

The ‘Great Books’ of the New Testament

Many Christians know the Bible as a collection of stories, like the Good Samaritan, or a collection of verses, like the love chapter read at weddings. But few can say why there are four gospels, or what Paul’s purpose was in writing the letter to the Galatians or to the Ephesians. Most read the Bible as a devotional book, but in an increasingly secular context, Christians need a more mature understanding of the whole biblical text. This workshop will equip participants to teach each New Testament book from a literary “great books” perspective, examining the books as wholes, focusing on authorial voice and each book’s purpose, theme, content, and unity. This workshop will not provide a ‘survey,’ but rather model hands-on discussion, using a “great books” method for the good book. At the end, participants will be able to lead adults through the entire New Testament in around 32 hour-long sessions.

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I. Great Books Methods for the “Good Book”: Reading the Bible as “Literature”

- A. Reading in the Ancient World
- B. Reading in the Age of Print
- C. Reading in a Digital Age
- D. Challenges and Opportunities for Biblical Reading in a Post-Literate Age
 - 1. Reading books of the Bible “like any other book”
 - 2. Limitations of only devotional reading

II. Learning to Read Anew: Active Reading

- A. Qs of an active reader
 - 1. What is the book about as a whole?
 - a. Main theme, how author structures book
 - 2. What is being said in detail, and how?
 - a. Author’s main ideas, arguments
 - 3. Is the book true, in whole or in part? The Q of Judgment
 - a. Cannot answer until answered first two Qs
 - 4. What of it? The Q of Significance (from Adler, *HTRB*)

III. Four Levels of Reading + One More (Devotional)

Elementary

Inspectional

Analytic

Comparative

IV. Analytic Reading

A. Finding Out What the Book is About

1. Classify book: what genre is it? What is its subject?
2. Briefly state what whole book is about
3. Outline book in its major parts
4. What problems is the author trying to solve?

B. Interpreting a Book's Contents

1. Come to terms with the author by interpreting his key words
2. What are the author's key sentences?
3. Find the author's arguments in sequences of sentences
4. Did the author solve his problems?

C. General Maxims of Intellectual Etiquette

1. Do not begin criticism until you have completed your outline and your interpretation of the book. (Do not say "agree, or disagree," until you can say "I understand")
2. Do not disagree disputatiously or contentiously
3. Demonstrate difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion by presenting good reasons for any judgment you make

V. Reading Books of the New Testament as "Great Books"

A. Where to Start?

1. Group Reading
2. Set the ground rules for participants
3. Try, if at all possible, to have everyone use same translation, in own language (avoid different translations – that could be "comparative reading")
4. "The text, the text, and nothing but the text" (in reading, carefully exclude *everything* outside the text, until have built up working understanding of an author's other books)

5. Tell everyone that you are looking *only* at the biblical author's words, *NOT* the interpretative helps placed in by later uninspired editors. That includes the title, chapter numbers, verse numbers, marginal notes, and paragraph headings. Use the discussion to put in breaks, themes, etc.
6. Use internal clues in the text to understand the author
7. **Text and Context:** "*a text without a context is a pretext for a prooftext.*"
8. Overcome reluctance to read by group reading of one single text (condition group to read whole books before comment)
9. Read with pencil in hand (if available, helps to Xerox texts for each)

B. Reading the Texts

1. Start with short books people may be familiar with, eg. Paul's letters
 - a. Paul's shorter letters take 15-20 min to read aloud
2. Use Gospel of Mark as first gospel, for great outline of Jesus' ministry
 - a. End with Johannine literature

Sample Calendar of Readings

(If start in September, can reach Matthew around Christmas)

Weeks:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Ephesians | 18. Romans I |
| 2. Galatians | 19. Romans II |
| 3. Mark c1-8 | 20. Philippians |
| 4. Mark c8-16 | 21. II Corinthians I |
| 5. I Thessalonians | 22. II Corinthians II |
| 6. I Corinthians I | 23. I Timothy |
| 7. I Corinthians II | 24. II Timothy, Titus, Philemon |
| 8. II Thessalonians | 25. Hebrews I |
| 9. I Peter | 26. Hebrews II |
| 10. II Peter, Jude | 27. James |
| 11. Matthew I | 28. John I |
| 12. Matthew II | 29. John II |
| 13. Luke I | 30. John III |
| 14. Luke II | 31. I, II, III John (epistles) |
| 15. Acts I | 32. Revelation I |
| 16. Acts II | 33. Revelation II |
| 17. Colossians | |

C. Lesson Template

Use the lesson template to have individuals, small groups, or whole group, fill out categories; save “theme” for last, after finishing whole book. Use one template per biblical book; at the end, use summaries for understanding all NT books. Use “title” to give full content – eg. it is not “Mark,” but rather “The Gospel of Jesus the Son of God, Written by Mark”.

Suggested Readings:

Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*, 1940, 1972

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 1988

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2003

GREAT BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
Lesson Template

Title of NT Book:

Author or authors:

Where to? From?

When?

Theme:

Key Verses:

Key phrases:

Outline of Book:

I.