

“The Bible Is for Scripture Scholars and Everyone Else,” *National Catholic Register*,  
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## **The Bible Is for Scripture Scholars and Everyone Else**

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We live in a world dominated by experts. Gone are the Renaissance polymaths the likes of Leonardo da Vinci who moved with equal ease in fields as diverse as mathematics, medicine, physics, architecture, aviation (his designs for a flying machine prefigured the modern helicopter), art, and botany. Universal learning has given way to specialization such that the individual knows more and more about less and less. For everything else he must rely on the experts.

While specialization indisputably affords real advantages for society, a growing dependence on pundits entails its share of hazards as well. For one, we risk losing a frame of reference to integrate scattered pieces of knowledge into a meaningful whole. Moreover, such dependency can undermine our confidence in common sense and our personal convictions, when these clash with the opinion of recognized “experts.”

One area where the expert/layman dichotomy has made conspicuous inroads is our approach to the Bible. Once seen as “God’s word to everyman,” Scripture has been recast as a recondite text whose interpretation requires the assistance of highly trained scholars. The complaint is often raised that in the pre-Vatican Church the Bible was not in the hands of the people. The Council certainly gave a decided push to the reading of the Bible. But no sooner are the Scriptures placed into the hands of the common Catholic than they are whisked away by “specialists” who assure us that the Bible is thoroughly incomprehensible without their aid.

To be sure, biblical scholarship provides an invaluable service to the Church. A more intimate knowledge of local customs, familiarity with the original languages, and an appreciation for differences in literary genre enable the reader to penetrate more deeply into the sense of the sacred text. Yet, helpful as it is, exegesis performs an ancillary function to the faithful’s direct contact with God’s Word and should not be allowed to usurp the latter. Several reasons make this so.

First, to foster a spirit of devotion in our reading of Scripture, scholarship must be used judiciously. Philologists and historians, as the great theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once wrote, have a certain habit of mental reservation that is inimical to contemplation. People who have invested much time in dissecting a text (von Balthasar compares such study to an autopsy) are in danger of becoming so enmeshed in the study of internal mechanisms

that they neglect the animating principle that holds these elements together. The believer who approaches Scripture as a praying lover (rather than as a coroner) will devote a minimum of time to unearthing curious details, and concentrate his attention on discerning what God is saying to him.

Secondly, the Scriptures were written under God's direct inspiration, whereas (as a general rule) biblical commentaries are not. Commentaries are subject to the fallibility of their authors as well as to the quirks and prejudices of their times. Attentive students of biblical scholarship are acutely aware of the fickleness of exegetical trends. Theories widely touted as incontrovertible twenty years ago are today viewed as amusingly passé. Or, as Cardinal Ratzinger—himself an eminent Scripture scholar—notes, “A saying of Jesus reported in the Bible is not made binding on faith because it is acknowledged as Jesus' word by the majority of contemporary exegetes, and it does not lose its validity when the opposite is true.” In all generations, divine revelation merits a response of abiding faith, while scholarship may be appropriated when helpful and otherwise dismissed with a wink.

Thirdly, though the investigation of experts often aids in understanding the Bible, it is far from necessary. Many translations contain helpful notes and commentaries, but generally such observations don't touch on the essential message of the text, which is plainly accessible to all readers. Neither is historical-critical study necessary for a fruitful reading of the Bible. As the Belgian theologian, Servais Pinckaers, O.P., has observed, “If this labor were required as indispensable for an authentic reading of Scripture, access to Scripture would be barred for most Christians, pastors as well as laity.” Happily, this is not the case. Jesus offered his message to the crowds—the learned as well as the simple—and through his Word He continues to enlighten the lives, nourish the prayer, and inspire the activity of all who approach Him in faith.

A keen sense of discernment is needed to avail oneself of biblical scholarship where it is helpful, while maintaining a proper autonomy and independence. Personal contact with the revealed Word in an atmosphere of prayerful devotion must be guaranteed pride of place. Pope John Paul II has defined the primary goal of biblical exegesis as “putting believers into a personal relationship with God.” When exegesis serves this noble aim, all believers benefit.