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SO WHAT ABOUT BIBLE STUDY?

I expect that everyone who has come into the Church of God has been told that we need to study God's Word, the Bible. Back in the early 1960's I heard Mr. Armstrong say over the radio that we need to "blow the dust off our Bibles" in order to read and find out what God actually tells us in His Word. Mr. Armstrong's challenge was that the Bible actually did NOT teach the things that so many churches in the world around us assume it teaches. In many cases the Bible teaches the exact opposite of what people have assumed.

So we came into God's Church and studied the Bible. With the help and guidance of the booklets and articles and magazines and correspondence course lessons that the Church provided, we over a period of time came to understand "the truth". Sermons and Bible Studies added to that understanding. And in time we came to have a reasonably good understanding of all of the Church's basic teachings.

And what happened then to our personal Bible study?

In my first year at Ambassador College one minister gave a sermonette in which he urged us to set ourselves the goal of reading through the whole Bible in one year. Since there were large sections of the Bible that I had at that point in time never yet read, I accepted the challenge. I kept a small piece of paper in the front of my Bible, with the starting date on it, and kept track of how far I had read. Towards the end of 12 months I had fallen somewhat behind (this reading was in addition to Bible classes at AC, etc.), and I only managed to finish "on time" by reading from 10 to 20 chapters per day for a week or so during the summer break. Thereafter I set myself the same target a few more times, but without worrying about whether it took me 12 months or whether it actually took me 14 or 15 months to get through the whole Bible.

Since then I have not again had the goal of "reading through the whole Bible in one year". Instead I have had the opportunity to conduct Bible Studies in various congregations. And for Bible Studies I would go verse by verse through one book of the Bible at a time. So my personal studies were always focussed on the particular books we were going through. Sometimes I was going through two or three different books concurrently with two or three different groups of people in different geographical locations. In that way I have covered almost all of the books of the Bible (I think there are only 3 or 4 books in the Bible which I have not at one time or another covered verse by verse with a Bible Study group), many of them numerous times. And for the past 8 years my studies have focussed mainly on the subjects of the various articles I have written during that time.

So why am I telling you all this about my own personal study of the Bible? Is it to show off about how much Bible Study I have done?

No!

I HAVE MENTIONED MY OWN PERSONAL BACKGROUND ONLY BECAUSE I TOO FIND IT VERY DIFFICULT TO MOTIVATE MYSELF TO DO REGULAR DAILY BIBLE STUDY! I FIND IT VERY EASY TO SKIP A DAY OR EVEN SEVERAL DAYS WITHOUT DOING ANY BIBLE STUDY!

A MAJOR PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH TODAY

We need to recognize that far, far too many of us, who consider ourselves to be "members of God's Church", actually don't do REAL and REGULAR Bible Study! And that includes me.

I didn't come from a Church of God background ... I didn't grow up sitting on a blanket in Church of God services and Bible Studies. Even at the time I drove onto the Ambassador College campus in Bricket Wood, England, to start as a first year student, I had never yet heard of "feasts and holy days", and to me the word "fast" only meant the opposite of "slow" (this was about 3 weeks before the Day of Atonement that year). Nor had I been a church-goer before then.

So when I came to Ambassador College EVERYTHING was "new understanding" for me. I couldn't get enough. I read all the church literature I could get my hands on, including the books various men had written as their thesis projects for advanced degrees from Ambassador. It wasn't enough to take the Bible classes for my own year of study ... I also studied the detailed notes kept by fellow-students from Bible classes that lay yet ahead for me.

AT THAT TIME IT WAS EASY TO MOTIVATE MYSELF TO REGULARLY STUDY THE BIBLE!

Everything was new. Each session of study broadened my horizon and my understanding. And more and more things fitted together and formed a whole picture. It was easy for almost any minister to inspire me with his message; my mind was highly receptive because I just wanted to learn as much as I possibly could learn, so I could live as God wants me to live.

But then, years later, somewhere along the line things changed.

Oh, I didn't lose my desire to learn MORE about what God teaches us through the Bible; I didn't lose my desire to come to an ever DEEPER AND GREATER understanding of what it is that God wants us to do, how He wants us to live, and what He requires of us. BUT the zeal and motivation for "simply reading through the Bible" had faded somewhat. Now I had to prod myself to do such "regular reading". However, I found that I had an instant and spontaneous zeal for studying the mind of God IF I HAD A CLEAR AND SPECIFIC GOAL FOR MY STUDIES ... in other words, if I was studying into a specific subject, topic or book of the Bible that I desired to have a better understanding of.

So the opportunity to prepare for conducting Bible Studies has always had an extremely motivating effect on me to study more deeply into God's Word. The well over 1000 Bible Studies I have had the opportunity to conduct over the past 30 years have been by far the greatest motivation for me to "do Bible study", far more so than the similar number of sermons I have given during that same period of time. Given a choice between giving a sermon and giving a Bible Study, I far prefer the opportunity to give a Bible Study ... because to me there has always been a clear difference between the two. In both these situations we are seeking to understand God's mind and God's instructions. However to me personally the difference between these two is this:

A) In a sermon I myself have to think of a subject and an outline and a flow of ideas and points ... and then I search through the Bible to see whether God's Word supports the ideas I have. So in a sermon we attach Scriptures to the ideas that we have come up with (our claims for inspiration from God for our ideas in the first place may be correct in some cases, but are obviously also incorrect and unjustified in other cases, as when we say things that later turn out to be incorrect). It is not wrong to use this approach, but the flow of the sermon is overwhelmingly guided by our own thoughts and ideas, and looking for biblical support for our thoughts.

B) In a Bible Study of any book of the Bible, GOD has originated the outline and the flow of points. GOD

has controlled where the subject matter switches from one verse to the next. I have no control over what statements will be made in the verses that follow. Instead of having a responsibility to come up with an outline of ideas, in a Bible Study I have A RESPONSIBILITY TO TRY TO DISCERN EXACTLY WHAT IT IS THAT GOD IS TELLING US IN EVERY SINGLE VERSE. I only have to comment on and explain and make clear what GOD has inspired to be recorded in that book ... there is no flow of subjects or ideas that I have to originate. And I have always been more comfortable with this process than with the other process (i.e. sermon preparation), though I have obviously used both processes many, many times, even as I use the latter process when I write articles.

So while I have a hard time motivating myself to "just read the Bible for half an hour", I have an instant motivation when I am faced with a question. Many times I have launched into deep research into some question or other "at the drop of a hat", because of a spontaneous desire to understand, to explain, to clarify and especially to refute incorrect information. Many times I have opened my email at around 8:00 p.m., thinking I would have an early night. Then I receive some question or some information which I feel requires an answer ... and the next thing I know it is 2:00 a.m. and I am still sitting in front of my computer, searching out information from various sources and formulating a reply. If I have not completed my response (typically the case when a question has triggered my decision to write an article), then I usually wake up quite early the next day and spend most of the next day in front of my computer ... searching various source documents, various translations, using concordances, non-biblical reference works, etc. ... frequently again till past midnight. Then I don't need anyone to motivate me to "do Bible study".

Over the past 8 years the many papers and articles I have written have been the most important inspiration for my own personal Bible study. Had I not written any of them, I would have had an extremely hard time motivating myself to "do Bible study", apart from when I have prepared the sermons I have given during this time.

Unless I have a very specific goal, I find it VERY DIFFICULT to get myself to "do Bible study".

So here are some thoughts for you to consider on this subject of doing Bible study.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO KEEP READING THE SAME BOOK

There are different types of reading material. Some books are stories, be they fictional or be they real life stories. Some books are reference works. Other books are manuals for specific products. Other books are textbooks for specific courses of study. Other books again are aimed at specific trades and professions with information pertaining to those professions. And some books are read purely for inspiration, to help people overcome negative moods and attitudes, to instill positive attitudes.

We typically approach these different categories of books in different ways. Stories we read from start to finish. Occasionally we may read some story more than once, though most stories would only be read one time by most of the people who decide to read the story in the first place. Reference works, like encyclopaedias and dictionaries, we would almost never read from cover to cover. These books we simply search for the specific information that we are looking for. Manuals for products or for computer programs we might read a section at a time, skipping those sections that are not of interest to us. Textbooks for specific courses of study we might likewise read a section at a time, focussing on the material that deals with the things currently being covered in the classes or lectures. Inspirational books, on the other hand, people tend to turn to only when they feel a need for inspiration and encouragement.

So where does the Bible fit into this picture?

Well, a large portion of the Bible is written in the form of stories. But at the same time many of those

stories, as well as other non-story sections, are also excellent "reference works". In addition, the Bible is also "the manual of all manuals" for the product God created, human beings. And the Bible is also the textbook for the course of "how to live human life successfully", presenting the most vitally important principles of living. And the Bible is also "the professional publication for the ministry" ... even as an architect will find trade-specific information in a publication aimed at architects, so a minister will find "trade-specific" information in the Bible to help him do his job more effectively and responsibly. And yes, the Bible is also an inspirational book ... reading it will produce faith and hope and confidence.

However, one thing should be recognized: irrespective of what category of books we are talking about, IT IS VERY DIFFICULT FOR ANYONE to be motivated to read the same book in its entirety over and over again, as an ongoing and never-ending project. It is only a question of time before what may have started out as an exciting challenge becomes a chore, on which it is difficult to focus one's undivided attention for any length of time. This is also true with reading the Bible.

For someone who is coming into God's Church the process might be as follows, as was more or less the case in my own situation:

1) The first time we read the entire Bible much, if not most of it, is new to us. We are reading the Bible much like we would read a new story. There is a sense of anticipation for those sections we have never read before. And while many details will not make an impression on our minds, much of the overall story-flow will stay with us.

2) When we then read through the whole Bible again, many of the details that did not make an impression on us will now catch our attention. Some will make an impression on us, while others will again slip out of our memories. If we read through the whole Bible a third and a fourth time, more details will remain in our minds.

3) But by then we are also very familiar with very many sections, where we instantly recall the words and the story that follow the verses that "trigger" our recall of those sections. And in many cases of such "routine reading of the Bible" our minds are blocked from seeing anything we hadn't seen before. As we come to sections familiar to us all the information we have in our minds from our previous readings of these sections will again come into our conscious thinking, creating a bias in favour of the information already in our minds ... after all, we are only seeing the same words we have read several times previously.

This is when we have to do something to actively CREATE A MOTIVATION to keep reading the same book. If we haven't done so already, this is where we have to switch from viewing the Bible as a story to seeing it as a reference work.

4) THIS IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND! Whatever meaning or interpretation we have attached to any verse or passage, and then reinforced that meaning with our subsequent readings of the same verse or verses, is going to create a bias in our minds. This is fine for all those places where our bias is indeed correct. BUT in those cases, where our initial understanding is incorrect, it is almost impossible for us in our "routine Bible study", and without some outside input, to come to see that our understanding is incorrect. If we have attached wrong meanings and wrong interpretations to certain words or passages, then no amount of routine Bible study will ever straighten out our wrong understanding.

You know this is true for people in the world's churches, where some people have read the entire Bible perhaps 20 times ... and they still don't understand that we don't have an immortal soul, that there is no ever-burning hell-fire, that God is not a trinity, that heaven is not the reward of the saved, etc.. The meanings and interpretations THEY have attached to specific words and verses and passages prevent them from understanding what those verses really mean. However, the exact same thing is true for us ...

that when WE unknowingly do attach a wrong meaning to a word or passage, then that will prevent US from seeing the error in the way we view that word or passage.

It is just as difficult for us to see that our understanding of a specific verse is incorrect, as it is for people in the world's churches to see that their understanding of the Bible is wrong. We have always known this for people in other churches, but we have tended to assume that we are somehow above this, that this doesn't apply TO US, because we are in God's Church and because we have accepted "the truth".

But the truth is that IT DOES APPLY TO US! It was difficult for the people who were in God's Church before Mr. Armstrong came amongst them in the 1920's to accept that God requires us to also observe His Feasts and His annual Holy Days; it was difficult for Mr. Armstrong to accept that Pentecost is on a Sunday and not on a Monday; it was difficult for some others back in 1974 to accept that Pentecost is not on a Monday; it was difficult for Mr. Armstrong to realize that he would die before Christ's second coming; it was difficult, back in 1986, for some to realize that Mr. Armstrong was not going to be one of the two witnesses; it was at first difficult for me to see that the present Jewish calendar is not right before God; etc.. It is always difficult to see that something we have always viewed as true and correct is in fact not correct at all.

And the true Church of God has always, since its inception in Acts chapter 2, had some ideas that were incorrect. To start with, the early Church expected Jesus Christ's return within a few years. Later we see the Apostle Paul addressing various heretical ideas in the letters he wrote to the different congregations. In the Book of Revelation we see other problems addressed in the messages to the 7 churches. When Mr. Armstrong first came amongst the people of the Church of God in the 1920's, they had incorrect understanding on various issues. During his 50 years of ministry Mr. Armstrong constantly came to new and clearer understanding on many topics ... meaning that UNTIL THEN his understanding on those topics had been incorrect or incomplete. Since Mr. Armstrong's death, now almost 17 years ago, most of us have come to a better understanding on SOME matters than the understanding we had when Mr. Armstrong died in 1986 (e.g. until that time many of us thought Mr. Armstrong would be the leader of the two witnesses, which we can now understand was obviously incorrect, etc.).

I am convinced that both, you and I, STILL have some ideas that are incorrect. Otherwise there would be nothing more for us to learn. I recognize that at the same time many people have taken up many WRONG IDEAS AND TEACHINGS since Mr. Armstrong's death. We are now indeed terribly divided, not just in our allegiances to different church organizations, but even in many of our beliefs and teachings and practices. So there are real problems that can be encountered. Yet I don't believe it can be denied that we did not have everything correct at the time of Mr. Armstrong's death.

I am also reminded of Mr. Armstrong's repeated statement that it is ten times more difficult to unlearn wrong ideas than it is to learn what is right the first time around. This principle also applies to us, who are already a part of the Church of God.

THIS IS WHERE REAL BIBLE STUDY IS NEEDED!

5) So familiarity with the basic text of the Bible then results in our personal study becoming less zealous, and perhaps even only very sporadic.

6) For many people it eventually gets to the point where they hardly ever open a Bible except when they are attending a church service or a church-sponsored Bible Study. I've heard of men who speak in services ... and who only open their Bibles at home when they have a church speaking assignment to prepare for. In most of these cases that is a radical change from the way things were when they first came into contact with the Church. Yet I can understand this situation ... if we only read the Bible as a story, without having specific questions to which we want answers, then it can become extremely difficult

to "read the same book one more time".

7) Many others do continue to do their own personal Bible study more or less regularly, but often with very little aim or purpose. It is done out of a sense of duty, because "that is what God expects". However, apart from a positive feeling of having done one's Bible study, most hardly ever seem to learn anything they didn't know before such "study". Many times people struggle to decide about "what shall I study now?", and randomly pick one book or other, with little aim and purpose and motivation. Their "study" is very random and arbitrary.

As I said above, it is difficult to keep reading the same book that we have already read several times previously. We clearly need something that will motivate us to keep studying the same book.

AFTER YOU HAVE READ THE WHOLE BIBLE

While I personally can usually read a (secular) story only once, thereafter lacking any motivation to read the same story again, I can read portions of A REFERENCE WORK indefinitely into the future.

Applying this to the Bible:

If we do read the whole Bible two or three times, we can very likely do so from the perspective of reading it as a story. But after that we need to change our perspective. If we try to keep reading the Bible as a story, we will experience a decrease in motivation. That is when we need to change our perspective. That's when we need to start viewing the Bible as a reference work, or as a manual for a specific subject.

When we read a story, we take it as it comes and as it unfolds. But when we read a reference work, then WE HAVE SOME QUESTIONS FOR WHICH WE WANT ANSWERS. We are looking for specific information, and we know what type of information we are looking for.

To maintain a high motivation in Bible study, we MUST approach every session of Bible study with specific questions for which we want answers, or with a quest for specific information on a specific subject ... the way we would approach a reference work.

But there are two different ways to come to the study of the Bible with specific questions in mind ... a right way and a wrong way.

THE RIGHT WAY to have questions for which we seek the answers in our study of the Bible is to be open to whatever the answers may be ... even if they do not agree with our own preferences or opinions. The right way is to consider ALL the relevant Scriptures before we reach a conclusion.

THE WRONG WAY of coming to the study of the Bible with specific questions is TO SEARCH FOR SUPPORT OF THE ANSWERS WE ALREADY HAVE IN MIND. This is not really "Bible study" because it is not a search for any answers ... it is only a search for Scriptures that can be used to support the answers we ALREADY have decided upon!

Consider what I am saying because this wrong way is unfortunately a very, very common way that people do "Bible study" ... they are really only looking for support for their own ideas, and they will ignore all the Scriptures that are in conflict with, or even outrightly contradict, the answers they wish to support with the Bible.

To emphasize this point: the most common and obvious tell-tale signs that indicate people are approaching Bible study from this wrong way are:

- 1) They will IGNORE all the Scriptures that don't fit in with the answers they wish to put forward.
- 2) They will ARGUE AGAINST the Scriptures that oppose and contradict their specific positions.
- 3) When such opposing Scriptures are presented to them, they are NOT PREPARED to respond with: "Hm ... I hadn't thought of that Scripture in this way. I guess that puts the whole point I am trying to make into a different perspective? Let me rethink this whole matter before I commit myself."
- 4) They will find a translation that states the verse just as they wish to see it translated to support their position ... but without FIRST establishing that the Hebrew text or the Greek text in fact supports the translation they really like. This is translation-shopping at the expense of biblical accuracy.

To approach such "advanced" Bible study (i.e. beyond the stage of merely reading the Bible as a story) the right way means that we are looking for information about a specific subject, but without already having a firm answer in mind that we wish to support with the Bible. We must be prepared that in SOME cases the Bible doesn't really say or teach the things we have always assumed it says or teaches. We know that this surely applies to people who are in this world's churches .. they can only come to an understanding of the truth if they are prepared to accept that the Bible doesn't always say what they believe it says (about the trinity, going to heaven, etc.). We in God's Church are not above this requirement for correct Bible study ... we must be prepared to face up to the Bible in some cases not really supporting some of the things we believe and have assumed to be biblically correct. To reject this point would infer that we believe that we have ALL the truth, and that there is nothing more to learn ... other than constantly reinforcing all the things we ALREADY KNOW are true. And we then kid ourselves into believing that we have learned "something new" when in fact we have done nothing other than find a new way to support the things we have already accepted to be true and correct all along.

It is not a matter of EXPECTING the Bible to in some cases contradict the things we have always believed; it is simply a matter of being prepared to face up to this possibility SHOULD it ever arise. We should never approach Bible study from the perspective of: let's see now, what else of all the things I have always believed is incorrect?

We need to recognize that when people approach the Bible for support of the ideas they ALREADY hold, that in those cases they will ALWAYS find "biblical support" for the things they want to believe. That has always been the case. It was the case in the Protestant Reformation, it was so with Martin Luther and with John Calvin, and it was so with every other church that was started after the Reformation. And this was also the case for every wrong teaching that has ever been entertained by some of the people in God's Church ... we had Scriptures for why Jesus Christ should have returned 30 years ago, we had Scriptures for why Britain and America "had won their last war" by the 1950's, we had Scriptures for why the Great Tribulation should have started long ago, we had Scriptures ..., etc.. Any time we have set dates, we've had Scriptures to support our dates.

The correct way to study the Bible requires us to approach the Bible with a desire to find answers to our questions, but it can never be limited to searching for support for our own positions, and "being willingly ignorant" of those things that disagree with our own positions.

Let's now consider another point.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN READING AND STUDYING

There is a difference between "reading the Bible" and "studying the Bible". Many of the people in God's Church who have over the past five decades believed they were "studying the Bible" were in fact doing nothing more than "READING the Bible".

We never see the things we are not looking for. This is also true for Bible study. Let me give you an illustration.

I have on a few occasions grown a beard for about half a year before shaving it all off. And typically my own mother (as well as some other people around me), who has never liked to see me with a beard to start with, never noticed anything different about me when I first shaved off the whole beard. It didn't occur to her that yesterday she had seen me with a beard and today she was seeing me without a beard. She just couldn't see any change, because IN HER MIND she was overwhelmingly accustomed to seeing me without a beard. Her mind-set prevented her from seeing a change. In some cases it took a stranger to point out to my mother that I no longer had a beard ... after she had already seen me a number of times without it.

To some degree or other we are all like this ... we don't see many of the things around us that we are not looking for or expecting. And this is also the case when we read the Bible. When we have conditioned ourselves to always see a certain Scripture as "having a beard", it is hard to recognize that the Scripture actually "doesn't have a beard at all", that it doesn't really say what we have always thought it says.

To really study the Bible, we must have the mind-set of looking for and expecting certain information, of having specific questions to which we are seeking the answers, without knowing for certain beforehand just what those answers will be.

There is a difference between the way a tourist views a specific attraction (e.g. a mountain view, the view of an important historical building, etc.) and the way a highly qualified artist, who intends to paint that attraction, views that same attraction. Both people may be looking at the same thing, but the artist will see things that completely escape the tourist's eyes ... like colours, shadows, outlines, patterns, etc.. Where the tourist is like someone who reads the Bible, the artist is like someone who studies the Bible. We have to approach the study of the Bible like the artist and not like the tourist; we have to be on the lookout for the patterns, the correct meanings of specific words, compatibility with other clear biblical statements, etc..

Over the past 35 years I have heard very many sermons and sermonettes that were given "by tourists" rather than by "professional artists", that were given by people who only READ the Bible rather than by people who actually STUDIED the Bible.

The most effective tool I personally have ever found for coming to a better understanding of the Bible is to simply look up in a dictionary the meaning of every word that is used in the Hebrew or Greek text of the verse I am looking at. Good dictionaries of biblical Hebrew and of biblical Greek are worth far more to me than any commentary I have ever examined.

After that, the second most effective tool I have ever found is to examine other verses that use the same Hebrew or Greek word, and in the case of a verb, in the same form, as is used in the verse I am examining.

But the main difference between reading and studying the Bible is that in studying we must be looking for information; we have questions to which we want to find answers. It is this attitude of looking for the signs of specific information that sets studying apart from reading. Like a prospector looking for gold or diamonds, we don't know exactly what we'll find, but we are scrutinizing everything before us, intensely alert to any signs of "a strike". This means that sometimes we will also be attracted to "fool's gold" ... in analogy this means we find Scriptures that seem to support a position we are in the process of reaching or for which we seek biblical support. But a closer examination makes clear that this particular Scripture does not really support that position ... it was only "fool's gold". And then we should not become attached to that "fool's gold". And with practice we will recognize "fool's gold" (i.e. Scriptures that are used

inappropriately to support some position or other) more easily.

However, we should recognize one thing: whenever someone approaches Bible study THE WRONG WAY (i.e. looking for support of the answers he has already decided upon), then he will ALWAYS be attracted to "fool's gold"! "Fool's gold" has got the right colour and it looks right on the surface ... and because they have ALREADY decided upon the answer they wish to support, therefore they will not be motivated to subject their "find" to an in-depth scrutiny that would expose its shortcomings. The superficial look and feel of their "find" is sufficient proof for them that they have struck "real gold".

There are far too many people in the Church who are impressed by some teaching or other, simply because a few Scriptures are presented as support for that teaching ... without bothering to examine whether or not those Scriptures do in fact SUPPORT the teaching. Over the past 30 years I have heard scores of Scriptures used in sermons and in sermonettes and in speeches, which had absolutely nothing at all to do with the points that were being made in those sermons and sermonettes and speeches. Scriptures are frequently and easily presented as proof for points which those Scriptures don't really support. The religions of this world regularly do this, but we in God's Church have also done the same thing many times.

Let's look at some Scriptures.

WHAT ABOUT "DAILY" BIBLE STUDY?

Back in Deuteronomy God gave Israel instructions that would apply to a king. Notice ...

And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him A COPY OF THIS LAW IN A BOOK out of that which is before the priests the Levites: And it shall be with him, AND HE SHALL READ THEREIN ALL THE DAYS OF HIS LIFE: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: (Deuteronomy 17:18-19 AV)

Here we find God's instruction that a king was to read God's Word "all the days of his life". This expression consists of two words in the Hebrew text: YOM (day) + CHAY (life). This same expression is used many times in the Hebrew text. For example, in 1.Samuel 7:15 we read:

And Samuel judged Israel ALL THE DAYS (Hebrew "yom") OF HIS LIFE (Hebrew "chay"). (1 Samuel 7:15 AV)

It should be clear that Samuel was NOT involved in judging Israel EVERY SINGLE DAY OF HIS LIFE! This expression is not a reference to what happened "on every single day" in Samuel's life, but rather a reference to something that happened "as long as Samuel lived" (though for the last 20+ years of Samuel's life Saul was king over Israel).

Without belabouring the point, the Old Testament expression "all the days of his life" is a way of saying "for the rest of his life" or "for as long as he lives", but without necessarily inferring an activity that had to take place EVERY SINGLE DAY. It means "an ongoing activity".

In Deuteronomy 17:19 the issue was not whether or not a king would read God's Word every single day, but rather that he would make reading God's Word a lifelong habit, irrespective of on how many days every week or every month he would do such reading. The OBVIOUS meaning of this Hebrew expression is a reference to the person's whole life, without focussing on every single 24-hour period in that lifespan.

I mention this because in the past we have often inferred that this Scripture requires us to do Bible study

EVERY SINGLE DAY ... and if we somehow skipped a day, then we ought to feel guilty for having neglected Bible study. But that is not what this Scripture is intended to convey.

The point is this: we need to make the study of God's Word A REGULAR HABIT, one that we hold fast to for the rest of our lives. And I don't mean just the READING of God's Word, I mean the STUDY of God's Word. However, the issue is not whether we do this "every single day" or whether we do this only "several times a week", because this depends very much on our individual and personal circumstances.

For example:

Someone who has never read every book of the Bible certainly SHOULD set himself the goal to read through the whole Bible in a specific period of time. For a slow reader the goal might be two years, and for a very fast reader the goal might be six months. For most "average" readers one year is probably a realistic goal. But it depends on the person. Such a goal is best accomplished by means of a "daily" plan, without worrying about the occasional days that are sometimes "missed". The goal of such "reading" is to become familiar with what the Bible actually says.

On the other hand, someone who has already read the whole Bible two or more times will probably need to set a different goal. Such a person is ready to have a goal aimed at "studying" the Bible, like a course textbook or a reference work. Whether the study is aimed at a specific book of the Bible, or whether it is aimed at a specific subject that ranges across all the books of the Bible is a personal decision. But in THIS type of study it is not necessarily as important to have a "daily" plan. Part of someone's study like this may involve examining non-biblical books and articles and reference works, to gain a better understanding ... and it may require some planning and some efforts to obtain access to such non-biblical material, and some time may pass before we get to see such books. To me that is also part of my "Bible study" ... gaining additional insights from dictionaries and encyclopaedias and other sources of information, because it helps me to better understand some verse or some teaching of the Bible. Important in this type of study is a steady progression towards a better understanding of the subject we have selected to study, without worrying whether or not such progression is "daily".

[Comment: I personally don't usually include "Bible commentaries" in this category because most of their information is rather subjective and biased, and I have never yet trusted any commentary on anything other than some "technical information" (such as what a specific Hebrew or Greek word means). I have NEVER (in the past 20+ years) looked to any commentary to tell me "what the Bible means" in any given verse! If I already know what a given Scripture means, and I then find a commentary that happens to have that particular point correct, then I might occasionally mention this. In other words: having FIRST determined what a certain Scripture means, I have then sometimes checked a number of commentaries to see IF any of them actually also got it right. But I haven't looked to them to tell me what the Scripture means.]

An analogy may help to illustrate this point.

When we are trying to obtain a new skill (e.g. playing a musical instrument, learning to play golf or any ball game, etc.), it is very important that we PRACTICE DAILY if we really expect to make good progress. However, once a person has become an accomplished musician or a skilled golfer or ball player, then it is quite easy to MAINTAIN a fairly high proficiency at this activity simply by engaging in it once or twice a week. Now obviously, for those who are striving for the number one position in the world in such activity (e.g. the world's top pianist or violinist, the world's top athlete in some discipline or other) it will not be enough to only practice once or twice a week to maintain their world rating ... they will have to maintain a rigorous and regular schedule of training to hang onto their number one position. But for most people who have attained great skill in their chosen activity it will be sufficient to practice this skill once or twice a week to maintain a high level of skill and competency.

So in analogy: For anyone who has never read the whole Bible from cover to cover, it is very important to achieve this as quickly as possible ... thus a daily plan is extremely desirable, because anyone who has not yet read the whole Bible will be missing some of "the basics" in the course of Christianity. Exposure to all of God's Word forms the foundation on which our Christian lives are built. Gaining that exposure to the totality of God's Word is like obtaining the basic skills of piano playing or violin playing, etc.. Once we are somewhat familiar with the total content of God's Word (by having read at least once, and preferably two or three times, through the whole Bible), then we have acquired some basic skills, AND THEN good exposure to Bible study two or three times a week may be adequate not only to maintain, but also to add to and to build on the level of competency already achieved by the basic reading through God's Word. However, anyone striving for "being at the top" (i.e. a spiritual leader, a minister) must obviously study more intensely and more frequently than that.

Consider one other thought on this question of "daily" Bible study.

Who benefits more from their Bible study: one man who studies the Bible every day, seven days a week, for 30 to 45 minutes a day ... or another man who studies the Bible only twice a week but for two to three hours each time? Both are spending similar amounts of time in Bible study, but only one of them is doing such study every single day.

It is obviously rather subjective to say which one of them benefits more, because we are all different. But for me personally the answer is very easy: without doubt I personally benefit more from the two longer periods of study, than from seven smaller periods. I suppose it has to do with the way my mind works. Whenever I start my studying, it takes me a while "to get into high gear"; but once I am there, then the ideas and the research flow along smoothly, often at a rapid pace. To interrupt such a flow of research and such trains of thought often sets me back a whole lot more than could be achieved in 15 extra minutes the next day. When it comes to memorizing, I can do more in six periods of 30 minutes each, than I could possibly do in one single 3-hour session. But when it comes to doing research, then I can achieve far more in one single 3-hour session than in six 30-minute sessions, because each day I will need almost 15 minutes just to get back to the train of thoughts I had when I stopped the previous day. And these days I don't really do much memorizing; I focus mainly on research.

To state this another way:

For someone whose goal is MEMORIZING the Scriptures, daily exposure is extremely important. But for someone whose goal is RESEARCHING the Scriptures, seeking a better, clearer and deeper understanding, longer sessions of research are often more valuable than daily sessions of study that are each of a shorter duration. Of course, if such longer sessions of study can be undertaken on a daily basis, that is even better still. But longer daily sessions of study can usually only be maintained for a limited period of time. Examples are students preparing for their examinations, Mr. Armstrong doing intensive daily Bible study for a period of six months when he first came into contact with God's Church, the Bereans of Acts 17:11 who "searched the Scriptures daily" for the limited period of time that Paul and Silas were with them, etc..

Let's look at Acts 17:11 more closely.

And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, AND SEARCHED THE SCRIPTURES DAILY, WHETHER THOSE THINGS WERE SO. (Acts 17:10-11 AV)

Before Paul and Silas came to Berea there were no church members in Berea. So the Bereans had not been exposed to any of the teachings of the Church that differed from the teachings of Judaism. Then

Paul and Silas started preaching to them. Perhaps Paul started his preaching off with God's dealings with Abraham, to establish some common ground. He might then have proceeded with the accounts about Isaac and Jacob, and about Israel going down into Egypt, and later God bringing Israel out of Egypt under Moses, through the period of the judges down to King David, then the split in the kingdom in the days of Rehoboam, then through the major prophets and the minor prophets, etc., all along bringing into the account God's references to the Messiah who would come and to God's plan eventually encompassing the people of all nations. Paul very likely quoted many of the prophecies that referred specifically to Jesus Christ, especially those prophecies that Christ fulfilled during His ministry.

Once Paul had quoted specific Scriptures from the Old Testament, after his talks some of the people in that group of Jews in Berea (this happened at the synagogue in Berea) would check the Old Testament scrolls kept at the synagogue TO VERIFY the statements Paul (and Silas) had made. They had open minds to the things Paul preached. Unlike the hostility evinced by the Jews in Thessalonika, the Jews in Berea were eager to examine the evidence that Paul presented as proof for what he preached.

So each session of "checking the Scriptures daily" was directed at the things Paul and Silas had preached about that day. The key phrase in verse 11 is: "... they searched the Scriptures daily WHETHER THOSE THINGS WERE SO". In modern terms we might say that the Bereans "made a point of turning to all the Scriptures that Paul quoted in his preaching", except that they didn't have their own private copies of the Bible and thus could not follow along while Paul was preaching. With the books of the Old Testament being on different scrolls of parchment and with no chapter or verse divisions it was a major task just to find each reference that Paul quoted from memory. Such "checking up" could not have taken place simultaneously with Paul's preaching (as it does today in our modern church services when we all turn to the Scripture that the minister is quoting from), and so the Bereans did this after Paul had preached to them. This went on for several weeks before the hostile Jews from Thessalonika came and stirred up trouble, forcing Paul to leave the area.

The point is this: the Bereans were not necessarily involved in "regular daily Bible study"; they were really only involved in "regular daily checking up" on the things Paul preached. The checking up on a daily basis by those Bereans would be the equivalent of Mr. Armstrong's "six months of intensive study" when he first came into contact with the Church. Mr Armstrong studied during those six months with a specific goal, and at the end of those six months he had reached a conclusion (that God requires us to keep the weekly Sabbath on Saturdays). Likewise the Bereans studied with a specific goal (to verify the things Paul preached), and within several weeks "MANY OF THEM BELIEVED" (Acts 17:12) ... they reached the conclusion that the things Paul preached were true. I can identify with the process they went through from the way my own contact with God's Church in the early sixties developed. Their coming into God's Church was preceded by a period of intense Bible study, and that is precisely what Acts 17:11 tells us.

But this Scripture (Acts 17:11) is not a reference to "doing DAILY Bible study for the rest of their lives". There would have come a point when they had checked ALL the Scriptures (i.e. read the whole Bible two or three times), when they had verified ALL the Scriptures that Paul had ever quoted, when their understanding of the Scriptures would have grown considerably ... and then they would no longer have checked up on Paul on a daily basis. Once they came to a correct understanding and made a commitment by being baptized, then the checking up process was completed.

Acts 17:11 is a statement of what one particular group of people did when they were confronted with religious ideas new to them; this Scripture is not a command of what we are to do ON A DAILY BASIS for the rest of our lives.

Consider also that Acts 17:11 is speaking about a group of people. Since people did not have their own copies of the Old Testament Scriptures, it means that SOME of them were involved in this daily

"checking up" of the Scriptures Paul had quoted, and these few then related what they had found to the whole group. Without their own personal copies of the Scriptures it was impossible for all of them to do any individual personal "daily Bible study".

One major lesson for us in Acts 17:11 is this:

WHENEVER we hear any preaching (or read any religious writings), we must ALWAYS check up "WHETHER THOSE THINGS ARE SO"! In other words, we must carefully examine whether what we hear and read is actually true and correct. As I have already mentioned, over the past 35 years I have heard (and read) VERY MANY instances where Scriptures were misapplied and incorrectly explained. You yourself have very likely also over the years heard many examples of Scriptures that were incorrectly explained and applied. Many of my earlier articles were written from what I perceived as an obligation and a responsibility to refute incorrect explanations for specific Scriptures and doctrines. You too have an obligation to check up on the things I say in my articles.

Simply because someone quotes a Scripture to support his points, does not mean that his points must be biblically correct. It is easy to misapply Scriptures. The average "Bible commentary" contains hundreds of examples of Scriptures being misapplied and misinterpreted. But most of us who have given sermons and sermonettes have at times done the same thing ... explained Scriptures incorrectly and misapplied them. I know this is true for me ... that I have in the past given explanations which I am now convinced were not correct.

For most of us today Acts 17:11 applies every time we attend a church service or a Bible study or listen to a religious tape or read any religious literature ... we are to carefully examine "whether what the speaker says is so". But this is not necessarily a "daily" process.

To infer that Acts 17:11 REQUIRES us to do DAILY Bible study goes beyond the intent of this verse.

Let's look at some more Scriptures.

The word "study" appears three times in the Bible (KJV), once in the Old Testament and twice in the New Testament. Here are these Scriptures.

[Comment: I am here for the moment excluding the two Scriptures, Proverbs 15:28 and Proverbs 24:2, where the word that means "to meditate" is translated as "study". We'll look at those two verses later.]

And further, by these, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and MUCH STUDY is a weariness of the flesh. (Ecclesiastes 12:12 AV)

This is not an admonition to study God's Word, but only a somewhat negative observation that extensive studying can be very enervating, draining one's energy. If anything, this verse comes close to discouraging people from doing "too much study".

In the two places in the New Testament that mention the verb "to study" two different Greek verbs are used.

And THAT YE STUDY TO BE QUIET, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; (1 Thessalonians 4:11 AV)

The Greek word here translated as "study" (*philotimeomai*) literally means "from a love of honour to strive earnestly to bring something to pass". It doesn't really mean "STUDY" as we tend to understand the word "study". The first part of this verse means in practical terms: "strive with a positive attitude to

lead a quiet life".

The only other place that has the word "study" is 2.Timothy 2:15.

STUDY to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 AV)

The Greek word here translated as "study" (spoudazo) means "be diligent", but with a sense of haste and urgency. That is why Young's 1898 Literal Translation translates this verse as follows:

BE DILIGENT to present thyself approved to God--a workman irreproachable, rightly dividing the word of the truth; (2 Timothy 2:15 YLT)

It is THE CONTENT of this particular verse that tells us that this "diligence" is directed at STUDYING the Word of God ... to correctly "divide" the Bible we must obviously first "study" it thoroughly.

This verse certainly instructs us to DILIGENTLY study the Bible. However, doing this "diligently" does not necessarily require us to do this "daily". I don't question that someone who studies the Bible two or three times a week for extended periods of time is being diligent.

A correct approach to Bible study is:

The importance with Bible study is NOT whether or not it is done "daily"! The importance with Bible study is that it is done DILIGENTLY! And this DILIGENCE in Bible study has to become a lifelong habit. Bible study needs to be done with a motivation to learn and to grow in knowledge and in understanding (see 2.Peter 3:18), and not from a motivation of fulfilling some duty to spend daily time with the Bible.

To make myself quite clear:

I am not in any way trying to put down "daily Bible study". For those of us who actually STUDY the Bible DAILY, while maintaining a high motivation to constantly learn more about God and His plan, that is great. And for those of us who STUDY the Bible two or three times a week for longer periods of time that is "equally great"!

The problem we in God's Church face today is not whether people study the Bible daily or whether they only study the Bible two or three times a week. The problem we face is that large numbers of people who attend church don't actually study the Bible at all on anything that could be called "a regular basis"! Many will do nothing more than occasionally "reading" the Bible a little bit, with no motivation other than trying to assuage their somewhat guilty consciences. This is a major problem, because we simply cannot grow and advance in knowledge and understanding without a serious study of the Word of God. If the only times we open our Bibles is at church services, then we are neglecting our commitment to God to "seek Him with our whole heart" (Psalm 119:2; etc.).

We MUST study the Bible!

Let's look at another point.

WHAT ABOUT MEDITATION?

Consider that in Old Testament times there were only a few copies of "the books" available. People simply did not have their own personal copies of the Old Testament. Apart from the priests and the Levites, very few people had direct access to the scrolls of the Old Testament. This means that "regular

Bible study" was a virtual impossibility for anyone but a few priests and Levites in the Temple. Sometimes decades went by without anyone having seen a copy of "the law" ... as when the high priest Hilkiah "found the book of the law" in the days of king Josiah (see 2.Kings 22:8-11).

The same holds more or less true for those who came into the Church after Christ's ministry ... very few people would ever have had a personal copy of any of the books of the Bible. This continued for at least 1500 years after Christ's ministry. In New Testament times I would speculate that most of the congregations of the Church over a period of time managed to build up one complete copy of the whole Bible (all handwritten of course) for the congregation to use. The occasional wealthy individual may even have had his own personal copies of certain books, but that would very likely have been the exception, as books were extremely expensive.

It is really only in the last 400 years that, as a result of the development of printing, the Bible has become readily available to large numbers of people. Today many of us have multiple copies of the Bible in our personal possession. And printed Bibles are today relatively cheap to buy.

The point is: for the first 5500 years after the creation of Adam the regular daily study of the Word of God in one's own home was an impossibility for all but a very, very few people. In Old Testament times the study of the Word of God was the domain of the priests and the Levites, and in the New Testament this study became largely the domain of the ministry. That is why we find the instruction "STUDY to show yourself approved unto God" written as a specific instruction to A MINISTER, Timothy, rather than as an instruction that Paul chose to write to one of the congregations he addressed in his letters.

It is not that members of the Church were not expected to do their own personal study of the Bible; it was simply a matter of recognizing that most members (i.e. those who pursued regular jobs in agriculture, fishing, tent-making, etc., without being in the ministry) would simply not have had very much regular access to many of the books that comprise the whole Bible. Very few non-Jewish members of the New Testament Church would have been able to read Hebrew, which means they could not have read any of the Old Testament scrolls themselves ... they depended on others to read the Hebrew text and then translate this for them. Doing regular and frequent personal Bible study of the whole Bible has only become possible for all members of the Church over the last 500 years or so.

Because Bibles were scarce, therefore MEMORIZING large portions of the Bible became extremely important. Memorizing as much as possible of the Bible compensated to some degree for the lack of being able to carry a copy of God's Word on your person for instant access whenever the need arose. It seems fairly likely that the Apostle Paul, for example, could quote most, and possibly even all, of the Old Testament from memory.

So if the people of God couldn't do any personal Bible study, except perhaps very occasionally, what did they do instead?

THIS IS WHERE MEDITATION ENTERS THE PICTURE!

"Meditation" was to God's people in Old Testament times what "Bible study" is to God's people today. Both have the same purpose ... to come to a better understanding of God and His plan and purposes.

There are different Hebrew words used in the Old Testament that are translated into English as "to meditate", but they largely overlap in their meaning. Basically they refer to thinking deeply, musing, pondering over a question, to study an issue before answering. The thinking and pondering is focussed on God's laws, God's creation and His purposes, and man's place in that plan.

To illustrate the overlap between "meditating" and "studying":

One of the two main Hebrew words translated as "to meditate" is the verb "hagah". In Joshua 1:8 this word is used as follows ...

This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but THOU SHALT MEDITATE (Hebrew "hagah") therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. (Joshua 1:8 AV)

And again in Psalm 1:2 ...

But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law DOTH HE MEDITATE (Hebrew "hagah") day and night. (Psalm 1:2 AV)

And again in Psalm 63:6 ...

When I remember thee upon my bed, AND MEDITATE (Hebrew "hagah") on thee in the night watches. (Psalm 63:6 AV)

But in Proverbs 15:28 this verb is translated as follows ...

The heart of the righteous STUDIETH (Hebrew "hagah") to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things. (Proverbs 15:28 AV)

And in a negative sense the word is used in Proverbs 24:2 ...

For their heart STUDIETH (Hebrew "hagah") destruction, and their lips talk of mischief. (Proverbs 24:2 AV)

Meditation is one form of "studying". Before we can meditate (in this biblical sense) we must have some knowledge and understanding about God and His laws and His purposes. So for those people who have read and studied the Bible to some degree, they can then "meditate" about these things, meaning they can contemplate, mull over, ponder on, and think deeply about the things they have read and come to understand about God. Trying to put the whole picture of God's creation and dealings with mankind together is a form of meditation.

As the author of Psalm 119 (very likely Jeremiah) tells us:

MEM. O how love I THY LAW! it IS MY MEDITATION all the day. Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me. I HAVE MORE UNDERSTANDING THAN ALL MY TEACHERS: FOR THY TESTIMONIES ARE MY MEDITATION. I UNDERSTAND MORE THAN THE ANCIENTS, BECAUSE I KEEP THY PRECEPTS. (Psalm 119:97-100 AV)

Plain reading of the Bible is the foundation. "Bible study" is thinking about the implications and the ramifications of what we have read. "Meditation" is precisely the same thing ... thinking about the applications and ramifications of God's laws. During Bible study we do this while looking at the text of the

Bible, while in meditation we do this by recalling to memory the (perhaps paraphrased?) text of God's Word. But both are the same basic activity.

Put another way: when we don't have access to a printed copy of the Bible (perhaps during a long journey, etc.), then we can do our "Bible study" in the form of meditation ... thinking of God's laws and how they apply to our own specific circumstances, pondering over the magnitude of God's creation, etc.. But the important thing is that we have THE MOTIVATION to do this. And we will only have that motivation if there are specific things we want to understand more fully.

Consider again the above verses.

The writer of Psalm 119 seems to have been a young man when he wrote this psalm (implied by verses 9-10 and also verses 98-100). So we have a young man saying:

- I have more understanding than ALL MY TEACHERS
- I understand more than THE ANCIENTS.

We would today think of a young man who would write or say something like this as rather arrogant. But it was undoubtedly true ... because God used the writer of this psalm to write a portion of the Word of God. And THE KEY for why the writer (Jeremiah or perhaps David?) had "more understanding" than his seniors in age was because of the manner in which he studied God's Word ... he thought constantly about God's laws and how they applied to him, and he did this from a practical point of view by obeying all of God's precepts. So he thought about how God's laws applied to him personally, and he put the understanding he came to into practice in his own life.

The result was that he had a better understanding of God's mind and God's intentions than even his own teachers, who may have been his seniors in age by 20 to 40 years. Irrespective of whether Jeremiah or David wrote this psalm, both of those servants of God had "more understanding" than the men around them. So here is an illustration from the life of David, that illustrates the level of understanding David had while he was still in his early twenties.

You know the account where David was fleeing from Saul and came to the priest Ahimelech and asked him for food. The priest explained that he only had "hallowed bread" which GOD had designated as being only for the priest and his family (see 1.Samuel chapter 21). Now keep in mind that David was a religious man with a very strong conscience of obedience to all of God's laws and instructions.

QUESTION:

If YOU had been in David's place, and if you did not have any precedent to refer to (i.e. nobody outside of a priest's family had ever dared to eat "hallowed bread"), WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE? Would you have accepted the hallowed bread? Would you have had a guilty conscience for eating something that God had strictly reserved for the priests? Or would you also have freely and without any qualms whatsoever accepted this hallowed bread?

It is easy to make the correct decision in hindsight. But without any precedent to look to what would you have done?

I ask this question because I am convinced that, without the benefit of knowing how David handled this situation, I would not have accepted the hallowed bread ... I would rather have fasted for one more day than feel I was being presumptuous in asking for something that God had reserved for the priests. And while it would not have been wrong to not ask the priest for the hallowed bread and to just fast a little

while longer, it would also have indicated less understanding of the mind of God than David had while he was still in his twenties.

Jesus Christ used this particular incident to highlight the lack of understanding on the part of the Pharisees, when He said ...

But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, WHICH WAS NOT LAWFUL FOR HIM TO EAT, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? (Matthew 12:3-4 AV)

Jesus Christ's statement that it was "not lawful" for David to eat that bread makes quite clear that David had to make a conscious decision to do something he was normally not permitted to do. And Christ's statement also shows that God accepted David's decision here on this matter. So when David numbered Israel that was a major sin, but when he ate the hallowed bread which was exclusively for the priests, that was not a sin.

My point is that David had an excellent understanding of God's mind while he was still a young man, without question a far better understanding than I, for example, have, because I would not have been able to make the decision to eat the showbread without qualms of conscience bothering me that I was being presumptuous. David was right and it is my understanding that would have been lacking under those circumstances.

Now how did David come to such a good understanding of God's mind? When we read the Psalm it seems fairly clear that David spent an enormous amount of time "meditating" about God's laws and God's plan and intentions. He asked himself questions about God's plan (like: what is man really, that You, God, are mindful of him ...?, etc. see Psalm 8) and searched for the answers. In our modern context we would have to say that David did a great deal of "Bible study", and this gave him the confidence to make right decisions before God.

And this illustrates the main purpose for Bible study.

Unless our study of the Bible leads to a better understanding of the mind of God (over a period of time), our study has been in vain. THE PURPOSE of Bible study, just like the purpose of meditation in the days before printed copies of the Bible were available, is to help us come to a BETTER UNDERSTANDING of God's thinking, of how God's mind works. The purpose of Bible study is NOT primarily to understand "all mysteries and all prophecies" (1 Corinthians 13:2 paraphrased); it is not to know every technicality of Hebrew and Greek. The purpose of Bible study is to come to better understand God, to be able to predict with greater confidence how God would respond to various situations, to come to UNDERSTAND God's thoughts and ways (see Isaiah 55:8-9). That is the real goal of Bible study.

One question we should ALWAYS ask ourselves as we read through the Bible is: what does this particular verse tell me about how God thinks? The Bible gives us a great deal of insight into the way God thinks, and that way of thinking is consistent (see Malachi 3:6 and Hebrews 13:8). And David understood that thinking far better than I do, as is readily apparent to me from a study of David's life. But we today also now have the benefit of precedents set by people like David and others, who acted boldly and with confidence that they were doing the right thing before God. We can learn from all of these precedents. They are all recorded in the Bible to help us today make right decisions (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17) in our lives and in our circumstances.

So let me state this very plainly:

The Bible reveals God's laws to us. We know that God wants us to obey His laws. In situations that are not clear-cut we often ask a minister what we should do. That's fine, but a major purpose of Bible study is to help us make our own decisions in situations that are not clear-cut, and make those decisions CONFIDENTLY. When David was faced with the choice of either no food or else the showbread, David made this difficult decision boldly and confidently, as can be seen from his reply to Ahimelech ...

And David answered the priest, and said unto him, Of a truth women have been kept from us about these three days, since I came out, and the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in a manner common, yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel. (1 Samuel 21:5 AV)

David's confidence that his decision was acceptable before God was based on the vast amount of "Bible study" (i.e. in his situation "meditation") David had done over a long period of time.

We are told in Psalm 111 ...

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: A GOOD UNDERSTANDING HAVE ALL THEY THAT DO HIS COMMANDMENTS: his praise endureth for ever. (Psalm 111:10 AV)

Regular straight-forward situations are not a test for our understanding. It is situations that are not clear-cut that really put our understanding to the test. And it is in THOSE situations that it becomes evident who is REALLY doing Bible study and who is not, because simply "reading" the Bible will not give anyone a good understanding of God's mind ... a good understanding is the result of STUDYING God's Word to come to better understand God's thinking. Our responsiveness to God must go way beyond keeping the Sabbath and the Holy Days, tithing and not eating unclean "foods". We have to actively seek "a meeting of minds" with God, and real Bible study enables us to do so.

Now let's look at another question.

WHAT ABOUT ATTENDING "BIBLE STUDIES"?

There was a time in the 1950's and 60's when almost all the members of the Church attended the weekly Bible Studies. Today only a very small minority of those who are a part of one of the churches of God attend regular church-organized Bible Studies. So what about you? SHOULD you be attending regular Bible Studies, or is that something that is not that important for you?

I probably would NOT be attending such Bible Studies! I would, however, be happy to conduct any Bible Studies. This answer might surprise some of you, but let me explain.

While I am a minister, and while I have conducted Bible Studies myself, many of you have also been in the Church since the 60's and 70's, if not earlier. While I may have conducted over 1000 Bible Studies, if you have been around since the 1960's, the chances are that you have ATTENDED well over 1000 Bible Studies (including the tapes from studies you have listened to). I know of some people who have heard me give Bible Studies on a number of different books of the Bible MORE THAN ONCE. Now supposing I am going to do a series of Bible Studies on the Book of Romans, and there are some people in the congregation who have in the past 25 years heard me go through the whole Book of Romans two or even three times ... should THEY make a point of attending my new Bible Studies on Romans?

NO!

The Book of Romans hasn't really changed its meaning since I went through it with a congregation 10 years ago and 16 years ago and 21 years ago; so most of the things that I would cover in the current studies would be things I have explained previously in different congregations. After all, specific Greek words still mean the same as they did 21 years ago, certain unclear translations in the KJV are still equally unclear today, the subjects Paul deals with in this letter are the same as they were 21 years ago, etc.. So if someone in the current congregation was also in one of those previous congregations where I also went through this book (or if they heard the tapes from those previous Bible Studies), it is going to be extremely difficult for them to be enthusiastic about the new series on Romans. Can anyone sit in the same course of college lectures four years in a row without becoming bored? So when I give a series of Bible Studies on a book that I have covered previously, then that is for the benefit of those who have not heard my previous studies, and I don't have a problem with people who have heard those books explained previously not having any interest in the current series. I myself do not listen to "old Mr. Armstrong sermons and broadcasts" in the hope of finding something I hadn't gotten before ... so likewise why should anyone listen to me explain the Book of Romans more than once?

Some people attend Bible Studies out of a sense of duty. Others attend the studies because they provide opportunities to fellowship. But surely the main attraction of any Bible Study should be the time that is devoted to "studying the Bible"? And IF what is going to be presented is going to be "old hat" for someone who has been around for 20 or 30 or more years, then they really should not feel any obligation to attend for the sake of attending.

Back in the 50's and 60's and early 70's the Church grew very rapidly in membership. New members came from backgrounds where many of the Church's teachings were quite revolutionary. For most of us it took repeated exposure to many subjects to get them clearly into our minds. If the same book of the Bible was covered again four years later, there were many people in the congregation who had not heard the previous series of studies, and for the others it was good revision. And besides, the new series probably presented some information that had not been given in the previous series.

BUT THAT WAS 30 AND MORE YEARS AGO!

And now new faces are quite rare. Of those who are today even prepared to attend Bible Studies, the majority seem to go back in the Church to 25 years ago and longer. And now most of those "old timers" have heard most books of the Bible covered more than once. And there is the very real danger that attending Bible Studies can become nothing more than a ritual, where the real highlight is the fellowship before and after the study.

So back to the questions I asked earlier:

Should YOU be attending the regular Bible Studies? That depends on you. If you are able to do so and feel so inclined, great; by all means attend. But if you have already heard that Book of the Bible explained previously, especially by the same speaker, then I don't believe you should feel any responsibility to go and have that book explained to you "one more time". Now as the speaker I may often feel: "Wait a minute; I have something here that I haven't explained to you previously, something you NEED to hear". But in practice those who have heard me previously will hear mostly what they have heard before. Back in the late 60's I heard Mr. Armstrong speak many times about "the two trees", and each time Mr. Armstrong felt he had some "new" understanding to add, but after a while most of it was basically a repetition of what he had explained in previous sermons. Over the years I probably heard Mr. Waterhouse's sermon 10 or 12 times; and for the first 3 or 4 times I found it extremely interesting and exciting and inspiring; but for the last few times I heard that message it was basically "old hat", all the ideas being very predictable. It is not that repetition is wrong or bad, but we need to recognize that having to repeatedly listen to the same message from the same speaker is not something that arouses spontaneous enthusiasm. And I am speaking about people listening TO ME more than once on the

same subject.

Back in the 60's and 70's the format that was established for Bible Studies was very likely ideal for those circumstances. Large numbers of people needed to be educated in the basic doctrines of the Bible. To most of us "the truth" was quite different from what we had grown up with. It was needed to guide people through a study of the various Books of the Bible. But now, 30 years or more later, most of us have understood the basic doctrines of the Bible for decades! We understand that we don't have an immortal soul, that the righteous don't go to heaven, that there is no ever-burning hell-fire, that the Sabbath is on Saturday and not on Sunday, etc.. We don't really need any Bible Studies to prove all these things to us; we don't need someone to explain to us that Christmas is a pagan celebration, as is also the observance of Easter, etc.. We have attended (or listened to) perhaps 1000 or more Bible Studies, in addition to perhaps 1000 or more sermons.

IN ANY BIBLE STUDIES THAT ARE ORGANIZED THIS REALITY NEEDS TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT!

Any audience that TODAY will attend a Bible Study is coming to it from a totally different perspective than an audience 30 years ago would have come to that Bible Study. What was NEEDED 30 years ago is NOT really needed today. We cannot be explaining the same things to the same audience 30 years down the road, and somehow expect them to have a high level of interest.

I don't know the full answer, but I suspect that what is needed is A NEW FORMAT FOR BIBLE STUDIES. The format needs to take into account that the audience today has A FAR HIGHER BIBLICAL LITERACY than 30 years ago. For present audiences our traditional format has worn out its usefulness ... as witnessed by the extremely low attendance figures at Bible Studies in most cases.

Perhaps a format along the following lines would be more suitable?

- 1) The format would not be a lecture from the minister, but a discussion chaired by the minister. This would acknowledge that many people have learned a great deal over the past 30 years, and have valid information and understanding to contribute.
- 2) The subject for each Study would be THE QUESTIONS THAT PEOPLE BRING ALONG. They could be either handed in to the minister in advance, or they could be presented impromptu at the beginning of the Study. But the questions come from the participants in the Study, which should ensure some interest in the answers.
- 3) When there are no questions, then there will be no Bible Study. If it seems that there will only be a few questions that are going to only require rather short answers, then the Study is cancelled and the questions are kept over for the following Study. [This is where it would be helpful to know in advance if anyone has any questions for the Study.]
- 4) A "No questions - no Study" approach would prevent the Studies becoming just another ritual. If no one indicates a need for any answers or explanations, then there is no point in having a Study. If people really want the social occasion to fellowship, they could meet without any Study taking place.
- 5) The approach I personally favour is for the minister to generally first answer a question fairly thoroughly, and then open it up to the whole group for comments, observations and perhaps further questions that were sparked by his comments. Then he moves on to the next question. It should not be difficult for the minister to ensure that it never degenerates into an argument.

6) Some discussions may spark ideas for subjects for future Studies. People have to be doing their own studies at home to generate sufficient questions for discussion. Perhaps it could be arranged that everyone who plans to attend the Studies brings TWO QUESTIONS to every Study? With 15 people that would make 30 questions ... and some of them are bound to only require short answers. For some questions the minister could ask for volunteers to provide an answer, before adding his own contribution?

7) But even then, with a new format and all, mid-weekly Bible Studies will at best still only draw a small percentage of the whole congregation. It is not a cure for low attendances at Bible Studies. Smaller congregations are likely to have a higher percentage turnout for Bible Studies than larger congregations, due to the fellowship component inherent in Bible Studies.

However, one point should be clear: Church-organized Bible Studies should not be a substitute for one's own personal Bible study. Rather, such organized Studies should be a stimulus for doing one's own studies at home, delving Berean-style further into some of the topics that were discussed at the Studies.

So much for organized Bible Studies. Let's now summarize some of the material we have considered in this article.

IN SUMMARY:

When we first came into contact with God's Church most of us were easily motivated to study the Bible, as we were exhorted to do by the ministry. But once we had become familiar with the Church's basic teachings, many of us slacked off in really studying our Bibles. We need to recognize that it is difficult to motivate people to keep reading the same book over and over. Motivation for such a task is the real problem here.

There is also a difference between "reading" the Bible and "studying" the Bible. Unless we have clear goals about what we want to achieve in our study of the Bible, we are unlikely to really "study" the Bible ... we will only be "reading" the Bible.

This is really nothing other than applying the first law of success, as expounded by Mr. Armstrong ... to have the right goal. Without a goal we will only wander aimlessly in our Bible readings. Unless I myself have a specific goal, I find it very hard to motivate myself to read the Bible for a period of time, simply because I have read those sections so many times before.

The key to doing proper personal Bible study is for us ourselves to generate questions for which we desire to find answers in the Bible. Research is always based on wanting to find answers to specific questions, and biblical research is no different. The desire to find answers or to reach greater clarity of understanding on any subject is a strong motivator, far stronger than the appeal of: "you'd better do some Bible study because that's what God expects from you, you know?" Seeking answers and greater understanding gives meaning to our Bible study.

But there is a right way and a wrong way to go about our "biblical research". The wrong way is to start out with the answers we want, and then search the Bible for support for those answers. When this is the approach, it goes without saying that we will always ignore or even explain away Scriptures that are not compatible with the answer we wish to support from the Bible. This biased way of examining the Bible is unfortunately very common.

In the long term it doesn't work for others to urge us to do our Bible study ... such urgings typically only have a short-term effect on us. Ultimately we must be self-starters, like for example King David, in formulating questions to which we desire answers from the Bible. In order to be "diligent" in our study of

the Bible, we need to have questions for future studies before we even complete whatever subject we are currently studying. The number of questions we have should ideally always stay just ahead of the answers we have worked out. Whenever we catch up to finding answers to all our questions, before having new questions, we are likely to experience a drop in enthusiasm or at least in our attention-span when it comes to doing Bible study.

There are many ways in which our desire to learn more and to come to a better understanding of the Bible can be stimulated. Today there are many people who read religious articles from many different authors; and there are many people who listen to religious tapes from many different speakers, across organizational boundaries. Many people derive from such reading and listening a motivation to study more for themselves. Yes, there is always the danger that some people become attracted to ideas or teachings that are biblically unsound, that they will be deceived by some clever presentation or other. But such reading and listening to tapes is indicative of A NEED that is not being met by the organizations they are a part of; a need to be given meaningful material and information, in line with their 30 years or more of exposure to the Church and its teachings. We cannot give the same sermons and Bible Studies and publish the same articles, just slightly revamped, as we did 20 and more years ago ... and expect people to not search for information more meaningful to them. To NOT do such searching for more meaningful information would mean that those people would have lost every motivation to continue STUDYING their Bibles.

God's people need help in being given A MOTIVATION to continue studying their Bibles. Instead of gently chiding us for not doing as much Bible study as we ought to do, the ministry needs to recognize and confront the fact that they, the ministry, should help to ignite a motivation within the membership to study God's Word diligently and zealously. And we can only stir up others if we ourselves are on fire.

Bible study should be diligent. Whether we do it daily, or whether we only do it two or three times a week for longer periods each time, is an individual choice which depends on our own circumstances. PRAYER must for God's people be a DAILY activity, but Bible study and meditation and fasting are not necessarily activities that must be done daily by us (and fasting CERTAINLY cannot be a "daily" activity, right?). We have to decide for ourselves how we will go about doing Bible study.

Real Bible study involves doing everything that is included in the word "meditation". It is not a matter of you having to do some Bible study and then after that do some meditating. Meditation is just a form of seriously studying the Bible, whether the Bible is lying open in front of you or whether your Bible is closed and you are deep in thought looking at the ceiling. You are thinking about the meaning and significance and ramifications of what God has revealed to us through the pages of the Bible.

So how about doing some real Bible study?

Frank W. Nelte