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Stop Snacking on 'Scripture McNuggets'

A Bible expert diagnoses the bad habits that keep us from feasting on God's Word.

Interview by Drew Dyck/ September 16, 2016



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We use the Bible as a manual or answer book. We look to it as a talisman or horoscope. We proof-text, cherry-pick, and impose our own biases. The sins against Scripture are numerous and, according to Biblica vice president Glenn R. Paauw, endemic. And don't get him started on what the Good Book has suffered at the hand of translators and publishers.

Saving the Bible From Ourselves: Learning to Read & Live the Bible Well is Paauw's jeremiad against our tendency to distort, misuse, and misrepresent the Bible. All this mistreatment, Paauw argues, has left us with stunted Scriptures. CTPastors.com senior editor Drew Dyck spoke with Paauw about his quest for a bigger Bible.

Why does the Bible need saving?

God took a risk with the Bible—he gave it to us. It's in our hands, and we're free to do with it what we will. We shape it culturally. We shape the actual look and feel of it as an artifact, and we form practices around it. We are capable of imprisoning the Bible, of diminishing its impact. And if we don't do right by the Bible, the Bible itself suffers.

Also, the research is pretty clear that the Bible needs saving. Sure, we say great things about it, but the fact is that it's not having the impact it could. It's being misused a lot, and it needs rescuing.

A lot of people will agree that the Bible needs saving, but from outsiders: critics and skeptics. But that's not what you're talking about.

Yeah, that's the easy out. The easy thing would be to say, "Well, it's really sad that so many people live their lives without the Bible or are ignorant of it." And that is sad, but the more dangerous fact is that even those people who think they are doing right by the Bible often aren't. What if those of us who have a high view of Scripture are, in practice, not doing it justice?

We have more Bibles than ever and more tools to study it. So why the ignorance and misuse of Scripture?

When I first started working at the International Bible Society, known today as Biblica, researcher George Barna came to one of our meetings. He said, "I appreciate your work, especially your translation work, giving people access to the Bible. It's a big need in many places. But for all the Bibles we have here and Bible resources like never before, there is a huge connection problem. Even people who want to read their Bible, they just don't do a good job of it."

That started me on my journey. I said, if I'm here for a long time, I'm going to go after this problem. I didn't want George Barna Jr. coming back in 30 years and saying that people still aren't engaging Scripture. It's not hard to sell Bibles. It's the bestseller every single year. But we have to do something about this engagement issue.

You write that a lot of people are disappointed by their experience with the Bible, which creates guilt. Why the disappointment?

We're not honest with people about the Bible. There's this fear that if we admit it's a difficult and challenging book, we'll scare people off. We want to tell people, especially new Christians, about all the great things that will happen to them by reading it.

Since we're not honest about what kind of book the Bible is, and how it's supposed to work, when people start reading for themselves, they encounter all kinds of crazy material that doesn't fit the paradigm that we've given them. They find stuff from ancient cultures,

from different parts of the world, and they don't understand it immediately. And it's hard for them to get something they can apply to their lives every single day from just reading through the Bible. So it leads to cherry-picking verses. Because there are these gems, these verses that seem to contain important spiritual truths.

So you get all these cherry-picked passages, but everything else gets neglected or completely ignored. Certain passages are essentially de-canonized. We end up with a partial Bible. So people get discouraged. They try again with a read-through-the-Bible-in-a-year plan, but they're just not making it.

We need to start equipping people to understand the Bible on its own terms. We have to go back into the Bible's world, rather than demanding it be immediately relevant to ours. We need to give them pathways from the ancient world into today's world.

You urge people to pursue "big" readings of the Bible. What do you mean by that?

First of all, I mean it literally; we need to increase the size of our Bible readings. Start reading the words around your cherry-picked passages. Then you're immediately confronted with context. If you're reading in Philippians—"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"—then you'll start reading about the situation that Paul was in when he wrote those words. You'll get a better understanding about the kinds of things he may be able to do in this situation. You won't take it as an absolute promise about any endeavor you can envision, like winning a football game. So read bigger passages. I'm a big fan of reading entire books of the Bible.

We have a diminished view of Scripture in another way, especially in the West. We see the story as this individualistic, go-to-heaven-when-I-die story instead of a restorative story about the renewal of all creation and my place within that larger narrative. That's the bigger, glorious vision that the Scriptures give us.

That kind of reading requires a certain amount of education. Is there a danger of elitism?

The real danger is overemphasizing the Reformation ideal that every single person should read the Bible, and read it alone. That's a very modern experience of the Bible. Within 100 years of the printing press, all these modern translations started coming out. Suddenly individuals are getting Bibles when they didn't have them throughout church history.

In America, a place focused on individualism and democracy, we can all supposedly develop our own interpretation of the Bible. There's even this idea that you're not supposed to allow church history to influence you. It's just you and God and the Bible. One of the big recoveries we need is to read the Bible in community. That allows community members who have done their homework and have a good grasp of the Bible to help guide others.

There's a distrust of scholars in the evangelical church. But there are amazing, God-honoring scholars doing great work. We need more bridges between the great work they're doing and regular Bible readers in the church. We need to be taught by those gifted to teach. That doesn't rule out the Holy Spirit, working through the Word in your individual life. It's just in a context that's bigger and healthier.

You're pretty hard on the Reformers, who gave us *sola scriptura*. Didn't they put the emphasis back on Scripture?

I come from the Dutch Reformed tradition, so I know this tradition very well. I know its strengths. In many ways, the Reformation was a necessary correction in the life of the church. It was recovery of original core things: the role of faith, the role of Christ, and the role of Scripture, in a formal sense. But we shouldn't pretend that there weren't any unintended consequences, just because they were the Reformers.

Individualism grew out of the Reformation. So did the Protestant tendency toward schism: Not only should you read the Bible by yourself, but whenever you differ from somebody else, your duty is to start another church. The proliferation of denominations under Protestantism is a scandal, frankly. I love the recoveries of the Reformation, but we should be honest about some of the other destructive things that came from it as well. This individual reading experience is one of those things.

It was also the Reformation that gave us a modernist form of the Bible. I believe form and content have to work together. If we don't think form matters, it will affect us in ways we're not attuned to. The very first chapter-and-verse Bible in the 16th century, a Reformation Bible, set every single verse as a separate paragraph, and you couldn't tell the difference between song lyrics, stories, and letters anymore. It all looked numbingly the same, just two columns down the page, a collection of individual spiritual statements. So that's how we started reading the Bible, because the form told us to read it that way. We're still living with the consequences.

We shouldn't think of translations as just a word thing. We need to think in terms of literary form and genre, so people who don't know ancient literary forms can immediately see it when they look at the page.

Recently we've seen attempts to make more readable, aesthetically-pleasing Bibles. Is that encouraging?

Yes, I think there's a movement now. Everyone who has a Bible now has a reference Bible. What if everyone who had a Bible had a reading Bible too? We want to portray the books of the Bible in their elegant natural literary format, so readers are invited to *read* rather than just pick out the bits that they like. I love the fact that reading Bibles are catching on. It's part of the sign that there's a recovery starting.

You propose several different "Bibles," meaning different approaches to Scripture. Can you briefly describe them?

First off, we need to see the Bible differently. We need to have elegantly designed Bibles. We need to see Bibles that aren't nearly so complicated, so the experience of reading the Bible becomes pleasant.

Once people see the Bible differently, they can begin to feast on it rather than snack on it. We've been trying to live off of what Philip Yancey calls "Scripture McNuggets." But we've got to start feasting on the whole Word of God.

Then we need to get serious about the role of *history*. The Bible is rooted in history. We need to understand that the ancient world wasn't like our world. That rootedness is what makes it a human story, so we need not be afraid of that. Part of the fundamentalist, modernist legacy is that the more we talk about the humanity of the Bible, the more nervous we get. We're afraid that makes it less of a divine book.

We also need to read the Bible as a *story*. The Bible is not a flat document, where everything is the same. Knowing the story is going someplace, that Jesus is at the center—that's the way to read the Bible.

Then we need to know that the Bible is an *earthly* book. We need to lose this semi-pagan vision of leaving this earth and recover a vision of the restoration of all things. We need to start talking about the renewal of the cosmos the way the New Testament does.

Reading in *community* is also essential. The *yous* in the New Testament are overwhelmingly plural. We need to start thinking about what it means for a community to be transformed and not just individual lives.

Then, finally, let's bring *beauty* back. Beauty was one of the casualties of modernity. The Reformers are partly to blame, with their emphasis on plain churches and plain preaching. We shunned beauty, but beauty and truth are meant to go together in God's world. Beauty is a clue that something is right. And we should recover that in our Bible-reading experience.

You decry what you call the "TMI Bible." Can you explain?

Take a typical center column, cross-reference system. It seems like it's really helpful. If there's a topic raised in a verse, I can jump to five other verses that talk about the same topic. But if I'm not taking every one of those cross references in their own context and reading them well, then there's a great tendency to misuse those passages.

It's like a hyperlinked Bible. Instead of reading continuously through one book and discovering what one author had to say about a topic, I'm constantly jumping around, getting little pieces, adding them up, and thinking I have some biblical truth. The problem is that's a modernistic way of thinking: to dissect and then quantify. But the Bible wasn't created in the modern period. It wasn't built to be used that way.

What's your take on digital Bibles?

The jury is still out. Their entrance into the market wasn't positive. They were very verse-centric and allowed people to slice and dice the Bible. But computers are amazingly powerful tools. Graphic designers are able to create amazing beauty. We've been thinking too much about information and not enough about beauty in our electronic Bibles. If computers are so powerful, then why aren't our Bibles gorgeous? Why are they just pieces of information? If the people who design Bible programs can be in touch with some designers, and not just people who know code, then we could have a more beautiful Bible.

What can churches do to encourage deeper engagement with Scripture?

Simply facilitate a more communal Bible reading experience. It's amazing what happens when people get together, and instead of studying right away, they just experience the Bible in big readings and shared readings—going around the room, or listening to someone skilled in reading a big portion of it. But we just don't hear it much anymore. The Bible was born in an oral culture. It was something people would have heard, not seen.

Then it's important to allow for discussion of Scripture. The analogy I use is of the synagogue. In Scripture you have these stories of what happens when Jesus or Paul go into the synagogue. You can tell from those stories that the settings were interactive. It wasn't just the rabbi or leader delivering a monologue and everyone leaving. There was interaction, and everyone was expected to take part. With Paul, even when people aren't liking what he's saying, he's invited back the next week to do it again.

We've lost the ability to process the Bible in community. We always think that someone has to be right. And that if someone is wrong, they have to be silenced or we have to leave. We just don't have a high tolerance for a diversity of opinions. In the New Testament, there were strong opinions, and in many cases they turned into deal-breakers. But we start there. We need more open, healthy discussions. We need to get away from this idea of just me and my Bible and my private opinions, and have more open, communal discussions of Scripture.

How might a bigger reading of the Bible change the way we preach?

The practice of jumping around a lot in a sermon and using references, just the chapter and verse, tells the congregation that this is what the Bible is and that's the way it is supposed to be used. A colleague of mine, Christopher Smith, says, "What if instead of always quoting the chapter and verse, we always referred to the Bible by context and content?" So instead of saying "John 4," we say, "The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman that came after he turned water into wine." That would allow people to pick up context every time we reference a Bible story.

So my advice to preachers: stop jumping around so much. Realize that the main thing is for people to understand the story of Scripture—and that their lives are a continuation of

that story. I'm big on narrative preaching. I think the central thing the Bible is trying to do is invite us into its story and teach us to live out that story today.

Are we too obsessed with application?

We are. I cringe every time I hear the instructions we give to new Christians. Apply your Bible reading every single day. Pray about how you can apply it. That's just not true. I can read long stretches of the Bible without finding an obvious application. It's a model that leads to frustration, because people can't find the application. So let it go. Just read the Bible and try to understand it, and the implications will come soon enough.

If people catch this vision of a bigger reading of the Bible, what might that look like 10 years down the road?

I envision groups of people regularly reading whole books of the Bible. I see them gaining a basic understanding of the major movements of the biblical story, a basic understanding of genre. They'd be thinking of the Bible in terms of story. They're thinking, *how can I authentically continue Jesus's story of restoration in my world?*

If this vision takes hold, people would be unsatisfied with lesser approaches to the Bible. I think this movement is already launched. As depressing as the research is, I see signs of new life. There's a new Bible paradigm emerging, and that gets me excited.