

How to Do a Doctrinal Bible Study

Purposes and Principles

Doctrinal Bible study is an effort to learn what the Bible teaches or assumes about the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith—topics like God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, humanity, salvation, and the church. To learn from doctrinal Bible study, you must fit together what the Bible teaches about the various doctrines because the Bible’s treatment of the topics is not organized systematically. Its teachings about God, Christ, and other doctrines don’t appear in a logical order. Doctrinal Bible study allows you to bring together through careful reading what the Bible says in its statements about various aspects of God’s truth. Without doctrinal Bible study, the doctrines of the Bible may appear disconnected. A study of the doctrines in the Bible gives you an organized understanding of biblical beliefs and makes it easier for you to teach your beliefs to others.

At least three types of doctrinal study can be done:

1. Studying the doctrinal assumptions made by a biblical writer
2. Discovering one book’s teaching about a doctrine
3. Examining a doctrinal passage

Studying Doctrinal Assumptions

Doctrinal assumptions are teachings and beliefs about God that are not formally stated but are assumed by the Bible writers. For example, the writers assumed the existence of God. They did not argue for it, seek to prove it, or labor about the issue. They assumed it as fact. You can discover other assumptions when you read books in the Bible. Let’s look at several examples.

What assumption did Paul make in I Thessalonians 1:4?

Paul said he knew God’s choice of the Thessalonians. Paul therefore assumed his readers were God’s elect, God’s children.

What assumption is made in I Thessalonians 5:2?

Paul mentioned that it is common knowledge that “the Day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.” He assumed Jesus’ return would be unexpected and without announcement.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-23 Paul assumed Jesus' resurrection is evidence that Christians have life after death. Paul plainly stated this in verses 20-23. It is a logical conclusion from his words.

Sometimes a Bible writer spoke to his readers with the words *we know*. Paul did this in 2 Corinthians 5:1, and his use of *we know* shows a belief or an assumption he makes. You can learn some of a writer's assumptions by looking for statements like this. In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul made a number of assumptions you can discover by carefully reading the book.

Read Philippians 1-2 and list three doctrinal assumptions Paul made.

1.

2.

3.

Here are assumptions we noticed. You may have identified different ones. Paul accepted the certainty of Christ's second coming (see 1:6,10). Paul knew that God hears our prayers (see 1:3-4). Paul had confidence that God would complete His work of salvation in believers (see 1:6; 2:12-13). Paul assumed the existence and work of the Trinity (see 1:19; 2:6,11). Paul was certain of Christ's identity as the preexistent Son of God who came to earth, died on a cross, and was exalted as Lord of the universe (see 2:6-11).

Discovering One Book's Teaching About a Doctrine

This second method of doctrinal study involves collecting information on subjects or topics that are prominent in a given book or text. The Book of Ephesians deals in detail with the doctrine of the church. The Book of Hebrews teaches the humanity of Christ.

We will follow these steps to learn the doctrinal teaching of a single book of Scripture.

1. *Discover the doctrine being treated.* This is accomplished by carefully reading the book several times. Each reading will help you understand a teaching or an emphasis the book makes about God, Christ, salvation, the church, the Holy Spirit, or other doctrines. If you want to trace a subject of doctrine through a certain book, be sure to use a book that thoroughly treats the subject. You would not want to use the Book of James to study the Holy Spirit because that is not a major emphasis in James. However, James makes several references

to the second coming of Christ and to events that will happen when Jesus returns (see Jas. 1:12; 4:12; 5:7,9). You can learn where to find full discussions of doctrinal topics by reading about those topics in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia. There you will learn which books treat the subjects in some detail.

2. *Identify passages that treat the doctrine.* Sometimes you can locate in a concordance the word in which you are interested as it is found in that book of the Bible. Sometimes you cannot find the word; in that case, you must carefully read through a book to learn what it teaches about the doctrine.
3. *Study each passage and record your observations.* You may need to look for information in a commentary or another Bible-study resource to analyze the passage. However, do not do this until you have recorded insights from your personal study.

Let's practice a doctrinal Bible study by exploring one book's teaching about a doctrine. Because doing this kind of study can require a great deal of time, we will help you take a few shortcuts.

Use the worksheet "Doctrinal Bible Study" on the following page to practice the first three steps you have studied so far. Your assignment is to discover what the Book of Hebrews says about the humanity of Christ. Normally, you would read the Book of Hebrews several times, identifying the passages that deal with Christ's humanity and comprehending the context of each passage. We will speed the process by telling you that the relevant passages are 2:17-18; 4:14-16; 5:1-10; and 7:23-26. List the relevant passages on the worksheet. Study each passage and record your observations. Complete these steps before continuing.

4. *Write an outline of the doctrinal passages.* Group scriptural teachings under appropriate subtopics, as you learned to do with topical Bible study.
5. *Summarize your outline.* Your summary should condense your study into a few words.
6. *Record applications to your life.* Apply your doctrinal study to four areas: your relationship with God, your life, your relationships with others, and the church.

Complete the remaining steps on the worksheet "Doctrinal Bible Study" before you continue.

Doctrinal Bible Study

Doctrine:

Bible references and observations:

Outline

Summary

Ways to apply the study—

- to your relationship with God:

- to your life:

- to your relationships with others:

- to the church:

The insights you gained from your doctrinal study should have equipped you to complete the following statements. Although some may seem to be similar, each clarifies a different aspect of Christ's humanity.

Hebrews 4:15: Christ can sympathize with the weakness of human beings because ...

Hebrews 2:17: Christ's participation in the human condition allows Him to ...

Hebrews 2:18; 4:15-16: Because of Christ's demonstration of obedience, He is able to ...

Hebrews 2:18; 4:15-16: Because Christ did not sin in the midst of His temptation, He is able to offer believers ...

Hebrews 5:8: Christ learned the meaning of obedience by ...

Hebrews 7:25: Because Christ lives to intercede for us ...

Compare your outline with the one that follows. Perhaps you can improve this outline by adding ideas from your outline. And perhaps you can use some ideas from this outline to improve yours.

The Helpfulness of Christ's Humanity

- I. His sufferings taught Him the full meaning of obedience (see 5:8-10).
 - A. They secured for Him a maturity in His obedience.
 - B. They gave Him every qualification for His priesthood.
 - C. They obtained a glory from the Father in His exaltation.
- II. His experiences provide encouragement for believers (see 2:17-18; 4:15-16).
 - A. They show an example of victory.
 - B. They allow mercy and grace for the tempted.
- III. His atonement prevents separation from God for believers (see 2:17).
- IV. His intercession secures complete salvation for believers (see 7:25).

Your observations and outline don't have to be identical to ours. The important thing is that they focus on the central ideas you have learned from your study and that they form a strong foundation for application.

Examining a Doctrinal Passage

This third type of doctrine study gives detailed treatment to sections of a book that are largely doctrinal in their content. You will use this study to examine a Bible passage that treats a specific doctrine or teaches an important emphasis. For example, James 2:14-26 addresses the relationship between faith and works. Romans 3:21-31 teaches justification by faith. You can turn to Hebrews 11 to understand the true nature of faith in God. The topic of Christ's resurrection is fully treated in 1 Corinthians 15.

You will use these principles to examine a doctrinal passage.

1. Write a paraphrase.
2. Use observations and questions.
3. Summarize the content.
4. Make a comparison.
5. Apply the passage.

Let's use this type of study to understand the doctrine James is teaching in James 2:14-26.

**Read James 2:14-26. Follow the principles above to analyze this passage.
Record your work on the chart "Doctrinal Study of James 2:14-26."
Complete your study before reading further.**

Doctrinal Study of James 2:14-26

Paraphrase	Observations and Questions	Summary	Comparison	Application

Now let's process your work. You could paraphrase the verses only after careful reading and meditation. Check your paraphrase against a contemporary translation to make sure you did not depart from the writer's meaning.

We included these observations and questions.

- The New American Standard Bible translates James 2:14 as "Can that faith save him?" How does this differ from merely saying, "Can faith save him?"
- What is the meaning of the word *justified* in James 2:21,24?
- What kind of problem was James addressing?
- Study the Old Testament passages in which Abraham is mentioned (see Gen. 15:6; 22:1-19). Notice that the incident of Genesis 15:6 mentioned in James 2:23 occurred before the incident of Genesis 22:1-19 mentioned in James 2:21. According to James, what did the incident in Genesis 22:1-19 prove about the incident in Genesis 15:6?
- In what sense was Rahab justified by her deeds? Find information about her in Joshua 2.

You also should have summarized in a sentence or two what you learned about James 2:14-26, what you believe the biblical writer meant, and how the passage can be used.

Compare the relationship of this teaching to such passages as Romans 3:21-31; Galatians 2:17-21; and Ephesians 2:8-10. Notice the close similarity in wording between the Romans passage and the passage here. Paul said we are "justified by faith" (Rom. 3:28) while James said we are "justified by works" (Jas. 2:24).

Is there a difference in the meaning of the word *justify* as used by Paul and James? Explain what you discovered in your study.

You probably needed to consult a commentary or a Bible dictionary for this one. Although Paul's and James's teachings seem to contradict each other, this is not the case. It is a matter of emphasis. Paul emphasized that justification comes by faith, as opposed to human works, which cannot earn God's acceptance. James explained that true faith is not limited to merely a confessing faith, like that of demons, but must extend to a committed faith that expresses itself in good works. In other passages Paul also taught that faith results in a transformed life characterized by good works (see Rom. 12; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10).

The application of the James passage no doubt demanded careful thought. Notice that James 2:14-20 shows the nature of a dead faith. This kind of faith can't meet human needs and can't show an inquirer that it is genuine. In James 2:21-26 we see that genuine faith results in an obedient life. This kind of faith led Abraham to show his obedience to God by offering Isaac and also led Rahab to offer protection to the Jewish spies. You should have recorded modern applications of these words to your life.

Doctrinal Bible study can help you focus on specific topics in the Bible. Your Bible study can be expanded and enriched as you apply this tool.

Adapted from Thomas D. Lea, *God's Transforming Word: How to Study Your Bible* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1986), 193-205. Out of print.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Holman CSB®, and HCSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.lockman.org).