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The COMA Method of Studying the Bible

**Why use a method to study the Bible?**

We follow a study method in order to make sure we aren’t imposing our own meaning on the text. Instead, we want to discover the meaning the author intended the text to have and allow the Holy Spirit to apply it to our lives. Sometimes the meaning of a text is fairly clear. In this case, a method of study produces a deeper understanding. Sometimes the meaning isn’t clear, and a method of study can protect us from misinterpretation.

**What is the COMA method of Bible Study?**

COMA is a somewhat unfortunate acronym for the steps we follow when studying the Bible

**C**ontext, **O**bservation, **M**eaning, **A**pplication

Other Bible study methods might name or order the steps slightly differently, but all useful methods should include these steps.

**Context:** Bible passages weren’t written in isolation and weren’t meant to be read in isolation either. Context allows us to understand how the surroundings of a passage impact its meaning.

**Observation:** The point of observation is to understand the content of the passage. You are **not** looking for meaning in this step. Once you’ve observed a passage well and understood its content, the meaning will become clear.

**Meaning:** Ask the question, “What did this text mean to its original audience?” This step proceeds and builds upon observation. A correct understanding of the text’s meaning sets you up to apply it well.

**Application:** Answer the question, “What does this text mean for me or for us today?” Faithful application is based on a correct understanding of the text’s meaning.

**Preparing to study**

When you are doing Bible study it is easiest if you look at one section at a time. What do I mean by a section? A section is one story, one psalm, one parable, or one unit of teaching. Our modern Bibles delineate sections for us and often even give them headers. Studying one section at a time will make the task easier. It’s also helpful to study through an entire book.

Pray! How easy it is to overlook this step. We all need the Holy Spirit to help us understand and apply the Bible.

**Context**

Before considering the context, identify the genre of the passage or book you are studying.

**Common Biblical Genres** -Historical narrative, Poetry, Prophecy, Wisdom literature, Gospel, Epistle (a fancy word for a letter), and Apocalyptic literature. Other genres include Proverbs, Parables, Genealogy, and Law.

Once you’ve identified the genre, try to determine its significance for the passage you are studying. For example, it might influence the way you observe the passage. In a narrative, characters, action, and climax are important. In poetry, imagery is key. Apocalyptic literature uses symbols to convey its message. In an epistle, meaning is communicated through an argument.

After you’ve identified the genre, there are several different types of context to consider.

**Literary Context**

The literary context is the **words** around the text.

Here are some questions to ask:

* Where does this passage fit into the book as a whole and why did the author put it here?
* How do the passages before and after impact this text?
* How does this passage reflect the themes of the book as a whole?

**Historical Context**

The historical context is the **world** around the text.

Here are some questions to ask:

* Who wrote the book?
* When and to whom was it written?
* Why was it written?
* Are there cultural or historical references in the passage?

A study Bible can be useful to answer these questions.

**Biblical Context**

The biblical context is **where** the passage fits in the overall story of Scripture.

Here are some questions to ask:

* How does this passage contribute to the Bible’s story of redemption?
* How does the story of Scripture help me understand this specific passage?

Another aspect of biblical context is other passages to which the author refers. These might come in the form of quotes or allusions. Ask yourself why the author is referring to another biblical passage.

When considering context, you are considering the entire passage: how it is impacted by the genre of the book, where it fits in the book you are studying, and where it fits in the story of Scripture. Consider the context first because context keeps you from interpreting a passage in isolation.

**Observation**

Now you are ready to consider the details of the passage.

A study Bible might have been useful to determine the context but now it’s time to put it away. It’s too easy to let a study Bible or commentary do the thinking for you instead of observing the passage yourself to discover its meaning.

Read and listen to the passage several times. Jot down things that you notice or questions that you have.

Next, look for these elements in the text.

**Repeated words, phrases or ideas**

This can give you a good idea of what the passage is about.

If the author is repeating something, it’s probably important.

**Contrast/Comparison**

Some examples of contrast in Scripture include characters (i.e., Saul & David), types of people (i.e., Pharisees & sinners), images (i.e., light & darkness), and descriptions (old man & new man).

If you look for nothing else but repeated ideas and contrast, you will have observed a lot.

**Setting/Characters/Action/Climax**

It’s particularly important to observe the author’s use of these elements in a narrative.

**Grammar**

* The subject of the passage – who is it about? Does the subject change throughout the passage?
* The verbs – what verbs are used and how are they used (i.e., imperative or indicative)?
* Transition words – these words show how the sentences and ideas in a passage are connected (i.e., therefore, but, for, in addition, because, etc.).

**Imagery**

This is especially important when observing poetry. Notice what the author conveys through the images he chose and the way he used them.

**Key details**

* What jumps out at you as you read the passage?
* Does anything strike you as strange?
* Does anything seem familiar from another part of the Bible?

The most helpful thing I can say about observing a passage is – Be Curious! The best interpreters notice things in the text and ask good questions about the text.

**Meaning**

Now that you have lots and lots of notes it’s time to try and make sense of those notes. Your goal is to discern the meaning that the author intended based on the observations you’ve made. With that in mind, review your notes and see if any patterns emerge.

**Structure**

Use your observations and any patterns you’ve noticed to determine how this passage is organized.

* Maybe it’s action building to a climax. This is often true in a narrative.
* Maybe it’s the use of a repeated word or phrase or the use of a poetic image.
* Maybe it’s a logical progression through transition words.

The structure reveals the way the author organized the passage in order to convey his meaning.

Don’t worry if you’re having trouble coming up with an exact structure. If you’ve read the passage a few times, you’ll often have an idea of how it’s structured without even realizing it.

Once you have a sense of the structure, try to summarize the main point of the passage in one sentence. Your sentence shouldn’t be too complex, but it may have one or two clauses.

This is where I often see people make a mistake. They’ve done hard work coming up with observations, but then they set that work aside and come up with a meaning that’s not based on their observations.

The main point of the passage should be directly connected to your observations. Asking yourself a few questions after you’ve come up with the meaning will make sure this is the case.

**Questions to consider**

* Is my main point consistent with the overall findings of my observations?
* If someone asked me why I came up with this particular meaning, could I support it based on my observations and the structure of the text?

Each passage has one main point, so you should have a similar main point as others who have studied the passage.

**Connecting the passage to the person and work of Christ.**

Jesus said that the whole Bible concerned him (Luke 24: 25-27). Every passage we study points to the person and work of Christ in some way. Identify how the passage points to, or is dependent on Christ and his work on the cross.

Determine the place of your text in redemptive history and use that to help you identify how your text connects to the person and work of Christ.

Sometimes this is fairly obvious. This is often the case when you’re studying the New Testament. But sometimes it requires more work. This can be the case when you’re studying the Old Testament. When studying an Old Testament passage, ask yourself whether a character, image, or event in the passage points to Christ or our need for Christ.

**Application**

Application is the point of all your hard work. Although a passage has one main point, it may have many different applications. Focus on one or two.

**A New understanding**

* Did you learn something new about God, his ways, his character, his plan, or his priorities or was a truth reinforced?

**A Challenge**

* + - * Do you need to change your thinking on a certain point?
			* Is there a way you need to preach to yourself?
			* Is there a behavior you need to adopt or stop doing?
			* Does this passage have implications for the way you relate or speak to others?
			* How should you pray based on this passage?

**An Encouragement/Praise**

* What can you praise God for based on this passage?
* Is there an encouragement or a promise you need to dwell on?

Don’t just think about yourself. Most passages of Scripture have rich corporate applications. Ask how this passage applies to those around you – your local church family, non-Christians, or society as a whole.

**Additional notes on particular genres**

**Historical Narrative**

After you’ve read the story, identify the setting, the rising action, the climax (or climaxes), and the resolution. Plot elements are unique to a narrative, so they’re an important part of observation. Sometimes it can be helpful to locate these items on a plot diagram. Longer stories might have more than one climax.

Once you’ve identified the plot elements, notice the details that the author included in the narrative. He couldn’t include every detail, so he intentionally included some while leaving others out.

The author was making a theological point when he wrote his story. This theological point is integral to the meaning of the narrative. The author included particular details and organized his story in such a way as to strengthen his theological point. Therefore, the climax (or climaxes) and the author’s comments or attitude about the narrative will help you understand its meaning.

**Epistle**

Epistles are written to persuade an audience of something. Therefore, the author builds an argument throughout his letter. When you are observing an epistle pay particular attention to the connecting words which show a logical relationship between clauses or sentences.

Here are a few examples:

**Because, since** – what follows is the ground (supporting evidence) for a previous conclusion

**For** – can be the ground or show purpose

**By** – the instrument or means

**In order that, so that** – shows purpose or result

**As a result** – shows a result

**Though, although, despite** – an action or conclusion may differ from expectations

**Therefore, thus** – usually precedes a conclusion which depends upon the previous material

Once you’ve identified the connecting words, try to summarize the argument the author is making in the passage. This is the key to the meaning.

**Poetry**

It’s important to identify imagery, metaphors, and similes when observing poetry. Furthermore, parallelism is an essential element of Hebrew poetry. Parallelism is two clauses with similar grammatical elements. The second clause will repeat, contradict, or add to the information in the first clause.

You’ll discover the meaning of a poem by identifying the stanzas and understanding the relationship between the stanzas.

**Resources**

Helm, David. *One to One Bible Reading*

An introductory book on studying the Bible with others.

Nielson, Kathleen. *Bible Study: Following the Ways of the Word*

A more advanced book on studying the Bible.

Ryken, Leland. *Reading the Bible as Literature.*

He has written a short book on each genre.