

Developing a Constructively Critical Christian Mind

Robert M. Bowman Jr.
President, Institute for Religious Research

Read and study the Bible intentionally.

- Read through the Bible, or the OT, or the NT, in a year.
- Set aside large blocks of time to read a whole book of the Bible in one sitting.
- Memorize key passages such as the 10 Commandments, the Beatitudes, 1 Corinthians 13.
- Devote periods of time (e.g., three months) to careful study of key passages, such as Genesis 1, Isaiah 53, the Sermon on the Mount, Acts 2, Romans 8, Revelation 21-22.
- Consider making one book of the Bible “the book of the year”—reading other parts of the Bible as needed to illuminate that one book.
- Consciously work to fill in the “gaps” in your Bible knowledge.
- Develop a working knowledge of the general contents of each book of the Bible.
- The ESV (English Standard Version) is widely considered one of the very best English versions of the Bible, and the *ESV Study Bible* one of the very best study Bibles available (see also ESV.org, which can be used for free).
- Consider getting a Bible study app or program that can be used on a computer or mobile device. The best for non-scholars (and excellent for scholars) is Logos Bible Software. You can get a basic package for a reasonable price and add a free book each month.

Become self-educating.

- Learning never ends; be insatiably curious.
- Seek a mentor and learn all you can from him or her, especially *how* to think.
- Soak up what you can from various teachers but don’t limit yourself to one.
- The best teachers will be glad for you to challenge them, to ask them tough questions, to think for yourself (Acts 17:11).

Broaden and deepen your knowledge.

- Don’t assume you understand the issues until you’ve heard differing sides and can explain them well, even to the satisfaction of those with whom you disagree (Prov. 18:17).
- Challenge yourself to tackle tough questions.
- Pursue integration of what you are learning in a biblical worldview.
- Engage people of differing viewpoints, not so much to convince them as to make sure you understand the issues—which will be evident when you are glad to be shown where your understanding is deficient or your arguments are weak.
- Work on becoming discerning as to the most informative and illuminating online sites.

Study method, not just facts.

- Logic and critical thinking skills
- Scientific method and the philosophy of science
- Historiography (methods of knowing and understanding the past)
- Theological method
- Apologetic method (methods of defending the faith)
- Hermeneutics (principles and methods of interpretation)

Expose yourself to the classics, spending time getting to know select key authors. Examples:

- Influential pre-Christian authors: Homer, Plato, Aristotle
- Classic literature: Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolkien, C. S. Lewis
- Classic Christian authors: Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, Lewis (again!)
- Influential unbelievers: Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, Sartre
- Classic films: *Gone with the Wind*, Capra or Hitchcock films, Bogart films, *Ben-Hur*, MGM musicals, etc.

Develop your mind in ways other than rational analysis or acquisition of facts.

- Creativity: spend time in the arts: listen to good music (perhaps even composing!), read and write fiction, watch films and think about how they engage life issues (see above).
- Play chess or other games that engage the mind.

Read some good Christian books. A few suggestions:

- Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart's book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (4th edition) is a popular introduction to biblical interpretation (see also BiblicalTraining.org).
- *Conformed to His Image: Biblical, Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, by my friend Kenneth Boa, is an introduction to spiritual growth that is both emotionally sensitive and intellectually sound.
- J. Warner Wallace's *Cold Case Christianity* is one of many excellent books on the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection (see also ColdCaseChristianity.com).
- Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* (now in a second edition) is a very long (1,616 pages) but very readable textbook on Christian doctrine. There are also shorter versions available: *Bible Doctrine* (672 pages) and *Christian Beliefs* (208 pages).
- *The Comprehensive Guide to Science and Faith*, edited by William A. Dembski, is one of the best surveys of issues of the evidence for creation (and other science-related issues).
- Rebecca McLaughlin's *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* sensitively and sensibly answers questions about the Bible, Christian values, controversial issues about sexuality and gender, the problem of evil, and more.