



BIBLICAL TEACHING

BIBLE REFLECTIONS

40 READINGS AND REFLECTIONS

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard

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About the writers

Beth Dodd teaches Christian doctrine at Sarum College in Salisbury. She is involved in training people for Christian ministry and in the Sarum Centre for Theology, Imagination and Culture, and is also a research associate at the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture. Beth has a keen interest in how theology and contemporary culture speak to each other through the realms of literature and the arts, and has published work on poetry and Christian theology.

Ed Mackenzie is a discipleship development officer for the Methodist Church and an associate lecturer in New Testament studies at Cliff College. He has written on biblical engagement and family spirituality and is also the co-host of the Together with God podcast (togetherwithgod.org.uk/podcast). Ed lives in Derbyshire with his wife and two children.

Caroline Wickens has been a minister in the Methodist Church for 25 years and is currently the superintendent of the Manchester Circuit. She has taught biblical subjects to student ministers in Zambia and Kenya, where she was also part of a team developing responses to HIV/AIDS. She has served in various churches in the West Midlands, been involved in ecumenical theological education in Salisbury and Birmingham, and supported people exploring discipleship and vocation within the church and beyond. Her writing is regularly published in *Roots* and various online sites including Christian Aid. She is married to Andrew and they have two adult children.

Michael Parsons has been an English teacher in secondary schools, a lecturer in theology in the UK and in Perth, Western Australia, and the commissioning editor for Paternoster and The Bible Reading Fellowship. He is currently Minister for Discipleship at Lechlade Baptist Church, and is the author of several books on the Reformation and an Associate Research Fellow at Spurgeon's College, London. He is married to Becky, with two adult children.

Introduction to Holy Habits

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:42-47 (NRSV)

Holy Habits is a way of forming disciples that is emerging anew from an exploration of this precious portion of scripture, Luke's famous portrait of the early church. As such, it is both deeply biblical and an approach that lives when infused with the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit – the same Holy Spirit who brought life, energy and creativity to the first Christian communities.

Holy Habits is based upon a series of ten practices that are shown to be fruitful in the Acts 2 passage: biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, sharing resources, serving, eating together, gladness and generosity, worship, and making more disciples. In this series of material, passages relating to the ten habits are explored one habit at a time, sometimes with reference to other habits. In real life, the habits all get mixed up and



complement each other as part of a holistic way of discipleship. You may want to be alert to such connections.

There are many lists in the Bible, and with biblical lists the first and last items often have particular significance. In this list, it is significant that biblical teaching comes first. All of the habits are to be found throughout scripture, and healthy holy habits will be grounded in regular engagement with biblical teaching. This is a foundational habit.

The last habit is also significant. Commentators have remarked that it is no surprise that ‘day by day the Lord added to their number’ when life was lived in the way Luke describes. Many can be nervous of the word ‘evangelism’. Holy Habits offers a way of being evangelistic that may help to assuage some of those nerves.

Holy Habits is a way of life for followers of Jesus individually and collectively. In Acts 2:42–47, Luke offers clues as to how these practices can be fruitful. Note the devotion he mentions at the beginning and the repeated use of the word ‘all’. Holy Habits is a way of life for all ages (including children), cultures and contexts. The habits are to be lived day by day, in the whole of life, Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday. And note how Luke attributes the growth that results to the Lord. These are *holy* habits, which flourish when the Lord is at the centre of all.

Introduction to Biblical Teaching

As noted above, biblical teaching is a foundational holy habit. The opening chapters of Acts present a continuum of ministry from Jesus through the apostles: Jesus had a teaching ministry which was rooted in the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament of the Christian Bible); this was continued through those who were first identified as his disciples. Luke is not explicit about the content of the apostles' teaching in verse 42, but New Testament Professor James Dunn argues:

The apostles are the medium and the guarantors of the teaching focused on fresh interpretations of the scriptures and beginning to order the memories of Jesus' teaching and ministry into forms suitable for instruction, worship and proclamation.

James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Epworth, 1996), p. 35

So the teaching is *biblical* teaching, drawing on the Hebrew scriptures, out of which Jesus taught, and Jesus' own teaching, much of which went on to be recorded in the New Testament.

Biblical teaching draws us to Jesus – the one who calls us to follow: Jesus, the Word made flesh (John 1:14), who lived by the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures and who became the centre of the teachings of the New Testament. Towards the end of his gospel, John says:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

JOHN 20:30–31 (NRSV)



Breathed through the breath of God (2 Timothy 3:16), biblical teaching nourishes us, challenges us, shapes us and inspires us. It provides the reference points by which we form, evaluate and practise all of the other habits.

Biblical teaching is a practice that is to be *lived*. There is great value in reading and studying scripture both on our own and in smaller and larger groups. Memorising verses can be helpful, and good biblical teaching and preaching is a time-honoured gift through which God speaks and shapes us. But the real measure of the effectiveness of biblical teaching is not how much of it we know or how eloquently we can teach or preach; it is how much we live out this holy habit in our relationships, our work, our voting, our spending, our engagement with the needs and issues of the world, and our care of creation (biblically the first job humanity was given).

So, as you read these daily devotional reflections, keep asking prayerfully:

- What does this particular passage teach me about how I learn from biblical teaching?
- How can the passage form me in the habit of biblical living in the whole of life?

If you find anything particularly puzzling, remember that biblical teaching is also a gift to be shared together within the church. In sharing your questions, you may benefit from the wisdom of another who has grappled with those particular biblical questions before.



| Beth Dodd

A pattern of praise

Genesis 1:1–5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (NRSV)



Reflection

The Sound of Music describes the beginning as ‘a very good place to start’. The editors of the Hebrew Bible clearly agreed. This is not the earliest biblical text, but it comes first because it begins at the beginning. Its priestly writer wanted to celebrate the God who creates all things, at a time when God seemed to have been overtaken by the gods of human society. The God of Genesis 1 is supreme, creating with a word and building order out of chaos. He establishes the structures and rhythms of life, from the movement of our breathing to the patterns of our days and weeks.

This passage is more than a statement of faith; it is a song of praise. Although scholars do not agree on whether we can call Genesis 1 a hymn, it certainly leads us into wonder at the glory and grace of the God of creation. The earliest known poem written in English was inspired by Genesis 1. Caedmon’s hymn was written by a very unmusical seventh-century monk, who received it as a gift in a dream. This poem praised God as creator of the heavens and the earth.

Just as with English poetry, it seems a ‘very good place to start’ to mark our beginnings – including the beginning of these reflections on biblical teaching – with praise. God has ordered the foundations of the world: light and dark, day and night, without which there would be no life. Acknowledging the wonder of the world in which we live, we are turned in worship, praise and thanks to the God who blesses us with life.

Close your eyes and pay attention to your breathing. Notice the light filtering through your eyelids. Praise God for the wonderful creation that you are a part of.



What we owe to one another

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-8, 12-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth... You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy... Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

(NRSV)



Reflection

The ‘ten words’, or decalogue, are among the most famous texts of the Judeo-Christian faith. They adorn church walls and are taught to children and adults alike. They are the first commands given to God’s people on reaching Mount Sinai, after escaping from Egypt. These words are the foundation and summary of the law, but they are more than a list of ‘Thou Shalt Nots’. Jesus summarised them in two great commandments, one like the other: ‘love God’ and ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. God’s people make this commitment to love because they were loved first by the one who saved them from slavery and death.

The opening words remind us that who we are we owe to another. God brought Israel out of slavery, but all of us alive are ‘saved’ from death by those who bring us into the world and see us through the dangers of infancy. Knowing that we are already saved binds us to each other and to God. Writing after the Holocaust, the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas taught that meeting another person face-to-face shows up our obligation to each other. Each is looking for love from the other, each is fearful of harm from the other. By choosing to love, we recognise in our common humanity a worth and dignity that we all share. It is easy not to face up to what we owe to one another by seeing people as things, but that way lies tyranny and violence. The God who saved us first calls us to save each other, to love and not to harm.

Think of a person that you find it difficult to love. Imagine yourself looking at them face-to-face. What do you owe to them as part of your service to God? How does God’s word shape your response? Pray for that person.



The Lord has spoken; we will do

Exodus 24:3–4, 7 (abridged)

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, ‘All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.’ And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord... Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ (NRSV)



Reflection

This episode seems straightforward. Moses has received the law from the Lord on Mount Sinai, he has told it to the people and they have agreed to follow. Their response suggests that what ‘the Lord has spoken’ is not just sound doctrine or good ideas but words that change the world, that will transform their society. The promise is made willingly, it is made twice and it is made as a community, in one voice. But this story would have been heard with irony by a people who had been taught the subsequent history of a nation that promptly went on to break a covenant that had been made so easily.

Our societies make many commitments, seemingly with one voice. Examples might be the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United States Constitution or the Magna Carta. Promises made with hope and clear purpose can prove much harder to stick to as time goes on and difficulties arise. While it stands as a beacon for many, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has also been challenged and undermined throughout its history, as have principles of equality or the rule of law when economic or political issues get in the way.

Promises do not hold if we do not hold to them. In Exodus, the Lord’s words are written down to preserve them and are recited to keep them fresh in people’s minds. Elsewhere, Israel is advised to bind the words of the Lord to their heads, hands and hearts, as a reminder of the promises they made and the transformation to which they are called.

Call to mind commitments that we have made as a society or as a church. Pray for God’s guidance and the strength to carry out his purposes.



Pass it on

Deuteronomy 11:18–19, 21 (abridged)

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise... so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them. (NRSV)



Reflection

Moses stands here on the plains of Moab, overlooking Canaan. He is teaching God's people how to live in the promised land, which he will never see. This passage comes at the end of a series of exhortations to hear and obey that recall where the people have come from and set down teachings for the future. Looking out and looking forward, this is an impassioned plea for the children he can no longer care for. It is a hope that they will live faithfully without him, true to their commitment to God.

Moses is saying that the teachings of the Lord are more than a set of words. To live the life of a disciple means to take God's words into our lives. We walk with them, work with them, eat them, absorb them, so that they become a part of our thoughts, our actions, our hearts and our bodies, changing our lives.

One way of incorporating the word of the Lord into our lives is to pass it on. We can see how this happens in everyday life. Parents and carers teach children through lullabies, nursery rhymes, fairy stories and old wives' tales. These ditties and maxims are often remembered well into adulthood, when they are again passed on to the next generation. Reciting the stories and songs of our youth does more than keep a memory alive; it brings the wisdom of ages into our lives today.

Call to mind a story or song that has formed you as a disciple living by biblical teaching. What wisdom does it have for you today? How might you pass this wisdom on? Give yourself a reminder to pass it on, perhaps through an elastic band on your wrist or an alert on your phone.



True kingship

Deuteronomy 17:14–15, 18–20 (abridged)

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you... and you say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me', you may indeed set over you a king... When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him... It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God... neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left.

(NRSV)



Reflection

God's people did not need a king, having been ruled by judges, priests and prophets. But human nature seeks protection from the powerful. Here the law graciously makes provision for a king, but also restricts their power and outlines the character of true kingship. Kings are encouraged not to become too rich – in horses or wives, silver or gold – which will turn them away from God. They are to follow the law's teachings, be faithful to God and see themselves as equal to others.

It is telling that we find examples of this kind of ideal monarchy not in history but in fiction. In fact, the writers of this passage may have been reacting against poor examples of kingship in the seventh century BC. The characters of Aragorn in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or the children in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* are unlikely monarchs who show that true kings and queens are faithful children of God, humble and devoted to others.

The idea that we are all children of the king is picked up by Paul, who in Romans 8:17 calls us joint heirs with Christ, who share both his suffering and glory. However, the glory of true kingship is found not in power but in service, not in riches but in faithful obedience, not in pride but in humility, seeking always the good of others.

As you pray, picture Christ as king. What images come to mind, and what do they mean for you today as you seek to live out biblical teaching?

HOLYHABITS is an adventure in Christian discipleship. Inspired by Luke's model of church found in Acts 2:42–47, it identifies ten habits and encourages the development of a way of life formed by them.

These Bible reading notes have been created to help churches and individuals explore the habits through prayerful engagement with the Bible and live them out in whole-life, missional discipleship.



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Olive Fleming-Drane and John Drane

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FELLOWSHIP
 BREAKING BREAD
 PRAYER
 SHARING RESOURCES
 SERVING
 EATING TOGETHER
 GLADNESS AND GENEROSITY
 WORSHIP
 MAKING MORE DISCIPLES

Writers in this issue:

Beth Dodd
 Ed Mackenzie
 Michael Parsons
 Caroline Wickens



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