

# How to Do a Topical Bible Study

Topical Bible study is the study of the topical teachings in the Bible. You may limit the topic to a single book, such as a study of the teaching in the Book of James about the use of the tongue. You may also trace the topic throughout Scripture, such as a study of the miracles in the Bible. The topic can be narrow, such as prophecies about Jesus' birth, or it can be broad and lengthy, such as prophecies in the Bible. A topical study can include topics that are important for churches, such as the roles of and requirements for church leaders. Husbands and wives can study the biblical topics of parenting and husband-wife relationships. Business people can study what the Bible says about handling money. Teachers can study Jesus' principles of teaching.

Topical Bible study can involve the study of a doctrine, such as the nature of God or the work of the Holy Spirit. It can also involve a practical matter like the ministries of a local church. The purpose of topical study is not just to satisfy curiosity. The focus must be on ways you can apply the topic to your life.

Topical Bible study is important because it provides a logical and orderly method of studying the Bible. The Bible's instructions and guidelines appear throughout Scriptures. You can use the topical method of study to bring together in an orderly manner all the Bible teaches about the use of time, money, or another suitable subject. Also, the use of topical Bible study can provide a balanced understanding of biblical teaching. For example, Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." In contrast, Galatians 6:5 warns, "Each person will have to carry his own load." A study of a topic like encouraging other Christians can help you discover which burdens you should bear and which burdens require help.

Topical Bible study also provides variety in individual study of the Scriptures. There is no limit to the variety of topics available for individual study. It is a type of study that fits well with the study of a book of the Bible. After you have studied a book like 1 Peter, you can study it again to examine such topics as God's directions for meeting suffering, the Christian and government, church leaders' duties, and Christ's example. This study will enrich what you have already learned from your investigation of the message in the entire book. In this way, topical Bible study helps you apply the Bible to daily living.

Some reference Bibles have already done much of the work necessary for topical study. Some contain many varieties of topical studies listed in the back of the Bible. These references contain verses of Scripture in which you can continue to investigate the topic. You will need only to look up the references. Other study Bibles include an encyclopedia that is helpful.

The method of topical study you will learn teaches you to use a concordance or a topical Bible to do your own study. The encouragement and excitement you will receive as you do your personal investigation can become an incentive to continue your Bible study.

**Read the Book of James and identify topics you might want to study.  
Below record the chapter and verses that deal with that topic.**

Topic	Reference
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Here is the process to follow in a topical Bible study.

1. *Select a topic for study.* The topic you select should be one in which you have a spiritual interest or need information.
2. *List related words.* This list should include synonyms, phrases, or ideas that have something in common with your topic. If you are studying the tongue, you might list such related terms as *words, speaking, boasting, cursing, blessing, utterance, instruction, reproof, or words of knowledge.*
3. *Find Bible references to your topic.* As you use a concordance and a topical Bible to find references, be careful to collect only verses that relate to your topic. Some New Testament references to the tongue refer to a spoken language rather than offering moral instruction about the tongue. Words like *blessing* and *boasting* show different ways of using the tongue. In looking at these words, however, be selective in choosing among the verses that describe the types of tongue usage. If your interest is the spiritual use of the tongue, add only verses that help you understand this topic.
4. *Write an observation or a question about each reference.* Be certain that your comments accurately reflect the context of the verses. Your comments might be a summary of the verse, the meanings of important words, insights about why the verse was written, and ways it applies to your life. Include questions about issues you don't understand.
5. *Write an outline.* Group Scripture references under appropriate subtopics. For example, in studying the tongue, you may find that some verses fall under categories like good uses of the tongue, bad uses of the tongue, controlling the tongue, or God's judgment of the tongue. As you review the verses you have gathered, a logical division will become clear to you. Include several subtopics under main topics. Each subtopic should contain a list of the references to the verses that support that subtopic. You will have an outline you can use in teaching or in sharing your ideas with others.

6. *Summarize your outline.* The outline provides an overview of what you have studied. A summary helps you condense what you have learned into a few words.
7. *Write applications.* List ways you can apply your topical study to your relationship with God, to your life, to your relationships with others, and to the church.

As you study certain topics in the Bible, you may want to limit your research by restricting your study to one book. A study of the tongue can be a broad study. Both the Books of Proverbs and James have extensive teachings on the use of the tongue. Helpful insights about the use and abuse of the tongue can be found from a study of either book.

## **Practicing a Topical Bible Study**

Now you will practice a topical Bible study. Then we will compare notes.

**Do a topical study of confrontation in the experiences of Jesus, Paul, and Peter. Gather Bible-study resources available to you and complete your study before reading further. Record your responses on the worksheet “Topical Bible Study” on the following page.**

Now let’s debrief your work. The following process corresponds to the steps in topical Bible study that we have considered.

1. *Select a topic for study.* Several years ago I listened with interest to a speaker who said that confrontation is an important ministry for any Christian. He defined *confrontation* as a word of encouragement or warning given by one Christian to another in need. His message sparked my interest.
2. *List related words.* I began my study by listing phrases, ideas, or synonyms that relate to the idea of confrontation. Among those were *exhort* (*exhortation*), *encourage*, *support*, and *rebuke*.

**What other words or phrases did you list?**

3. *Find Bible references to your topic.* Looking up the key words in a concordance, I found these Bible references on the subject of confrontation: Acts 20:2; 1 Timothy 5:1,20; and 1 Thesalonians 5:14. I also selectively read through portions of the Bible in which spiritual leaders were confronting their followers and urging them to action. I quickly realized that so much material was available that it would be better to limit it to the New Testament. Knowing that so much material in the Bible is related to confrontation is the reason I began by limiting your assignment to confrontation in the experiences of Jesus, Paul, and Peter. For this limited area alone I found passages dealing with confrontation from the life of Jesus, the ministry of Paul, and the leadership of Peter. Some of those are Matthew 4:19; 13:45-58; 18:15-17; Mark 2:1-12; 8:33; 11:15-18; 14:35-36; Luke 16:14-15; Acts 1:15-26; 2:14-40; 5:1-11; 7:51-52; 9:4-6,15-16; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:3-5,13; Galatians 1:6-10; and Titus 3:10-11. Some of these passages depict persons confronting other persons. Others show God and persons talking about needs and problems.

# Topical Bible Study

Topic:

Related words:

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:

How does this group of references compare with the ones you listed on your worksheet? Circle the ones I listed that you did not list. You may want to add these to your list.

4. Write an observation or a question about each reference. Next I asked the following questions about the references I listed.
- Who is doing the confronting?
  - Who is being confronted?
  - Why is the confrontation necessary?
  - What method of confrontation is used?
  - What are the results of the confrontation?

As I used these questions in my study, I was able to get a better understanding of a number of facts. For example, in Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus gave instructions for confronting a brother who has sinned or strayed. The method used is direct personal encounter. In Galatians 1:6-10 Paul confronts an entire church. This confrontation was necessary because church members were being misled by false teaching. Use these examples to evaluate the kinds of observations you made as you studied.

5. Write an outline. Here is how I began my outline.

- I. Jesus and the ministry of confrontation
- A. Jesus confronted hypocrisy (see Luke 16:14-15).
  - B. Jesus challenged others to action (see Matt. 4:19).
  - C. Jesus challenged others to gain greater understanding (see Mark 8:33).

**Complete the outline for Paul and Peter.**

**II. Paul**

### III. Peter

6. *Summarize your outline.* The last two steps are more personal than the preceding steps because they reflect needs. Maybe your summary statement was something like this: The church must practice the ministry of confrontation to prevent believers from slipping into sin (see Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:3-5,13).
7. *Write applications.* Your summary should have provided material you used to apply your topical study to your life.

I hope you found topical Bible study to be a practical and engaging way to assemble Bible teachings on a subject that interests you. When you give focused attention to the Bible's teachings on a subject, it is easier to understand God's direction for this area of your life and to apply it as He has instructed.

Adapted from Thomas D. Lea, *God's Transforming Word: How to Study Your Bible* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1986), 186-93. Out of print.

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