How to Use the Bible Properly

Are you familiar with the Bible Code method of studying the Bible? It's become popular with some people in recent years because it purports to be a way of discerning hidden messages in the text of God's word. Here's how it works.

The Bible Code method ignores the documentary form of the Bible, as well as the words that comprise each Biblical book. Instead, only the individual letters of the words of Scripture are deemed important. One thinks of the entire text of the Bible as simply a long string of letters, and this string of letters is repeatedly analyzed according to *equidistant letter sequence* (ELS). Starting with a single letter at a randomly determined point in the text, one skips a fixed number of letters over and over again, jumping from letter to letter as many times as it takes until a sequence of letters produces an actual word. With the aid of computers, Bible Code advocates have been able to find the names of many famous people "embedded" in the text of God's word—people such as John Kennedy, Yitzhak Rabin and Adolf Hitler. Some people claim to find coded statements about historical occurrences and predictions of future events.

What's the Fundamental Problem Here?

Ever since the Bible Code method became popular in the 1980's and 90's, mathematicians and scientists have shown the fallacy of its claims. Given the ability of computers to perform virtually limitless searches of letter sequences, the chance that meaningful words and phrases will eventually be produced is fairly high. Using the same ELS method, meaningful words and phrases have also been discovered in classic novels such as *Moby Dic*k and *War and Peace*. With such a method, the possibilities are endless.

Obviously, there are a lot of problems with the Bible Code approach to Bible study. But what is the fundamental problem? We might be tempted to say that those who use the Bible in this way do not respect it as the inspired word of God. But that is not the case. Many of these people believe fervently in the inspiration of the Scriptures. In fact, it is their belief in the Scriptures as the word of God that causes them to attribute the hidden codes they find there to God's handiwork. So a failure to respect the inspiration and authority of the Bible is not the basic problem here. Then, what is it?

The fundamental problem with the Bible Code method is that its proponents are failing to use the Bible in the way that God intended. The inspired authors of the books of the Bible never

claim to be composing documents with hidden messages for readers to discern. Each Biblical author used the letters of his language's alphabet to form words, sentences, and paragraphs to produce a literary work that would convey the thoughts of his mind to the minds of his readers (Eph 3:3-4). He expected his readers to read and interpret the document he wrote in the ordinary way that they would read and interpret any document. Nor did any Biblical author intend for his readers to join his writing to other inspired writings to create one large, composite work that could be analyzed for new messages by ignoring the documentary nature of what had originally been separate works.

Some Bible Code advocates respond by saying that almighty God could have inspired the Biblical authors to compose documents that He knew, when collected together in the form of a Bible, would function in a brand new way, producing messages that the human authors never knew or intended. Yes, I believe that God is powerful enough to accomplish such a feat--*if* He chose to do so. But the point here is that nowhere in God's revelation does He state that He intends the Scriptures to function in this manner. If, therefore, we are going to be proper students of His word, we need to use it in the way that God's inspired spokesmen indicate it should be used.

Do We Make Similar Mistakes?

The reason I call attention to the Bible Code method is not because I feel that it has a strong influence among Bible readers today. Its advocates are comparatively few, and I am sure that most readers of this article would shake their heads in disapproval of those who use the Bible in such an odd way. But let me suggest that the Bible Code method is merely an egregious example of the fundamental error that many of us commit when we study and apply the Scriptures. Thankfully, most people do not go to the extreme of the Bible Code, but we can be guilty of using God's word in the same fundamentally incorrect way. This is exactly what we do whenever we read the Bible in a different manner than the Biblical authors and, therefore, God intended. Let me list a few examples.

- **The Bible is viewed as one book**. We often read the Bible as if it were one large book instead of a collection of many books. Because these books are bound together within a single cover, we can easily lose sight of their individual nature, reading through the Bible as if it were a single volume with 66 chapters. In reality, the Bible is an anthology, a collection of 66 separate works that were written at different times to different audiences for different reasons. Every book of the Bible is inspired and, collectively, these books provide us with the full revelation of God. But each book of the Bible is an independent document, and it should be read that way.

- **The Bible format is treated as if it were original**. Many people think of their Bibles as the form in which the Scriptures were originally produced. Because our Bibles print these 66 books in a standard, fixed order, some people mistakenly presume this to be the chronological order in which the Biblical books were composed, or as the proper order in which they should be read. This mindset can skew how we interpret passages. In addition, our Bibles divide up the text into chapter and verse divisions. These manmade divisions may aid us in locating portions of the text, but they can affect— sometimes adversely—the way in which we understand the Scriptures.

- **The historical setting of a Biblical book is ignored**. People often study a Biblical book without considering its historical setting and purpose. We read the text as if it were written directly to us, ignoring for the moment that it was really written long ago to a particular audience for a particular purpose. God intended Christians of every generation to benefit from His word, but if we apply a Biblical passage without first discerning what the inspired author was saying to his original audience, we will probably misread and misapply the passage.

- **The genre of a Biblical document is ignored**. Biblical authors communicate divine truth using different rhetorical forms. The book of Romans is not the same style of writing as the book of Proverbs. The Gospel of Matthew cannot be read in the same way that one reads the book of Revelation. Some Biblical books contain multiple genres. If we fail to consider the rhetorical form in which a Biblical author is communicating, we will probably misconstrue what he is trying to say.

- **The context of a passage is ignored**. People commonly read Biblical passages without giving due consideration to the surrounding context. We pluck out verses of Scripture and assign them meanings that seem reasonable, but that often have little or nothing to do with the surrounding thought of the text. Hoping to support a favored point of doctrine, we engage in proof-texting; the meaning we give a verse is not the meaning it would convey if we read it in its documentary context.

The bottom line in all of this is that people tend to use the Scriptures in ways that the inspired authors never intended. I've known some people to justify this on the grounds that God could have designed the Bible to teach us things that the human authors never realized. Though there is an element of truth to this idea when it comes to the fulfillment of prophecy (1 Pet 1:10-12), this concept cannot be extended further. To do so looms dangerously close to the misguided thinking of the Bible Code advocates, for it opens the door to any skewed interpretation of the Biblical text imaginable. The goal of Bible study should always be to understand what the

inspired author was saying to his original audience. We fail to honor God's wishes if we read the Biblical documents otherwise.

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NOTE: In the subsequent articles of this series, I plan to discuss more fully the above errors that people make when studying the Bible, as well as several related issues. In short, this series will address the subject of *hermeneutics*. But it will not be a heavy academic study of interpretation philosophy and exegetical methods. Instead, I hope to offer practical assistance in reading and applying the word of God. My goal is to help us use the Bible in the manner that God intended so that we may live properly and glorify Him.