

# When Is Bible Study Not Bible Study?

BY ANTOINETTE CLARK WIRE

A distinguishing mark of organized women's program in our church from its inception has been a strong emphasis on the study of scripture. Therefore, the question is not "will we study the Bible?" but "how will we study the Bible?" Because the term Bible study is often rather loosely applied, we pose the question "when is Bible study not Bible study?" and suggest some answers that may help to sharpen our approach to this all-too-important element of [Presbyterian Women programming].



**Bible quilt made by African American artist Harriet Powers; Athens, Georgia, about 1886. From the exhibit, "Quilts, Counterpanes & Throws," National Museum of American History**

when we study *about* the Bible rather than studying the Bible itself.

There is no substitute for dealing directly with the biblical text. Using several translations of the Bible often helps to shed light on particular passages. Bible paraphrases, such as *Psalms Now* by Leslie Brandt or *The Living Bible* by Ken Taylor, may also be helpful, but these books represent one person's interpretation of the text. They should not be given the same weight as authorized translations that represent years of work by teams of distinguished Bible scholars.

when we use Bible verses or

passages selectively to support predetermined conclusions or favorite theological positions.

This "proof text" method of studying the Bible is precarious because it takes verses/passages out of context and can easily result in distorting their meaning. Responsible Bible study always takes into account both the historical and the literary context of any portion of scripture.

when we deal only with what happened in Bible times.

We need to study the Bible not only to understand how God acted in ages past but to hear God's living word for our day. This may make us uncomfortable at times but if Bible study never does that for us, it may mean that we have allowed it to become an exercise in irrelevance or sentimentality. The Bible is not a sentimental book. It confronts us with the judgment as well as with the amazing love and grace of God.

Nothing is more conducive to spiritual health and growth than the discipline of responsible Bible study. 🍓

Antoinette Clark Wire wrote the 1984–1985 United Presbyterian Women's Bible study, *The Parable Is a Mirror*, published by United Presbyterian Women in the United Presbyterian Church USA.

This article was originally published in the April 1983 issue of *Concern*, the magazine for United Presbyterian Women.

## Bible study is not really Bible study

when the Bible is used "devotionally."

Don't misunderstand! The Bible holds a central place in corporate worship, and devotional reading of the Bible is indispensable for personal spiritual growth. However, this is not Bible study. Both uses of scripture are necessary but they are different.

when we set aside too short a time for genuine delving into the portion of scripture to be studied.

It takes time to "wrestle" with scripture and to hear God speaking through it. To devote too little time to this is to delude ourselves that we are really studying the Bible. It is also to rob ourselves of the feeling of community that comes with a deep searching of scripture together.

when one person "presents the lesson" and everyone else listens passively.

The person who engages in real Bible study, in this case, is the one who prepares and presents the lesson. Participatory Bible study is not only more effective; it is much more interesting.