

Living by the Book. By Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991. 349 pp. \$10.99 Paper. Reviewed by T. Scott Christmas.

Howard G. Hendricks, the distinguished professor and lecturer from Dallas Theological Seminary, and his son, William D. Hendricks, president of the Hendricks Group, a communication development group in Dallas, teamed up to write an enlightening, practical book on how to study the Bible. In the book's forward, Chuck Swindoll rightly declares that Hendricks' Bible study methods enable the Bible to become user-friendly. He opens the door to the Bible being understandable. The intimidation experienced by the average Bible reader can be dissolved as these methods are perfected by practice. The goal is to move the reader's personal Bible study habits from the mundane to the motivational, from the lackluster to the lively, from the redundant to the reviving. After more than four decades of teaching these truths in the classroom, Hendricks does an excellent job of setting forth these methods in print, in a very practical step-by-step fashion.

In the first four chapters of the book, Hendricks lays the groundwork for learning effective personal Bible study. He does this, by first explaining why people don't study the Bible. Some need a plan that works. Some do not know how. Others may consider themselves "just a layman." Many do not have the time. A few have doubts about the Bible. While others, just can't seem to make Bible study interesting. Once the author has uncovered the reader's weakness, he goes on to build the case for the necessity of Bible study. Hendricks reasons that the study of the Bible is essential to growth, spiritual maturity, and spiritual effectiveness. With

those facts established, the “Prof” as he is affectionately known, begins to describe how his book can help. He promises to provide a simple, proven process. The reader is encouraged with the possibility of future self-confidence in his ability to handle the Scriptures. Motivation is increased by the promise of experiencing joy from personal discovery. And finally, the reader’s relationship with God will be deepened. Hendricks however, reveals that there are some costs involved. It will take time and effort, but will be well worth it in the end. He closes Chapter 4 with an overview of the process. The writer describes his three-step, life-changing approach as: observation, interpretation, and application. These three steps form the basis for the remainder of the book.

Step 1 in the process is known as observation. This step answers the question, “What do I see?” The writer begins Chapter 5 by showing the value of observation. He argues that what makes one person a better Bible student than another is simply the ability to see more (p. 47). In Chapter 7, Hendricks begins to walk the reader through working with an actual verse of Scripture. He shows the importance of defining terms, identifying the grammatical or literary structure of the passage, watching for cause-effect relationships, and relating the verse to the book as a whole. Chapter 7 is spent proving to the reader that he must learn to read. The author recommends two valuable resources to assist the reader: How to Read a Book by Mortimer J. Adler and How to Read Better and Faster by Norman Lewis.

Chapters 8-17 continue in the process of observation. The writer builds upon the necessity of learning to read by giving the reader ten strategies to first-rate reading. They include learning to read thoughtfully, repeatedly, patiently, selectively, prayerfully,

imaginatively, meditatively, purposefully, acquisitively, and telescopically. These chapters are filled with helpful tidbits such as how to set up a schedule for Bible reading. Also included in the section are questions to clarify what is being read. The reader is encouraged to ask questions of the text such as: Who? What? Where? When? Why? Wherefore? The reader is even given a very brief grammatical structure refresher course addressing topics such as verbs, subject and object, modifiers, prepositional phrases, and connectives. Hendricks instructs the reader to immerse himself in the text. The Bible student is to pay close attention to the context of what he is reading. The reader is also encouraged to study paragraphs as a whole.

When working with a paragraph of Scripture, the author recommends that the reader look for six things. While remembering that the key to observation is understanding what you see, the reader is encouraged to assume the role of a biblical detective. The clues to watch for in Scripture are things that are emphasized, repeated, related, alike and unlike, and true to life. These topics comprise the instruction given in Chapters 19-23. This helpful section instructs the reader to be aware of specifics such as movement from the general to the specific, questions and answers, cause and effect, similes, metaphors, the use of the term “but,” and irony. In Chapters 24-26, Hendricks encourages the reader to get the big picture, summarize observations, and understand the significance of facts.

Once observation is complete, the reader is instructed to move to Step 2, interpretation. Interpretation answers the question, “What does it mean?” Hendricks is careful to communicate the goal of interpretation. The reader is encouraged to attempt to stand in the biblical “author’s shoes and to recreate his experience—to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, and to decide as

he decided. We're asking, What did this mean to him? before we ever ask, What does it mean to us?" (p. 197). In order to emphasize this point, the author spends the next three chapters (27-29) carefully explaining the value of interpretation, the need to handle the Scriptures with care, and the necessity of paying attention to Bible genre.

Next, the reader is given five keys to interpretation, which assist in unlocking the biblical text. These keys include content, context, comparison, culture and consultation. The reader compiles much content by completing the first step of observation. The focus upon context teaches the reader to be aware of that which precedes his passage, and that which follows. Hendricks notes that there are several different kinds of context including literary, historical, cultural, geographic, and theological. The key of comparison is given to teach the reader to compare Scripture with Scripture. In this step, Hendricks shows the value of a good concordance. Culture also has much to do with proper Bible interpretation. The author demonstrates effectively the need to understand each passage of Scripture according to its own cultural background. Finally, the reader is instructed concerning the consultation of other Bible study tools. These tools include concordances, Bible dictionaries, Bible handbooks, Bible commentaries, and other additional resources. Hendricks is very helpful by suggesting different resources under each category which help in building a basic library. Yet this section comes with a warning not to rely too much on secondhand information. "The use of extrabiblical resources should never be a substitute for personal Bible study, rather than a stimulus for it. The order is always the same: First the Word of God; then secondary sources" (p. 250). Chapters 35-38 conclude the section on interpretation by covering the subjects of definitions of terms, figuring out the figurative, and putting it altogether.

Finally, in Chapters 39-45, the author deals with Step 3, known as application. Application answers the question, “How does it work?” After explaining the value of application, Hendricks gives four steps to correctly applying the Scriptures. The steps include: knowing the text and yourself, relating the text to personal experience, meditation, and practice. The author also gives nine questions to make application easier: Is there an example to follow? Is there a sin to avoid? Is there a promise to claim? Is there a prayer to repeat? Is there a command to obey? Is there a condition to meet? Is there a verse to memorize? Is there an error to mark? Is there a challenge to face? Chapters 42-45 assist the reader in extracting principles from the text, understanding the process of life-change, and getting started. Hendricks concludes the work with a list of additional resources to assist in Bible study.

Living by the Book has many strengths. Although the book is 45 chapters long, each one is a quick-read. Interspersed within the text are many diagrams, charts and illustrations which help to communicate the given point. Further, there are numerous passages given in which in similar examples of the particular point can be seen. Every chapter dealing with a step of Bible study closes with a section entitled “You try it.” If the reader is persistent in working through the sections, he can become well acquainted with the process itself.

It is refreshing to see the author attempting to circumvent a major problem in the area of Bible interpretation. Hendricks rightly assesses a typical approach to Scripture by stating”

Unfortunately, many people today have decided that the laws of logic do not apply to Scripture. To them, it doesn’t really matter whether you see the text as blue and I see it as green. In fact, it doesn’t really matter what color the text actually is. For them, the

meaning of the text is not in the text, it's in their response to the text. And everyone is free to have his or her own response. Meaning becomes purely subjective (p. 197).

As a result, the author is very careful to explain that a passage of Scripture can have “numerous practical applications. But it can have only one proper interpretation, one meaning—ultimately, the meaning it had to the original writer” (p. 206). This is excellent counsel considering the popular approach to Scripture that considers interpretation to be “What does this passage mean to me?” Therefore, Hendricks rightly advises the reader to adopt the motto “Handle with care!” when performing the step of interpretation.

Finally, what makes this book is so enjoyable is the motivational tone of the writer. It is easy to see why Hendricks has remained so popular at Dallas Theological Seminary. His enthusiasm is contagious.

On page 326, the author states that “the objective of this book is to help you ask observational questions of the biblical text, explain what a passage means, and then describe practical ways to use what you’ve learned in everyday life.” It is the opinion of this reviewer that Hendricks is successful in accomplishing his objective.

For the pastor, this book is a welcome reminder of the necessity to be involved in the study of the actual text. The temptation exists to make secondary sources primary. Often the study of commentaries can be substituted for the study of the Scriptures. Unfortunately, it is easier to read the opinions of other men rather than to think through the words of God. Although

observation is time-consuming, it is nonetheless necessary. Hendricks' work serves well to remind preachers of the need to look long into the text.

For the layman, this work is an excellent resource for cultivating proper Bible study methods. However, due to the detailed nature of this approach to Bible study, the reader should keep in mind that these methods will not be perfected overnight. They will take time and practice. But, the reward is well worth the effort. Through diligent practice, the reader can look forward to the transformation of his or her personal Bible study habits from the mundane to the motivational, from the lackluster to the lively, and from the redundant to the reviving.