

Hearing the Word

The Rationale

Extracted from The Manual

Web edition

Nigel Barge

Hearing the Word: The Rationale, Extracted from The Manual

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Nigel Barge, November 2023

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HEARING THE WORD

Synopsis

‘Hearing the Word’ is a tool to help all who read the Bible to find out what its authors originally intended when they penned it, and to seek God to apply His Word to their lives today.

It encourages people to approach a passage in a disciplined way using four steps:

Look - what does it say?

Learn - what does it mean?

Listen - what is the message?

Live - how should we respond?

It is simple. Founded on basic principles of addressing any text, it is beneficial to all: to the novice it lays a good foundation, to the ‘hardened’ Bible student it acts as a reminder of good habits that may have been laid aside!

It is a resource for personal work that is also useful as a basis for group Bible study.

In the hands of a Bible teacher, it may be used to help others:

- a) to think for themselves as they read their Bibles, and
- b) to mature in their knowledge of the Word of God.

This file is extracted from the complete Manual, which contains:

The ‘Rationale’ behind the material, and **how to use it** page vi

See also The Leader’s Guide for the **Introduction** Course, page 1

The Leader’s Guide for the six **Follow On** Bible Studies page 33

Hearing the Word: The Rationale, Extracted from The Manual

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At a point of discouragement, Stuart Smith was enthusiastic, having used *The Introduction* at a church weekend.

William Wilson affirmed my belief that the discipline of *Hearing the Word* has benefit to ‘experts’, including fine expositors like himself.

David McAdam brought great encouragement by demonstrating its effectiveness not only in use by church home groups but also as a tool to train pastors in third world settings.

Dave Glover spurred me on and sought to bring it into the 21st century by use of his graphics in the presentation.

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Through painstaking hard work, Phil and June Malloch have countered my literary inadequacies and made the materials presentable!

Nigel Barge
November 2023

THE RATIONALE

Preface

In the 16th century, one of the earliest reformers of the church rediscovered that the Bible was for everyone.

This inspired William Tyndale to translate it into English and print it for mass circulation. As he said to a leading clergyman of his day,

“If God spare my life, e'er many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost.”

When we were first developing ‘Hearing the Word’, a friend in Glasgow used it with his congregation.

As they went through the course, he noted two facts:

- a) All kinds of folk benefitted.

Someone who had only recently believed in Jesus and come to church interacted comfortably in a group with a student at Bible college.

- b) The ‘secret’ of understanding the Bible was out.

A friend said to him after the course, ‘I used to think what you did as a preacher on Sunday was clever; but now I know how you do it!’

It was perhaps a little shocking at first, but it made my heart soar. Notwithstanding God’s treasured gift to the church of preachers and teachers, there was an echo of the promise of the New Covenant:

“I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour... saying, ‘Know the Lord’. For they will all know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

(Jeremiah 31:33,34)

Introduction

*“Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day.
Teach him to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime.”* (Proverb)

All who seek Jesus love the taste of ‘fish’: *i.e.* they are eager to receive the Word of God. So, when it is ‘served up’ by those gifted at teaching it, we sit back and feast. The question is though, ‘Can we ‘catch’ it for ourselves?!’

The problem, in terms of learning from the Word of God from sermons, is that we remember such small amounts of what is said. It seems we retain only approximately 5 percent of what we hear. It is a sobering thought for preachers that 95 percent of all the ‘blood, sweat and tears’ of preparation during the week is therefore going to be lost to their hearers on Sunday!

Merely witnessing an expert in their field does little to transfer their skill: Two weeks in front of the TV watching Wimbledon does not increase the national ability at tennis! Similarly, as we hear a preacher expound the Scriptures, though we might learn much of substance, we don’t necessarily learn how to imitate them in opening up the Word of God for ourselves.

The challenge therefore is not merely to ‘taste the fish’ and admire the preacher for ‘catching’ it, but rather it is to imitate them and learn to ‘catch fish’ ourselves, by engaging with the Lord, in His Word.

Hearing the Word is a supplement to the God-given ministry of the ‘teacher’. It is a tool that can be used to show the whole church that they are able to expose the Scriptures, thus learning how to ‘catch fish’ for themselves! It contains two parts:

1) An Introduction

This is a four-hour interactive course, suitable for novice and expert alike. It shows the former and reminds the latter how to read the Bible ‘closely’, listening for the Word of God, in a simple and straightforward way.

2) Bible Studies

These cover all genres of Scripture. They provide basic information on the text available to the original hearers and encourage people today, using the method of *Hearing the Word*, to explore the Word for themselves. Having done this individually, they then suggest how their views might be shared together in a group.

In a nutshell - *Hearing the Word* enables us to do all that we humanly can, as we read the Word. Thereafter, we are completely dependent on the grace of God and work of His Spirit to reveal Himself to us.

The Basis

The first three stages – LOOK, LEARN and LISTEN – merely adopt a method that would be taught in a school English class. Only the last stage, LIVE, is existential, as it asks, ‘What is God saying to me?’

It is possible to engage in Bible Study in minute detail yet, like the Pharisees, completely miss the point. Jesus, the Word made flesh, told them, ‘*These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*’ (John 5:39,40)

The correct action then is not to suspend rational thought when reading the Scriptures; rather it is to employ all one’s God-given ability, in submission to Jesus, recognising that in the end, ‘*His thoughts are not your thoughts, and His ways are not your ways.*’ (Isaiah 55:8)

Hearing the Word exercises the discipline of human thought and reason but does it in the context of seeking divine intervention, recognising that ‘*Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain.*’ (Psalm 127:1)

There are two pre-requisites to learning:

1) The will to learn

Unless there is an underpinning desire to learn, no means, tool or tutor will be able to effect learning in another.

2) The confidence to ask questions

Perhaps ‘Curiosity killed the cat’ - but a lack of it may yet kill the church! It is through questions that people learn. The prime goal of *Hearing the Word* is to give people who read the Bible the confidence to ask

questions. That is the precursor to them then going on to find answers and to learn for themselves from the Word of God.

Hearing the Word is built on two assumptions. First, it is a basic need in the church for everyone to read the Bible and feed on the Word of God for themselves. We long to see the Word of God being impressed on children, talked about in daily life and being shared hospitably with others in our homes. (Deuteronomy 6:7; Acts 2:42ff)

Secondly, pastor-teachers in today's society are often in a position similar to the Apostles at the beginning of Acts 6 – aware of the priority of the Word but unable to treat it as such due to the demands on their time. Back then, the personal house-to-house teaching (Acts 5:42) was being neglected because of the demands of the food distribution to widows (Acts 6:2). Today the teaching of the Bible in regular, pastoral dialogue has been squeezed out by the busy lifestyles of shepherd and flock, and reliance is now almost completely on the Sunday monologue.

Hearing the Word seeks to address these in the following ways. It provides for:

1) Everybody,

by demonstrating that the Bible is *for* them and *accessible* to them. It gives people confidence to read it for themselves, by providing a simple structure to approach any text, at any time. Furthermore, it provides an on-going opportunity for interaction in Bible study between the pastor-teacher and member.

2) Teachers,

by providing a resource of Bible Study Guides to help leaders interact with their people and encourage them to learn from their Bibles. All the main styles of writing in Scripture are covered and each Study has a Leader's Guide. This means that a hard-pressed leader may simply pick up and start using the resources with little prior preparation.

The hope is that, as with the appointment of deacons in the early church, *Hearing the Word* will be a practical means that enables 'the Word of God to spread.' (Acts 6:7)

Testimony: ‘I can read the Bible’

by Mana Hazlett

I can remember when I first realised I could read. One evening I was sitting up in bed waiting for someone to come and read me a bedtime story. The story was chosen but for some reason there was no sign of an adult. I started to look at the text and realised that I could see that there were several paragraphs and that the story wasn’t very long. So, I started to read it and just read the whole story from beginning to end – and then read it again – and again. It was a wonderful feeling!

Fifty-five years on - the same sort of experience happened the fourth time I did our summer Bible study with the format of LOOK, LEARN, LISTEN and LIVE. First lesson, well, I was struggling. The second one, hmm, not much better at all, in fact I was quite bamboozled. I could see the general idea, but it certainly wasn’t clicking with me. So, the third session was my BIG problem because I was one of the leaders and really wasn’t sure how I would cope when I didn’t know how to get from one section to another!

Fortunately, the other leader was happy to prepare with me and on the night, the session went well. I was immensely relieved! People felt they got a lot from it and I didn’t have to confess I hadn’t a clue how the whole thing ‘joined up’! So, you can imagine my joy when I started session four. There was no pressure as I didn’t have to lead. When I started going through the format, well, I just got through it, and it all clicked. It all fell into place and made sense. It was a wonderful feeling, a bit like when I discovered I could read, all those years ago while waiting for a parent at bedtime. The next day, when I was seven, I knew I didn’t actually need anyone else to read anything, the world was my oyster.

So here I was all these years later, waking the next morning knowing I could do the series of strategies in LOOK, LEARN, LISTEN and LIVE by myself and read the Bible for myself! I’m an independent Bible reader now and have found my theological feet so to speak. It is a real feeling of being born again. The world is indeed my oyster.

Mana Hazlett Elder, Partick Trinity Church of Scotland, Glasgow

The Ethos

*Priesthood of all believers; Theological Basis; Human skills;
The Meaning of a text; The Author's intent*

1 The priesthood of all believers

At the Reformation a key rediscovery was ‘the priesthood of all believers’. The Bible showed the common man that he did not need a priest to act as his go-between to God; he had access himself by grace through faith in Christ alone. It followed from this that the written Word of God must also be accessible to all believers, without being mediated through a priest.

It was this belief that inspired William Tyndale to translate the Bible into English and print it for mass circulation. He expressed his intention to a notable cleric of his day with the words, *“If God spare my life, e'er many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost.”*

The goal of making the Bible known continues to be vigorously pursued by those in the evangelical tradition. In many churches, careful expository preaching covering the whole Bible allows everyone access to God’s Word. On top of this, there is a vast array of resources – Bible translations, books, sermons, conferences etc., within easy reach of most Christians in the west. The reformers could not have dreamt of such riches! Ironically, amidst such bounty, we are in danger of creating a new priest-like category: ‘the priesthood of the preacher’! In the church of today, we have let ourselves be ensnared by the lie that the Bible is so hard to understand it is only really accessible to ministers of the Word.

Belief in this lie has led to a total reliance on sermons, CDs, Bible notes, and books. Personal reading of the Bible itself may be seen as indispensable. Many think there is no point reading the Bible unless they have a suitable aid. From this it is a short next step to reading just the Bible notes or listening to the sermon, putting the actual Bible to one side.

The outcome of this is to minimise personal engagement with the Word. We are not taught *how* to think about the Word but rather, *what* to think. Many Bible Study Groups issue questions to ask about the text; members often end up discussing the question and what was in the questioner’s mind, rather than what was in the mind of the author of the text!

A symptom of how far we have strayed is our tendency, when justifying a belief, to quote preachers as the authority rather than the text itself. *Hearing the Word* aims simply to demonstrate to all believers that they can read the Bible for themselves, and to provide a model or tool that will encourage them to do so.

2 Theological Basis

Hearing the Word is founded on the following biblical Truths –

a) God created us to communicate with Himself

“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image.’” (Genesis 1:26)

We were made in His likeness for a relationship with Him. The foundation of any relationship is the ability to communicate.

b) The Bible is the Word of God

i) God has spoken in the past.

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.” (Hebrews 1:1)

This ‘Word’ was written down and constitutes the first part of the Bible – ‘The Old Testament’.

ii) God has spoken and revealed Himself in Jesus.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh.” (John 1:1,14)

“...in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son.” (Hebrews 1:2)

Jesus’ disciples recorded this ‘Word’, thus completing the Bible with ‘The New Testament’.

c) God’s Word is for everyone

i) Everyone can know God for themselves.

Jeremiah looked forward to the time when *“no longer will a man teach his neighbour saying, ‘Know the Lord’, for they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest.” (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:11)*

This does not dispense with our need of teachers *about* God and how to read His Word, but it does promise a knowledge *of* God, and an ability to hear Him speaking, that is both personal and direct.

ii) The key to hearing the Word is the Holy Spirit.

Long before Jesus came, Joel prophesied, *“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people...” (Acts 2:17 cf. Joel 2:28)* When this was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (*Acts 2:16ff*), the Spirit enabled the disciples to speak the Word of God and people of all backgrounds to understand it.

iii) The requirement is faith.

“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him..” (Hebrews 11:6)

Therefore, anyone who reads God’s Word faithfully can expect, by the enablement of His Spirit, to hear the Word of God for themselves.

d) God speaks sovereignly through the Bible

i) There is no formula by which we can make God speak to us.

“The (Spirit) blows wherever he pleases.” (John 3:8)

ii) Knowing the Bible does not mean we know God. Jesus told the Pharisees, *“You diligently search the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me and have life.”* (John 5:39)

The Pharisees knew the Scriptures yet did not recognise / hear the Word of God when He was made flesh and lived among them! (John 1:14)

iii) The Word of God comes to us through grace

“It is by grace you have been saved through faith – this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8,9)

3 Human skills

Supernatural and natural, spiritual and unspiritual; one of the most handicapping misunderstandings in the church is the perceived divide between them. This misconception manifests in many situations, where something which is common sense in daily life fails to be applied to the working of the church. Thus, people who are successful in their spheres of business, health or education do not bring insights gleaned when organising and managing people at work, to the operation and administration of the church. The assumption is that the church must be different, spiritual not natural. Although the intention to defer to the Spirit may be good, the results of the neglect of common sense are to the church’s loss.

Spiritual and non-spiritual are not necessarily mutually exclusive, of course. It is true that God’s ways are not our ways, and we submit in all

things to the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 2:10-16) However, within that *caveat*, we are meant to use all our faculties, experience, and common sense.

There is no area where this divide is more evident than in the reading of the Bible. Many tend to stand back, suspend natural inquisitiveness or methods of investigation, and wait for an expert to tell them what it means. The presumption is that the Bible is only accessible to *some* and if you are not one of the chosen then your intellect is to be used solely to store and regurgitate things that have been told you by ‘people who know’.

The opposite pole of this is the treatment of the Bible simply as a natural document that can be analysed and worked out using merely human logic. This is a half-truth; for though Scripture is written by men, it is breathed by God. (2 Timothy 3:16)

There is a tension here. To live faithfully with this we need, on the one hand, to approach it acknowledging that we are totally dependent on God to reveal Himself. That is God’s part. Unless He does, we will ‘labour in vain’. On the other hand, we should respect it and read it with the same care and attention, using the same principles and method that we would with any ordinary authoritative literature. That is the human part.

Hearing the Word is a tool aimed at ensuring that as we read our Bibles, we do whatever is humanly possible to hear the Word of God.

4 The ‘meaning’ of a text

Philosophers suggest that the meaning of a text might lie in three places:

- a) the mind of the author
- b) the mind of the reader
- c) ‘out there’ – a separate, unrelated third place.

To believe that its meaning resides in the reader themselves exalts the reader above the text and allows them to confer on it any meaning they wish. This approach allows the text to say only what conforms with the reader’s thinking.

Those who believe that God is the author and that the Scriptures are breathed by Him, hold that the meaning is centred in God Himself. However, the Scriptures were penned by men. As with the Word made

flesh, the Word written is both fully divine and fully human and must be read as such. Therefore, an integral part of the meaning of the Scriptures is the *intent* of their human authors. Though they were inspired by God, the authors wrote of their own free will, not just as an automatic printer for a divine computer. Each wrote a human document with their own intention.

This has implications: we do not approach the Bible with our minds in neutral, viewing it merely as a random collection of ‘magical’ words to be applied to our souls. This would deny its humanity. Neither do we approach it as an intellectual exercise to be subjected to the human mind and worked out. This would deny its divinity.

Instead, we come to it reading it as rigorously and carefully as we are able, searching the human document as thoroughly as we can. At the same time, we approach it with reverence, acknowledging that God may choose to speak through any part of it, in any way and by any means. This may include: a text on a notice board, a random verse, a line in a song, etc.

5 The author’s intent

The Reformers rejected the general approach to Bible reading of their day. This had viewed the Scriptures as a mystery full of hidden and mystical meanings whose texts were to be allegorised. Instead, Melanchthon declared, ‘Scripture cannot be understood *theologically* unless it is first understood *grammatically*.’

For this reason, ‘Calvin set himself to the investigation of the grammatical and literal sense [of scripture] by a careful examination of the Hebrew text and by a diligent attention to the drift and intention of the writer’s course.

‘In their expositions there were two guiding lights:

- a) The *scopus* – the overall purpose or goal of the passage.
- b) The author’s intent – the thought in the mind of the author when he wrote the text.’

(Quoted in ‘The Psalms by John Calvin’ abridged D Searle page xvii)

In equipping readers to summarise a passage and to discern the main point, ‘the Lesson’, *Hearing the Word* is designed to follow these two ‘lights.’

Methods

*Teaching Ministry; Styles of Learning: The Investigative Method; Reading the Bible:
. . . LOOK, LEARN, LISTEN (Main Point, Key Verse) LIVE*

1 The teaching ministry

There is confusion in the church over the ministry of teacher. Access to information about the conditions and culture of Bible times, and the ability to impart it, has often been mistaken for the divine gift of *Teacher* (*Ephesian 4:11*). This can also occur with the gift of *Preacher / Evangelist*.

Paul taught Timothy in the hope that he would ‘correctly handle the word of truth.’ (*2 Timothy 2:15*) It was not enough that Paul himself handled it correctly; he wanted Timothy to do so too. The divine gift of teaching is inextricably linked to discipleship. It does not do for others what they cannot do; rather by God’s grace, it enables the pupil to follow the example of the teacher by heeding his instruction. The work of a teacher, therefore, is not simply to tell others ‘what’ to do, but to show them ‘how’ to do it too.

If this is not done, the pupil becomes permanently reliant on the teacher. Inadvertently, the ‘priesthood of the preacher’ has fostered such a relationship. For spiritual nourishment, members of the church depend completely on their ministers of the Word. Like oversized starling chicks they simply sit waiting for the preacher to produce the next ‘worm’ from Scripture! It never occurs to them that they might be able to find some themselves, because the ‘parents’ don’t seem to encourage it.

2 Styles of learning

In general, people learn how to do things in various ways:

a) Imitation – *by observing an expert*

This is an important factor in learning, but mostly just in terms of inspiration. Little practical benefit is imparted in the process. If it were, there would be a marked increase in the skill levels in local sports clubs round the country after Wimbledon or the British Open!

In the same way, while great teaching may be the means of God speaking and may impart information about the Bible, just listening to it will not greatly improve personal skills in handling the Bible.

b) *Teaching – by being told what to do*

Imparting of information about good practice is essential. Again, by itself, it has limited benefit. Reading ‘how to’ books from the comfort of an armchair will not markedly improve a performance or lower a handicap! Similarly attending conferences or reading books about the Bible are of limited worth without reading the Bible itself.

c) *Instruction – by being guided by an expert*

An expert teaches – the pupil attempts – the teacher reflects on the attempt and then directs – the pupil responds. This is the classic model for personal tuition and is the essential ingredient of progress to the optimum level of an individual, in any skill.

This is at the centre of the rabbinical method of teaching and was surely deployed by Jesus with His twelve apostles. However, it is very rare within contemporary church life.

d) *Experimentation – by individual practice*

Individuals, based on all that they have learned or seen, practise and experiment. By itself this is a slow way to learn, but when combined with all of the above it is the only sure way to solid and swift progress.

Unfortunately, the third and fourth styles of learning are currently the most neglected in contemporary church life.

Conscientious teachers fear bad habits. One way to avoid them is to ensure that pupils do not practise in the teacher’s absence. While that may avoid bad habits, it will stifle initiative and the growth of the skill. The best way to encourage development is not to forbid experimentation but rather to complement it with regular instruction and careful oversight.

Pastors rightly abhor wrong biblical teaching. If, however, we discourage open thought and personal engagement with the biblical text, we stunt the spiritual growth of the flock. To foster growth, ‘children in the faith’ need to be nursed through adolescence. Even a right balance between autonomy and restraint involves risks and mistakes. However, achieving this balance is essential if the ‘children’ are to develop into responsible’ adults’.

Maturity in Christ is the goal of every Christian teacher for their pupils. *Hearing the Word* is designed as a tool for use by a church teacher who wants to equip others to handle the Bible text maturely.

3 The investigative method

Whenever we are faced with something to investigate, we instinctively approach it in the same way, be it a witness statement, a damp patch in the ceiling, a sales report, a letter, a failed recipe, etc! The method we use, consciously or subconsciously, involves the following stages:

- a) *Notice*
We look carefully at the situation and take in the facts.
- b) *Question*
We seek information about things we have noticed, by asking questions: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?
- c) *Refer to experience*
We trawl through our memory to see if there is anything we have seen in the past that will help us to make sense of this.
- d) *Answer the questions*
Drawing from observation and experience, we try to answer the questions.
- e) *Hypothesise*
We look for the main point / the reason for the situation by posing possibilities.
- f) *Test*
We try these out to see if any of them fits all the facts we have noticed.
- g) *Act*
Having made up our mind on the main point / the reason, we decide on a course of action.

Put like this, we may recognise the outline of a process that we all use. In its daily application, though, it is seldom so ordered in our minds! Different stages are often jumbled up and running concurrently.

The key to success is stage a), ‘Looking / noticing’. Most of us skim over it in our haste to do something and make progress. However, properly done, this stage takes time and discipline. Reading with a casual glance can result in unwarranted conclusions and inappropriate action. The best cooks, research scientists, plumbers, businessmen or doctors are those who are thorough in stage a), noticing carefully and questioning exhaustively before acting. The same may be said of readers of the Bible, of whatever age or experience.

4 Reading the Bible.

Hearing the Word applies the above investigative principles to Bible reading. It slows the process down and applies it systematically to the text at hand. This is ‘unnatural’, but it does ensure that we treat the text with respect and do not jump to false conclusions. In doing this, it trains and disciplines us into good habits. There is nothing new or clever about what it espouses. It is, in fact, little more than an encouragement to do what our children are taught to do in English lessons at school as ‘close reading’!

In processing any written communication, there are principles which are reflected in the stages of *Hearing the Word*:

a) **LOOK – What does it say?**

- i) The passage is read slowly and carefully, and words and phrases of interest are noted.
- ii) Questions are then formed that follow from the things noted – particularly things that surprise or confuse.
e.g. Who was he? When did it happen? Why was that word used?...
- iii) The context is examined – around the text, in the individual book and by scanning the rest of the Bible, to gain data to help answer the questions.

(The first phase is akin to sorting the pieces of a jigsaw. By the end of this first stage, all the pieces are face up, grouped into similar colours – blue sky, green grass etc. – with edges pieces separate.)

b) **LEARN – What does it mean?**

Now it is time to put it together! We start to look for the author’s meaning by:

- i) Answering the questions
The questions and the things that have confused are addressed in the light of all the information gleaned from the context.
- ii) Getting an overview
From all these answers, there is enough information to do a brief overview of the text. This is a précis that describes the content of the passage. This is very useful in finding out the text’s main point.

c) **LISTEN – What is the message?**

Having addressed the questions to get the meaning in the passage, we then look for the author’s overarching thought in the communication and his purpose for it. To do this we look for:

i) The Main Point

A sentence is the unit of written communication. Every group of well-written sentences of whatever size – paragraph, section, chapter, book, or series – has a unifying common thought. Often, that thought can be expressed as a single sentence. This is the thought in the author’s mind, his intended communication.

In trying to express the single thought in a Bible passage, we might begin our sentence: ‘Here the author of the book shows us that ...’

ii) A Key Verse.

In English classes at school, as a tool to establish the main point of communication, students are taught to look for a ‘topical sentence’ in each paragraph, chapter etc. This is the one that most accurately and fully expresses the main point in that particular passage.

This is a device, not a magic formula. There is no guarantee the author has provided a single sentence that is ‘the right one’. However, the benefit is that the process of trying to identify a suitable sentence acts as a stone on which to sharpen the cutting edge of the main point of the passage.

That sentence might become a ‘Text’, often quoted at the start of preaching. Correctly used, it is a device that allows one to examine the whole of the passage.

A Text is not a *springboard*! It is not a convenient means to let a preacher jump from the reality of the passage out into an ocean of unrelated topics which he might delight to visit on a whim!

Rather, it is more like a *trampoline*, letting preachers and listeners ‘bounce’ all over the passage, examining it and its implications from every aspect, while their feet keep landing back on the main intention in the author’s mind. That is how to use a text in expository preaching.

Spelling out the Main Point and a Key Verse is worth doing whenever we read the Bible, whatever the size of the text before us, whether a single incident, a set of chapters, a whole Gospel etc. It is not always easy, but with practice, it clarifies our grasp of Scripture.

For instance:

Examples of the Main Point and the Key Verse:

A single incident e.g. John 5:1-18

'Main Point': *In healing on the Sabbath, Jesus demonstrated that He was God the Son.*

'Key Verse': *"Not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own father, making himself equal with God." (John 5:18)*

Chapters 1-12 of John's Gospel

MP *Jesus performed a series of miraculous signs to demonstrate that He was God the Son, so that His disciples would believe in Him.*

KV *"This is the first of his miraculous signs that he performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory and his disciples put their trust in him." (John 2:11)*

John's Gospel

MP *God gives eternal life to anyone who acknowledges that Jesus is the King promised to the Jews, God the Son and who believes and trusts in Him.*

KV – *"These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31)*

The New Testament

MP *God the Son came, in God's time, as a human being, subject to the Law, to buy out people from under the Law, that they might be children of God.*

KV *"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." (Galatians 4:4,5)*

The Whole Bible

MP *Loving His creation, God redeemed His people from their sin through the gift of the death of His Son Jesus, so they might live with Him forever.*

KV *"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16 AV)*

d) **LIVE** –How should I respond?

Having got to the heart of the passage, the job is only half done. We are in the position of a sportsman who has donned all the right kit but not yet taken to the field! We need to act! The purpose of any communication is to effect a change in mind or action.

In one sense, up to now, our approach to the Bible text has been the same as we might make to any natural text. The Bible however has supernatural power. *“It is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* (Hebrews 4:12) It is the Word of God.

God’s purpose is for the Bible to be the principal means by which God speaks to us, first changing our view of Himself and secondly empowering us to change our actions. So having used all our natural faculties to help us understand the meaning of the text, we *respond* by submitting ourselves to the Spirit of God, asking Him to apply His Word to any area of our life He chooses. In doing this we need to be open to...

- i) what God has revealed about Himself in this text, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This should always lead us to praise and worship.
- ii) what God wants people to *do* and *be* in response to it, first as it applied to the original hearers, secondly as it applies to us, today.

From a human perspective, we expect the main applications to arise from the Main Point / Key Verse.

5 Conclusion

Hearing the Word is therefore a tool that identifies the natural process of human investigation and applies it to reading the Bible. Its principles help to discipline our approach to God’s Word, thus enabling us to use all our God-given faculties to the best effect. Having done that, we can only rely on His gracious response to speak to us as we seek Him.

‘The Tool’



LOOK – What does it *say*?

The Text

- a) What questions does it raise - p8
Who, What, Where, When, Why/why not, how?
- b) What surprises you?

The Context?

- a) the surrounding text p10
- b) the Book of the Bible p11
- c) the whole Bible p12
- d) the place in the Bible Story p14



LEARN – What does it *mean*?

- What type of writing is it? p17
- Answer the questions p20
- Summarise the passage p22



LISTEN – What is the *message*?

- What is the main point? p23
- Which is the key verse?



LIVE – How should we *respond*?

- What does it show *about God* (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) p25
 - a) His nature and character?
 - b) His grace*?
 - c) Jesus / His salvation on the cross**?
- What should I do? p29

* God’s undeserved generosity is evident throughout the Bible, and it is perfectly expressed in Jesus.

** The Bible from ‘the fall’ onwards shows God’s plan of salvation through His Son. Thus, *all* the Scriptures speak in some way of Jesus (Luke 24:27).

Presenting The Introduction Course

Format; Timing; Process; Practicalities; Follow On Bible Studies

While it is possible to pick up the principles by doing a Bible study with others, it is very desirable to explain and demonstrate them beforehand in a context of guided learning. '*Hearing the Word - The Introduction*' has been designed to facilitate this.

It is an 'add-water' resource: that is, a leader can deliver it themselves with no preparation beyond this Manual. In a congregational context, however, there is great benefit in asking someone from outside to lead it. This creates 'an event' and increases the attention of participants. (It is not just 'Dad' or 'Mum' speaking!)

FORMAT

After an introductory section: 'Approaching the Bible Correctly', the four principles are described and applied to a single passage, Mark 10:35-45, using a **Teach, Try, Talk** format:

Teach: The Course Leader reads out the material in this Leader's Guide, as the participants follow in their own 'Workbook'.

Try: The participants engage in an Exploration of the Bible individually for a few minutes, writing their findings in the Workbook.

Talk: They discuss their answers in small groups for a few minutes. Then with all participants together ('plenary'), the Course Leader collates feedback from the small groups and comments on it.

Everyone repeats this process for each of the Ten Explorations.

The following Leader's Guide (pages 1-32) contains the same material as the Workbook, on the same pages where possible. It provides extra comments, leader's instructions for group work (**in bold** and/or in a box), and suggests possible outcomes for the Explorations (*in Gill Sans font*).

The Introduction Course Leader's Guide and Workbook are available at <https://hearingtheword.org.uk> as slides, or formatted like a book.

The course may be used in two ways:

1. In person

The leader presents it on a central screen, reading it out word for word, pausing for participants to try the Explorations themselves. They record their thoughts on paper or a mobile device, then discuss these in small groups of 3 or 4. The leader hears the groups' thoughts and proceeds.

2. Online

The leader presents the slides to the participants by 'sharing' his or her screen. At the Explorations, individuals first record their thoughts alone. All then share these thoughts together before moving on.

TIMING

The material can be presented in around four hours. The content is varied and interesting; people will not be bored. However, it does require effort and does take energy, so take this into account when deciding which of the following programmes is suitable: (Page numbers as in Workbook)

1. In Person:

a) On a single day *It will take about 4 hours, plus breaks.*

b) Friday evening / Saturday morning

7.30 - 9.00 pm Finish with Exploration 3 on pages 11/12.

9.30 am - 12.30pm Pages 13 to 32.

c) In two sessions of 2 hours, a week apart

Pages 2 – 16 Set Exploration 5 (p17-18) as 'homework'.

Pages 17 – 32 Begin with group work on Exploration 5.

d) In three sessions of 1½ hours

Pages 2 – 11 Set Exploration 3 (p12) as homework.

Pages 11 – 21 Set Exploration 7 (p22) as homework.

Pages 22 – 32 Show Follow On studies. Arrange feedback meetings.

e) In four sessions of 1 hour.

Pages 2 – 9; set Exploration 2 as homework

Pages 10 – 16; set Exploration 5 as homework

Pages 17 – 23; set Exploration 8 as homework

Pages 24 – 32 Show Follow On studies. Arrange feedback meetings.

f) Weekend

It has been adapted for use in a church residential weekend.

2. Online:

In seven 35 minute segments, using the free version of e.g. Zoom.

<u>Meeting</u>	<u>Workbook</u>	<u>Manual</u>	<u>Start</u>	<u>Set as Homework</u>
1	pages	1 – 6	1 – 7	Introduction
2	"	7 – 9	8 – 10	LOOK
3	"	10 – 15	11 – 16	Exp ⁿ 2 answers
4	"	13, 16 – 19a	16 – 20a	Exp ⁿ 4 answers
5	"	19b – 23	20 – 24	Exp ⁿ 6 answers
6	"	24 – 27	24 – 28	Exp ⁿ 8 answers
7	"	28 – 32	28 – 32	Exp ⁿ 9 answers
				?Follow On Study 1

PROCESS

Hearing the Word is designed as an ‘add-water’ resource: a responsible Christian, even with limited Bible knowledge, can present it without difficulty in a smaller group. We strongly recommend four pointers:

1) Trust the material

Read it out word for word while participants follow in their Workbooks. Paraphrasing as you go along makes it difficult for others to follow. However, a few suitable extra comments or illustrations may be helpful.

2) Do not teach.

Teaching Bible facts is great in other settings; here, however, the main goal is not to impart Bible knowledge but to demonstrate principles that will help people to think for themselves when they read the Bible. If you adopt the position of Bible teacher, your listeners will sit back and let you do the thinking!

3) Encourage participation

Continually stress the need to learn together with one another in groups. Discourage individuals from dominating the time or regurgitating past sermons! If you give people time to think for themselves and write down answers, they will all have something to say during the sharing time. If such time is not given, it will be the most knowledgeable (or the most garrulous!) who will contribute, stifling the participation of others.

4) Make Time for Application

When presenting the course, make sure you leave at least **25 percent** of your time for the **LIVE** section. If need be, save time earlier by offering some set answers for Explorations 3 and 4. One of our most common failings is to open up the Word of God but leave no time to apply it to our lives!

PRACTICALITIES

1. In Person Course

The Leader presents the material in one room on a central screen.

In this Leader's Guide, ***Slide + a number*** means, 'Show next slide', while a red circle (°) means, 'Reveal within the same slide'. (In the pdf version, every single development gets a new slide, so 400 slides). If need be, use a second person to advance slides. It helps to practise beforehand!

This may be in the context of

a) A larger gathering

The leader can go through the **Teaching** in the booklet. Individuals **Try** it out on a Bible passage, alone at first. Then in small groups of 3 or 4, they **Talk** it over.

The leader then conducts a plenary session, hearing responses of selected groups. This has been done successfully in gatherings of over 60. Admittedly, a leader needs skill to handle larger groups.

b) House groups

The church leader can gather house group leaders and run the Introduction course with them. *They* then run it with their groups.

2) Online Course

a) Numbers?

It is best to have one person per screen. The host must be in control of anyone speaking. Avoid a second device in the same room with 'audio on'; it causes echo and feedback.

b) Materials

All need a copy of the Bible passages in Mark, a screen with internet connection, and a method of recording their responses. The presenter runs the 123-slide set, and shares his/her screen. Participants are emailed the Workbook in advance, so may view the text before or after the course as slides, on a computer, tablet, or smart phone held landscape.

c) Start

Participants read the Preface (**slides 2-5**) ??? before the course starts.

d) Time-keeping

Be disciplined. Encourage contributions to be brief. Set a limit of time and try to stick to it. With a bigger group, a regular start time, e.g. 6.00pm on Fridays, is easier for folk to organise. A smaller group may allow more frequent and less regular meetings.

The free version of Zoom (40 minutes) can restart after 9 minutes.

FOLLOW ON

After any lesson, you need to practise! This is as true of Bible reading as of golf and piano! The 4-hour introduction brings some benefit, but this will be greatly increased if what is learned is put into practice *at once*.

To facilitate this, the Manual and Workbook provide six ‘Follow On’ studies (p33). They cover Mark 10:46 – 12:17, subsequent to Mark 10:35-45, the passage studied in The Introduction. Each study provides background information and follows the layout of The Introduction. This Manual includes suggested answers to questions users might ask.

Ideally these studies should first be done individually at home.

This preparation beforehand greatly increases the benefit thereafter!

An opportunity is then given for people to come together and share, e.g.

i) A midweek gathering

A larger group breaks into small groups where people share their findings. Then a single leader conducts a plenary and offers the answers in the Leader’s Guide (e.g. p35-39).

ii) A house-group

People in a house-group may share their thinking, after which the leader might offer the answers from the Leader’s Guide.

iii) House-group then sermon

The house-groups are not given the Leader’s Guide. Instead, the Sunday preacher covers the passage all the groups have studied that week. That way, every method of learning will have been utilised!

iv) A meeting online

People may come together and share their thoughts on the passage; one of them offers the Leader’s Guide suggestions after each section.

BIBLE STUDY GUIDES

The model, once established, can be applied to any passage. There is a series of studies available covering different *genres* of Bible books, for use by individuals or groups.

(e.g. Law, Poetry, History, Wisdom, Prophecy, Letter, Vision, Parable)

Visit: <https://hearingtheword.org.uk>

Use in small groups

Once people have grasped the *Hearing the Word* method, it can be applied to any part of the Bible at any time. As such it is in the first instance a tool for an individual. However, it may also be used as a focus when people share round the Word, either with one other person or in a House Group / Bible Study.

It works both with people in the church, and with those who are not believers but would like to know more. Even the novice can join in when you start by listing all the *questions*. NB Although the Gospels are a good starting point, God may reveal Jesus through *any* part of His Word!

It is not passive. It will not lend itself to groups who anticipate a light and entertaining event. It requires work and application. The more effort put in beforehand, the greater the benefit to all concerned.

Preparation

If people do their homework and come ready to share, the long pregnant pauses that result when tired minds try to think ‘on the hoof’ are replaced by immediate replies from even the most timid!

To this end it is good to

- a) **set aside time** through the week, at least 10 minutes a day of quality time if possible.
- b) **read** the passage carefully, then work through the four steps.
- c) **write down** your answers. Turn it over in your mind all week; keep re-reading the passage.

Even if folk do no more than write down questions about the text, it will act as a ‘siphon’ to get the time of sharing going.

Sharing together

It is hoped that folk would go through the whole *Hearing the Word* process with the passage when preparing in advance in private. However, in a group there is not time to go through and apply every aspect of that process. If this is attempted it can become very turgid. Instead, it would suffice simply to ask the leading question in each of the four stages. Other information gleaned may be shared in the passing.

- 1) **LOOK** – what questions do you have, and what surprised you?
 - a) Let folk share questions they have, whether they know the answer or not.
If they have them written down in advance, even the most timid might be asked for their contribution with the knowledge that they had something to share.
 - b) Assure the group that no questions are too simple.
Show them an example in this. It gives folks liberty. Newcomers with little knowledge can contribute straight away.
 - c) Restrain the group from *answering* questions until all the questions have been *asked*. If folks start answering too soon, you *will* get side-tracked and may not think of, let alone answer, a more important question later. Once you have all the questions, the leader can choose which ones most need answering, and deal with them first.
- 2) **LEARN** – what are the answers to the questions?
 - a) Go through the list of questions, inviting brief answers from the group.
 - b) Pay particular attention to issues that confused and surprised.
 - c) At the end of the answers it might be helpful for the leader to offer a brief *summary* of the passage that draws on the answers, and invite comment and feedback from the group as a whole.
- 3) **LISTEN** – What is the main point / key verse?
 - a) Ask for the Main Point.
 - b) Invite suggestions for a Key Verse, and why they chose it.
It may be helpful to take a) and b) *together*. Often trying to choose a key verse sharpens appreciation of the main point.
- 4) **LIVE** – How should we respond?
 - a) What does it show about God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
 - b) What should I do?
It is very important that this part does not get squeezed out, as this is the point of it all!

NB important practicalities

1 Preparation

The better prepared people are, the quicker the study will flow. With a *little* preparation, and folk willing to work at it, it may take an hour. With *good* preparation, however, there could be much meaningful sharing – even in just 15 minutes!

2 Questions.

Questions are the key. They are the doorway to learning. Work at getting everyone to ask short, simple questions of the passage, whether they know the answer or not.

3 Brevity

Encourage short contributions with simple, one sentence answers. It is difficult to say something briefly; but if you can, that brief comment is far more likely to be understood and then (in the LIVE section) applied, remembered, and subsequently acted upon!

4 Domination

It is very important to learn from the Bible **together**. If one reader has more knowledge than another, it is tempting for them to dominate the answer-time by imparting that knowledge. Resist this! Try to ensure that the knowledgeable and confident don't dominate but rather that all sit and learn under the Word together.

5 Multiple Groups

It is possible to hold a 'Hearing the Word' study with many groups together (though this would need a leader who could control a crowd!) In such a case, it may be best to ask groups in the plenary of the LOOK and LEARN sections to offer just one or two responses from each group at a time.

6 'Church'

The above could be done while sharing something to eat or drink. If you also took the opportunity to pray together, you would cover all the 'bases' to which the early church 'devoted itself'. (Acts 2:42)

The preacher and the congregation

Hearing the Word may be used as a ‘two-edged sword’! It may have this effect if the congregation has the opportunity of study and discussion during the week *prior to* the sermon. It is hoped that it will then affect both the congregation and the preacher:

- *The congregation*

It encourages the ordinary person to read the Bible with the expectation that they can understand it and hear God for themselves when they do so. They do not necessarily need notes, commentaries, sermons etc. to engage with it. That is not to say, of course, that these things don’t have much profit, but God does not *require* them to communicate with His people; He may do so directly.

- *The preacher*

It encourages the preacher to stick to the Bible text, closely! Both preacher and listeners have access to the same passage. If the latter have had an opportunity to study it before they hear a sermon on it, there is less likelihood of the preacher going off on a ‘flight of fancy’ in a sermon because his listeners will simply say that this was not what the passage was saying.

Hearing the Word is profitably used in conjunction with the Pastor/teacher role. In this case people get to interact with and start forming their own opinions on a text; only *after* they have begun doing so does the Pastor / teacher bring their ministry to bear. This is what educationists call the ‘guided learning’ model and is by far the most effective mode of learning.

Bible Study Guides

Available as Workbooks, and as Leader's Guides with possible responses.

When first written, the books of the Bible were simply read or spoken aloud. The goal of the *Hearing the Word* Study Guides is to provide relevant information that puts today's readers in the position of the original readers or hearers, so allowing them to process the Word of God for themselves. As such, each provides:

- a) Some help in reading this particular type of Bible literature.
- b) Background information about this book and its author.
- c) Explanatory notes about contemporary customs and religious words whose meaning is not self-evident in the text.
- d) Some basic references to relevant passages in the rest of the Bible.
- e) A model for approaching the Bible: *Hearing the Word*.
- f) Encouragement to share your reading of God's Word with others.

Studies cover seven different *genres* of Biblical material. For the list of **Studies currently available**, visit <https://hearingtheword.org.uk>

These have been in print:

Law	Leviticus
Poetry	Psalms Vol I (Psalms 19, 22, 23, 42, 51, 122, 150) Vol II (Psalms 2, 37, 45, 83, 90, 95, 110, 115)
History	Joseph (Genesis 37 – 50), Exodus 1 – 13, Esther, Daniel 1 – 6, Matthew 1-2, Follow On (Mark 10:46 – 12:17, p35-63 below) LUKE in 13 parts, John: 'Seven Miraculous Signs'
Prophecy	Isaiah 1 – 39; Isaiah 40 – 66, Ezekiel, Amos, Jonah
Letter	2 nd Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, James
Vision	Daniel 7 – 12
Parable	'Six parables Jesus told'

Caveat!

Though *Hearing the Word* is simple, and applicable to everyone, not everyone takes to it easily.

Often the people who find it easiest to assimilate are those who are thirsty for God but who have not done much Bible study before. They may quickly assume this is just the way you look into the Scriptures!

Others may struggle with it for a variety of reasons:

1) it is different

Some, who have been Christians for a long time and used to simply being taught by others, can find the change of ethos hard to grasp.

2) it requires personal effort

Bible study groups are often looking for new off-the-shelf material and approaches. Often these are expected to deliver within the context of the group without prior effort. If *Hearing the Word* studies are used within groups **without prior thought**, discussion can seem stilted.

3) it is ‘intellectual’

Some may conform to the lie that it is too hard – they cannot do it. In fact, in its current form, anyone with motivation and a reading age of 12+ should be able to master it.

4) it is disciplined

Some are cautious that this approach may ‘quench the Spirit.’

Any approach may be sterile if we ignore God. *Hearing the Word* seeks to do all we humans can do, while waiting on Him. A good practice is to give the final LIVE section – when we ask God to apply the Word to our lives – at least a quarter of the time spent in discussion.

How do we make people thirsty for the Word? The old proverb goes, ‘You can take a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink’. That may be true. What you can do, though, is to put some salt in its oats! For some, *Hearing the Word* may be the needed ‘pinch of salt’.

Sharing the Word

Use

Hearing the Word encourages us to think about the Word of God for ourselves. It can be used *alone*, with *one* other person, or *in a group*.

Preparing for a group

Time put in alone beforehand will greatly benefit time spent together.
Work through the stages – LOOK, LEARN, LISTEN, LIVE. *
Write down your own questions and answers.

A format

- LOOK – Share your questions on the passage, even if you know the answers.
- LEARN – Share your thoughts on the answers to the questions.
- LISTEN – Share your views on a Main Point and a Key Verse.
- LIVE – Share what you think the passage tells us about :
 - a) God / Jesus
 - b) What should we do?

Very important:

Be sure to leave adequate time for the LIVE section.

Operation

As you gather round God's Word together:

- a. Listen to the views of others.
- b. Welcome new people. (Everyone can join in when you start by listing questions.)
- c. Encourage everyone to think for themselves. Don't let the knowledgeable dominate.
- d. Include everyone in your sharing together.

* The process is explained and practised in a four-hour course, suitable for all, called *An Introduction to Hearing the Word*.

<https://hearingtheword.org.uk>

