

*Saving the Bible from Ourselves:  
Learning to Read and Live the  
Bible Well*

April 2016

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*“What we do with our Bibles –  
physically, tangibly,  
experientially – both reveals and  
shapes what we think the Bible  
is.”*

– Glenn R. Paauw

## Learning to Read the Bible Well

*Saving the Bible from Ourselves* provides a new paradigm for reading and living the Bible well. Over the course of the centuries, Bible scholars and publishers have increasingly added “helps” – chapter divisions, verses, subheads, notes – to the Bible in an effort to make it easier to study and understand. But these simplifications have led to sampling of Scripture rather than deep reading, making the Bible a database of quick and easy answers to life’s troubling questions rather than a culture-shaping force.

In this book, Glenn R. Paauw introduces seven new perspectives on Bible reading for slower, smarter and deeper engagement of Scripture as he addresses the following questions:

- What is the Bible? What are we supposed to do with it?
- How did the Bible come into its current form? Why are chapter and verse numbers, section headings and special study Bibles detrimental intrusions?
- Why it is so crucial to read the Bible in context – not in the small, verse-sized readings so common to our electronic age?
- Why can’t the Bible be separated from history and historical investigation?
- Why do we need to begin reading the Bible as a story, not a self-help book, and see our place in its ongoing narrative?
- In reading the Bible well, what do we learn about evil’s corruption of an inherently good world?
- What mistakes do we make by neglecting communal Bible reading?
- How can we recover the elegance and beauty of the Biblical narrative found in its diverse genres and literary techniques?

“The Bible needs saving,” Paauw writes, “not because of any defect in itself, but because we’ve buried it, boxed it in, wallpapered over it, neutered it, distorted it, isolated it, individualized it, minimized it, misread it, lied about it, debased it and oversold it. We have over-complicated its form while over-simplifying its content. We’ve become cavalier and even cheesy with our Bibles. We’ll do almost anything with them. What we have not done, truth be told, is trusted it to be itself. It may not be far off the mark to say that the Bible is completely different from what we’ve been led to believe it is.”

Paauw is vice president of global Bible engagement at Biblica and a senior fellow at the Institute for Bible Reading. In his twenty-six years at Biblica, Paauw’s work has ranged from leading Scripture evangelism seminars at churches nationwide to overseeing the nonprofit publishing of the NIV, NVI and NIrV translations in North America. He also led the development of a revolutionary new visual presentation of the Bible called *The Books of the Bible*, which uses carefully-considered formatting to uncover the natural literary form of the Scriptures and re-introduce people to the grand narrative of the Bible.

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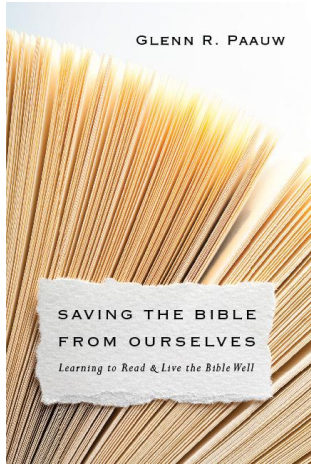


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## The Bible is the bestselling book year after year. Why are people still confused about what it says?

You may have heard that the Bible is the bestselling book of all time. And that's true, but that's not the half of it: the Bible is the bestselling book *every single year*. By any measure, this is remarkable. God didn't have a blockbuster once upon a time. He has THE blockbuster year after year after year. And if the Bible didn't need saving, this accomplishment would mean more than it actually does.

It might mean that the content of the Bible would be extremely well known – after all, there are all those copies out there. Given the sheer distribution numbers, we should have Bible trivia experts on every corner. But the researchers have been telling us for some time that the knowledge base isn't there. Regardless of the number of times we've rolled the Bible presses, the words on the page are not common currency.

There is an underside to the life of the Bible in our midst. This is the story of frustration, boredom and lack of connection. This is the story of failed expectations. Many of us try out the advice promoted in the official line and find that it doesn't work. We commit to a daily "quiet time," but after a while we give up. We read our little spiritual morsel and discover it doesn't nourish us all that much, and certainly not enough to carry us through the day. Actually, we kind of forget it pretty quickly. For far too many folks there is a hoped-for-but-as-yet-undiscovered spiritual meal in the Bible. After too long a wait they begin to doubt there is any real food there at all.

And now for the bad news. It's not just the obvious failures that are failures. Even when we think we have success, the reality is often not very good. Fragmentary, superficial and out-of-context readings and misapplications abound. One of the core reasons for our Bible engagement breakdown is that so many would-be Bible readers have been sold the mistaken notion that the Bible is a look-it-up-and-find-the-answer handy guide to life. They've been encouraged to treat the Scriptures as if they were a collection of doctrinal, devotional and moralistic statements that can be accessed and chosen at will. This topical-search mode of Bible use directly undermines authentic Bible engagement. The advent of electronic Bibles with their speedy find-a-verse feature is only making it worse.

One glaring failure of such an approach is that it ignores huge swaths of the biblical text that don't comfortably fit the model. Many books have no candidates for the My-Favorite-Scripturette award and are studiously avoided by the verse-pickers and therefore effectively decanonized. The grave danger here is that people think they are getting to know the Bible

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# BOOK EXCERPT

when actually they are being led to a small sampling of Bible passages – and often misreadings of them. This superficial use of the Scriptures is actually destructive because those who practice it operate under the illusion that they are engaging the Bible when they are not. They’re rarely even aware of what they’re missing.

The Bible needs to be saved because of what it has not become. It has not become a collection of books we know, the narrative we stew in, the words that form us. The Bible needs to be saved because it has been falsely promised to us and falsely delivered. It has been packaged aplenty, but unpacked not so much. The truth is the Bible is not easy. The Bible is a challenge – a sizeable library with a wide variety of ancient writings collected over a long period of time. There is no good reason to mislead folks about this fact.

*“For far too many folks there is a hoped-for-but-as-yet-undiscovered spiritual meal in the Bible. After too long a wait they begin to doubt there is any real food there at all.”*

If the Bible isn’t what we’ve thought, we have to face the implications. If this is not a user’s manual I’m holding in my hands or a collection of individual statements numbered for handy reference, I’m going to have to rethink my strategy for what to do with the Bible.

Any decent adventure into the Bible will take full account of both its form and its content. It will begin with knowledge of the messages of whole books and a clear perception of the uniqueness of their contributions. It will be followed by growing insight into how these books come together to form a single narrative – of God, Israel and the world – that comes into its own in the utterly remarkable story of Jesus of Nazareth and the new community he launched.

We’ll know we’ve hit the heart of it all – that is, that the Bible is achieving its purpose – when we realize that this ancient tribal tale has somehow become *our* center. When many more of us are engaged in communities that breathe this story and find their purpose in living this drama, then perhaps troubled minds and hurting hearts can be put at ease. The Bible too can be saved.

*– Adapted from the introduction, “Embarking”*