other man has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?” ~ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity Press, 1973), 30

“We wish to see Jesus”

“After the Reformation the city of Glasgow, Scotland adopted as its motto, ‘Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the Word and the praising of His name.’ In present day usage the motto has been shortened to ‘Let Glasgow flourish’. Such is the history of our time in a sentence.

“This is the era of the post-Christian man for whom Jesus Christ has become irrelevant. In His place, the frivolous pursue affluence and the serious, like the Greek philosophers, search for ‘reality’ and ‘meaning of existence’. In many ways John probably would feel more at home in our century than in any since his own day. In his society Jesus was irrelevant to the Greeks and rejected by the Jews. Yet John proclaimed his message to both.” ~ E. Earle Ellis, 1984 repr. (University Press of America, 1995), 94

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letters, Isaiah 40-55, favorite Psalms). Use what you’re learning in your praying, day by day.

Study the historical context of the Bible as broadly and deeply as you can. Again and again texts will spring into new life. Make your own analysis of key texts and sections. Do this broadly (whole books) and narrowly (focusing on key single verses, though never forgetting the whole context).³

As a Bible student, and teacher, I found myself doing some soul-searching after reading the interview. If Wright, admittedly not part of a church tradition that emphasizes an ongoing aim of “going back to the Bible,” is so serious about engaging the task, should I, as one who is part of a group with a longstanding commitment to that aim, not regularly examine my own commitment to the text and habits in studying it?

I submit that Wright’s focus on learning God’s word in light of a commitment to broad and deep study of the text in its historical context is consistent with the New Testament’s emphasis on diligently teaching the word to believers. In reevaluating the validity of that claim, I began with a search for New Testament uses of the verb διδάσκω (*didaskō*), “to teach,” and its three cognates, translated “teaching” (or “doctrine”) and “teacher.” In all, I found 207 occurrences.⁴ Even in the eight books that don’t use any of the words, synonyms or parallel ideas appear (e.g., Jude 3, “contend for the faith,” or 3 John’s emphasis on “the truth”).⁵ To study the contexts where the words are used is to be even more impressed that New Testament disciples were committed to thorough knowledge and teaching of the scriptures.

We’ll consider what prompted such earnestness in part 2.

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Notes

¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Fortress Press, 2014). The fourth and last volume of his “Christian Origins” series.

² Lynn McMillon, “N.T. Wright on ‘ordinary people living in an extraordinary way’,” *The Christian Chronicle*, March 17, 2014. www.christianchronicle.org/article/ordinary-people-living-in-an-extraordinary-way (accessed December 1, 2022).

³ Ibid. That Wright follows his own advice is apparent in his writings, but was also evident in the discussion of his book when, in his closing remarks, I heard him quote from memory several New Testament verses—from the Greek text.

⁴ The verb διδάσκω (*didaskō*), 97 times; noun διδάσκαλος (*didaskalos*), “teacher,” 59 times; noun διδασκαλία, (*didaskalia*), “teaching,” 21 times; and noun διδαχή (*didachē*), “teaching, that which is taught,” 30 times.

⁵ Note also the verb κατηχέω (*katēcheō*) and cognate noun, καθέξις (*kathexēs*), the word from which comes “catechesis,” especially as used in Luke 1.3; Gal 6.6; and 1 Cor 14.19, the latter in the context of Paul’s emphasis on “edifying” (building up) the church (vv. 3-5, 12, 17, 26).

All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the ESV.
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