

This excerpt includes both the participant book and the program guide

THE YEAR OF THE BIBLE

A Guide to Reading Scripture

Newly Revised

James E. Davison

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Preface to the Revised Edition

*T*his book was originally written to enable members of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to read through the entire Bible together as an entire congregation. Because *The Year of the Bible* was so successful, other congregations asked to use it too. Since its publication, many members of churches in a number of denominations have told me how much reading the Bible has helped them to grow in their faith. They have also expressed appreciation for how greatly it has enriched the life of their own congregation. Many have said specifically that they felt a special blessing now and then when they recalled that they were reading the very same passages at the same time as other folks. I hope, and expect, that this will be true for you and your congregation as well.

However, I want to add a special word to those of you who will be reading through the Bible on your own: you should know that the design makes it easy to follow the reading plan individually. Many people have already done this, and they have spoken about how valuable getting more deeply into the Bible has been for their understanding and faith.

Whether you read with others in a congregation that uses the accompanying *Year of the Bible, Program Guide* or read on your own, you can expect the readings to take, on average, about twenty minutes per day. Of course, the time you spend can increase when you reflect further on the readings or delve into some story, topic, or verse by searching online or reading a Bible commentary. Notice that

the usual pattern is to read three chapters from the Bible each day. Two of the chapters come from the Old Testament, while the third chapter comes either from the New Testament or from the Psalms. This pattern allows you to read the 150 Psalms over the course of the year, rather than for fifty days in a row!

The monthly articles in this book provide an overview of the material you are reading. They will give you some guidance regarding not only the major things to look for, but also some pitfalls to avoid. It is best to refer to each month's article occasionally as you do your readings. The articles will help you keep on track while offering a tidbit or two, now and then, that will make your reading more enjoyable.

One final note before we begin: You can expect to experience a wide range of emotions as you read from Genesis to Revelation. At various times, you will be excited by an unexpected insight, saddened by a tragic story, or surprised by an unusual cultural practice. Occasionally, you will probably ask yourself, "Is *that* in the Bible?" Or perhaps, "What on earth is *that* all about?" Now and then, however, you are also likely to think, "That's what I needed to hear!" Whatever thoughts, insights, and surprises you experience along the way, I hope that at the end of the year you will also say to yourself, "Now I have a deeper understanding of "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:7).

James E. Davison

To the Reader

You are about to start an adventure! Over the next months, as you read the Bible, you will visit a series of foreign cultures, spread across many centuries, with customs and expectations that will seem very different from your own. Some things will sound familiar—for example, “Love your neighbor as yourself”—but many others will seem quite unusual and foreign, such as the ritual and food laws of the early Old Testament. Regardless, as you let yourself settle into this “strange new world,” you will find insights and riches in abundance for living in the world you inhabit today.

To assist you as you enter into this “strange new world,” I have inserted a new section titled “In the Spotlight” for each month into this edition of *The Year of the Bible*. Some of these articles will highlight customs and cultural practices, while others will offer guidance as you seek to understand and interpret the biblical literature. These articles should make your reading easier, and they may help you grasp the meaning and value of the texts more fully.

Over the years since I first developed *The Year of the Bible*, I have been asked a number of questions by those who were starting out on this adventure. As you begin, let me mention a few of those questions and offer some brief responses. I hope these comments will help ease your way into the readings.

What Version Should I Read?

One of the first questions many people ask about participating in *The Year of the Bible* is what version of the Bible they should read. The first part of the answer: no one version is best for all people! Some translations are literal, trying to provide word-for-word translations as much as possible. In contrast, other translations paraphrase the biblical text loosely, with the intent of bringing the meaning out in contemporary language. Still other translations attempt to find a middle ground.

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is a good example of a more literal translation, while *The Message*, produced by Pastor Eugene Peterson, is a good example of a paraphrase. The *New International Version* (NIV) is an example of a version that falls between these two. As you probably know, many other translations are in each of these categories.

Each style of translation has its value. Generally, literal versions are better suited for study, while paraphrases lend themselves to effective devotional reading. The best version for you to use is probably the one that you find most comfortable, such as a Bible that you have had for years. However, it might be the one that you purchase after comparing a few in a local bookstore. Some people who decide to participate in *The Year of the Bible* want to start fresh by reading a new Bible.

If you wish to begin with a new Bible, I encourage you not only to compare versions, but also to consider buying your chosen version in a study Bible format. Study Bibles contain a wealth of information about the background of the passages you are reading and explain terms that may be unfamiliar to you. A study Bible can add to your insight as you make your way through the Old and New Testaments.

How Should I Read?

The primary point of *The Year of the Bible* is simply to get into the Bible—to see the entire panorama of the biblical world and to gain a sense of the whole of God’s revelation to us. The one-year period

provides a good way to help you accomplish this. For many people, it requires a challenge like this—reading all sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments in one year—to keep at it.

The downside to this time frame, as you can imagine, is that most people will not have much time to read in depth. It will take approximately twenty minutes to read the daily assignment. To read deeply and to reflect on the meaning of the passages will take considerably longer. If you can take the time only to read the material and to think about it a little, that will be sufficient for this year.

However, if you are able to set aside more time, either daily or occasionally, then I recommend that you take some time to reflect on questions like these:

- What are the primary themes in these passages?
- What do I find here that is new, different, strange, or fascinating?
- What insights do I gain here that I can apply to my own life and faith?

You might jot down your thoughts on these, or similar, questions in a notebook. Many people will attest to the value of keeping a journal of their thoughts, questions, and insights as they read the Bible. Over time, you will discover that your journaling helps strengthen your spiritual life and gives you a deeper sense of God’s presence in your life.

What If I Get Behind?

You can probably count on getting behind now and then! You are embarking on a yearlong project with readings for each day of the year. Even with the best of intentions and plans, you are likely to find that “life intervenes.” Emergencies, deadlines at work, unexpected visits from relatives, and many other unplanned-for events will likely dot your calendar. At such times, you may have to set your reading aside.

Of course, when you get behind it is best to catch up as soon as possible. If you find that you are two weeks behind—or more!—then

I recommend that you pick up your reading with the selections scheduled for the current day. As time permits, begin reading the materials you have skipped. It will not be long before you have caught up.

Now it's time to start reading! The articles in this book are designed to provide an overview of the readings for each month. They will give you some guidance regarding the major things to look for and some pitfalls to avoid. Refer to each month's article occasionally as you do your readings. You will find that the articles help keep you on track while offering a suggestion now and then that will make your reading more enjoyable.

Finally, let me simply say "thank you." I am grateful for your interest in reading the Bible in this program. I pray that, by the power of God's Spirit, *The Year of the Bible* will have a strong impact on you, and your congregation too. Throughout the year, may the familiar words of the psalmist prove themselves true for you: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (119:105).

JANUARY

Here it is! *The Year of the Bible*. For many, this will be the first time you read through the entire Bible. For others, this will not be new at all. Either way, you will find that reading through the entire Bible this year will give you a broader perspective on the whole of the Scriptures. We start January by reading at the beginning of both Testaments. Some of the material may be familiar, but other things may seem quite new, even strange at times.

In the Old Testament, we will read mostly from the book of Genesis. As the first words, “In the beginning,” suggest, Genesis gives us the basic setting for the people of Israel. In the story, the “patriarchs”—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s sons—along with their wives, the “matriarchs,” stand at center stage. However, Abraham does not actually appear until the twelfth chapter of Genesis. The first eleven chapters are dedicated to the prehistory of Israel. The purpose of these stories is to place Israel within the context of world history as a whole.

As you read the first eleven chapters of Genesis, try not to be

Day	Scripture Reading
1	Genesis 1, 2/Matthew 1
2	Genesis 3, 4/Matthew 2
3	Genesis 5, 6/Matthew 3
4	Genesis 7, 8/Psalms 1, 2
5	Genesis 9–11/Matthew 4
6	Genesis 12, 13/Matthew 5
7	Genesis 14, 15/Psalms 3, 4
8	Genesis 16, 17/Matthew 6
9	Genesis 18, 19/Matthew 7
10	Genesis 20, 21/Matthew 8
11	Genesis 22, 23/Psalms 5, 6
12	Genesis 24, 25/Matthew 9
13	Genesis 26, 27/Matthew 10
14	Genesis 28, 29/Psalms 7, 8
15	Genesis 30, 31/Matthew 11
16	Genesis 32, 33/Matthew 12
17	Genesis 34–36/Matthew 13
18	Genesis 37, 38/Psalm 9
19	Genesis 39, 40/Matthew 14
20	Genesis 41, 42/Matthew 15
21	Genesis 43, 44/Psalm 10
22	Genesis 45, 46/Matthew 16
23	Genesis 47, 48/Matthew 17
24	Genesis 49, 50/Matthew 18
25	Exodus 1, 2/Psalms 11, 12
26	Exodus 3, 4/Matthew 19
27	Exodus 5, 6/Matthew 20
28	Exodus 7, 8/Psalms 13, 14
29	Exodus 9, 10/Matthew 21
30	Exodus 11, 12/Matthew 22
31	Exodus 13, 14/Matthew 23

caught up in discussions of how these events relate to modern science. It is more useful to ask yourself what these stories would have meant to the children of Israel as they heard them told many times. Notice that, even though God creates light immediately, the sun, the moon, and the stars are not created until much later. For our scientific understanding, that sounds strange; however, it is a good way of pointing out that the gods worshiped by neighboring peoples are not gods at all. The nations surrounding Israel believed in many gods. For them, the sun, the moon, and the stars were divine. The implications for the religious beliefs of other nations are clear. There is only one God. This God is above all things, and God has created all things.

Likewise, the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and 3 shows us what human nature is like. It tries to explain in a simple manner that God has not brought evil into the world. Humans are responsible for perpetuating evil. This and the later stories in this section attempt to show, in a way that is clear to all generations, how God first interacted with human beings, how evil increased rapidly in the world, and how, because of that, God pronounced judgment on human beings.

In Genesis 12, the story moves to the ancestors of Israel, beginning with Abraham. You will discover as you read these stories that the fathers and mothers were not necessarily such wonderful people. For example, Jacob's deceitful behavior is questionable at best. You will see, too, that polygamy was an accepted practice. However, you will also notice that the stories make it clear that polygamy does not work out very well!

All the way through, it is important to note the theme of God's promise and faithfulness to the people God has chosen and their attempts, even though halting, to be faithful to the Lord. God's covenant remains firm even when these people cannot live up to it. The story of Joseph, especially, shows us how God can help a person who is faithful to God. It also explains how the children of Israel end up in Egypt and must be brought back to the Promised Land by Moses at the time of the Exodus.

In the New Testament, we will be reading the Gospel of Matthew. You may know that, while Matthew appears first in the New Testament, it was probably written after Mark. Nearly all scholars believe that Matthew and Luke used Mark as they wrote their Gospels. All

three of these Gospels give a sequential account of Jesus' life. Mark, however, does not pick up the story until Jesus' baptism, while Matthew begins with a genealogy and a story of Jesus' birth. Matthew's striking introduction probably led the early church to think that this Gospel was composed first and thus that it should certainly be placed first in the New Testament. It has been ever since!

Matthew's story about Jesus is straightforward. There are a few themes to keep in mind. A primary theme is that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed king, for the Jews. This is evident already in the genealogy of Jesus in chapter 1. The family tree is framed in three sets of fourteen generations. Matthew uses this neat and stylized form for the genealogy so that he can emphasize Jesus' descent from David. According to the Jewish manner of counting, the name *David* totaled fourteen. Three sets of fourteen indicate that Jesus is the Davidic son fully, completely, and perfectly.

Another theme to watch for in Matthew is the call to the church to be obedient to God. Watch for references to living a righteous, good life, as in the parable of the sower (ch. 13), in which seed sown on good soil brings forth abundant grain. Or notice the Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5–7), which gives a compelling picture of a serious Christian life. The idea of discipleship is tied to this. Like the original Twelve, Christians are to be disciples of their Master. They are to follow him, serving others without regard to themselves.

Matthew emphasizes that the kingdom of heaven—another theme of the Gospel—is open to those who do the will of God. Nothing else, whether mighty works (7:21–23) or family ties (12:46–50), will get a person into the kingdom. Observe the importance of the kingdom as you read Matthew. To belong to it may well mean persecution and suffering now, but it will also bring ultimate blessedness. To be outside the kingdom, however, will mean final judgment when our resurrected Lord returns in power.

As you think about the kingdom in Matthew, keep an eye out for places where Jesus shows special concern for those who were considered of less value in Israelite society. For instance, notice the references to his positive view of women and children. In addition, you will encounter a variety of incidents in Matthew where Jesus

offers mercy and shows kindness to people like the sick, tax collectors, outcasts, and the poor. Matthew wants to emphasize that every person, whatever their social status or physical condition, is equally welcome in God's kingdom.

Perhaps even more shocking to Jesus' contemporaries was his positive stance toward the Gentiles, that is, non-Jewish peoples. Observe how often Matthew highlights "the nations" as participants in the kingdom of heaven (8:11; 12:21; 25:32). Jesus' attitude toward other nations and peoples reaches a climax in the words of the "Great Commission," when he directs his disciples to "go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*" (28:19–20). This command indicates, beyond any doubt, that Jesus considers all people to be of equal worth. All are to be welcomed as members of God's kingdom!

In the Spotlight: January

The Family of Abraham

Later biblical and ecclesiastical history speaks of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—as the fathers of the faith. Similarly, their wives—Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah and Rachel—are often called matriarchs. The implication is that these people serve as ideals for later believers in Israel’s God. As you read this month, however, you may wonder how well they actually serve as models of faith for Israel or for us.

The stories of Abraham’s family manifest an amazing amount of unsavory behavior. Greed, lying, envy, and doubt: Genesis does not offer a happy history. The patriarchs and matriarchs are a not-so-healthy bunch. In that regard, it is wise to remember that they are not so different from us. We cannot criticize them or snicker at their foibles without implicitly judging our own.

Students of family systems theory will detect in these accounts some examples of the behavior of family members across time. Each of these persons tends to be locked into certain patterns of conduct that pass down through the generations. Notice, for instance, that Jacob (with his mother, Rebekah) deceives his father, Isaac, when he is old and blind. Shortly, Jacob will be deceived in turn by his uncle, Laban, who happens to be Rebekah’s sister. Later, Jacob’s sons will deceive him. When they provide what appears to be proof that his favorite son, Joseph, has been killed, Jacob spends much of the rest of his life in mourning.

Other tendencies in families are on display here too. You might think, for example, of parental favoritism. Isaac prefers Esau, while his wife prefers Jacob. Jacob, in turn, favors Joseph, the son of his favored wife, Rachel. The tendency to get support by building interpersonal triangles shows itself too. As mentioned above, Rebekah connives with Jacob against Isaac. Earlier, Sarah had called on Abraham to exclude Hagar, and later Jacob’s sons would gang up on Joseph.

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These stories suggest that the family of Abraham endured some rocky relationships from generation to generation. Yet these people served Israel as the fathers and mothers of their faith. In spite of what we might expect, the Bible never idealizes human beings. The heroes of faith are always shown to be fallible, and ultimately that makes the message of the Scriptures all the more realistic and believable.



As you read this month, look for a few verses, passages, or thoughts that especially speak to you. In the space below, you can keep a record of what you have found. Use a notebook if you need additional space.

THE YEAR OF THE BIBLE PROGRAM GUIDE

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James E. Davison

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Preface to the Revised Edition

Since *The Year of the Bible* was first published, nearly 60,000 people in large numbers of churches around the United States and Canada have used it. In some cases, groups of churches have joined in the endeavor. At least three presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and one denomination, the Reformed Church in America, have made *The Year of the Bible* the center of their programming for a year. People from numerous churches have told me about its impact on the life of their congregations—and on their own lives.

I have been grateful to hear all of the comments about the influence of *The Year of the Bible* and amazed at the many creative ideas that people have shared as they have developed *The Year of the Bible* in their settings. Their reports have confirmed my belief that the program will be done best if each congregation personalizes it. I have included some of these ideas in this edition of the Program Guide. My thanks go to all those who have spoken to me and, indeed, to all who have used *The Year of the Bible* in their congregations.

In the accompanying *The Year of the Bible* book for participants, you may notice that the specific monthly readings and the introductions for each month remain substantially unchanged from the original edition. However, I have added a section titled “In the Spotlight” for each month. Here readers will find discussion of a significant theme or topic that relates to the readings for the month. Each of these is intended to help participants read and interpret the material more easily.

Many colleagues and friends helped in the original development of *The Year of the Bible*. Their names are listed in the acknowledgments, and I will not repeat them here. I continue to be extremely grateful to all of them. My hope is that this program, which we began together so long ago, will continue to be a blessing for many in the future.

James E. Davison

Acknowledgments

For years, I have believed that knowledge of the Scriptures is a crucial element in the life of a faithful congregation. However, finding a way to increase the general level of biblical knowledge in a congregation is difficult. A variety of factors in contemporary society—from competing activities to short attention spans to spectator-sport attitudes—stands in the way of raising the level of biblical literacy effectively.

There are many approaches to Bible study, and I suspect that there is no one best way that fits every person, every congregation, and every situation. A combination of approaches probably will have the best effect in the end. In that vein, I offer *The Year of the Bible* as one way to work toward a solution to the problem. While the program stands on its own, it is compatible with a variety of other approaches, and it can be coordinated with a congregation's overarching program of Christian education.

The value of *The Year of the Bible* is that it can focus the attention of a congregation on the Scriptures for an entire year. This has been confirmed for me by my own experience in developing the program originally for Westminster Presbyterian Church in Upper St. Clair, a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Subsequently I worked with the Committee on Worship and Theology of Pittsburgh Presbytery to conduct a presbytery-wide “Year of the Bible” in 1995, in which eighty-five congregations participated. Not only does the program enable those who participate to expand their knowledge of the Bible as a whole, but it also stimulates their interest and enthusiasm for the Scriptures.

Acknowledgments provide an opportunity to thank those who have been especially helpful in developing an idea into a finished product. Many people have been helpful to me, of course. First, I want to thank the members of Westminster for their participation and support. It is to them that this book is dedicated.

A number of members encouraged me to pursue the original idea for a study of the “Year of the Bible” in 1988. Others aided with planning and implementation. The officers of the congregation not only endorsed the program but also signed on the dotted line themselves when asked for their pledge to take part. (You will see the specifics of what they agreed to do in the sample resolution in chapter 1.) Then, after receiving requests from other pastors and educators to use the program in their congregations, I sent out a call to our members for help in organizing a “Year of the Bible” for Pittsburgh Presbytery in 1995. About thirty-five members volunteered their services and helped in various ways over a twenty-one-month period as we organized and conducted the program. My thanks to all will have

to be summarized by mentioning the names of those who coordinated various aspects of the project: Howard Oliver, Patricia Hurlbert, Della Inman, David Inman, David Hilty, and Ginger Parmalee.

While I cannot list the names of all those who provided me with suggestions and ideas along the way, I do want to thank a number of individuals who have given special encouragement and support: the Reverend Donald Griggs and Patricia Griggs, the Reverend Arthur van Eck, Mrs. Vera White, and the Reverend Carleton and Elinor Stock. My thanks also go to the members of the Committee on Worship and Theology of Pittsburgh Presbytery, who sponsored this project and helped in various ways. In addition, I wish to express my gratitude to those who were part of the program staff of Westminster Presbyterian Church during the initial program. Without their encouragement and endorsement, *The Year of the Bible* could not have become a congregation-wide event in the first place. Thanks to the ministers, Laird Stuart, Emory Lowe, and Glen Hallead, and to the director of music, Walter Horsley, for their support! Special thanks go to three people who served as my administrative assistant at different stages of this project: Karen Richards, Elsie Hall, and Sandy Conley. Not only their secretarial skills and good ideas, but also their friendship and advice were a great blessing along the way. Would that everyone had the great good fortune to work with such capable and caring people!

Finally, a word of thanks, too, goes to my family: to my wife, Reeny, for her continual support and her encouragement to keep at it; and to my children, Tim, Andrew, and Scott, whose active lives reminded me (especially when I was “keeping at it” particularly intensively) of another primary responsibility of the Christian life—to spend time with your family.

James E. Davison

Introduction: *The Year of the Bible*

*M*any people say that contemporary Christians are “biblically illiterate.” While this is certainly not true of all individuals, it is apparent that many church members do not know the Bible very well. This is an unfortunate state of affairs, particularly for those denominations, like my own, that have traditionally placed a premium on knowledge of the Scriptures. Whatever the denomination, however, this is unfortunate for an even more significant reason: the Bible is the basis of our faith. As God’s written Word for us, it communicates the knowledge of Christ and God’s will for our lives.

You may have wondered, as I have, what can be done to reverse the tide. How can we help people in our congregations begin to learn the Scriptures—to become comfortable with them, to understand their basic themes, and to apply them in their daily lives? Bible study groups can be of assistance. In-depth Bible courses can help too. Oftentimes, however, such attempts reach only a few people. Generally, those who have been in a number of Bible studies are the ones who sign up for new ones when they are offered. What can we do to affect a major breakthrough in the level of biblical literacy in a large portion of a congregation within a relatively brief period?

This book outlines a program that will generate a high level of enthusiasm for reading the Bible on a regular basis, and it will do so in a broad cross-section of your congregation. I first developed the idea in 1988 at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Since then, hundreds of congregations have employed it across the United States and Canada. The program is simple. It centers on a challenge to the whole congregation to read the entire Bible in one year, and it builds an extensive program that involves the total life of the congregation around that effort.

In the process of designing the program, I discovered that people really do want to know the Bible better. The desire may be unconscious, but people in our pews appear to have a deep thirst to understand the Scriptures more fully. My experience has been that if you give people the chance to read the Scriptures and if you offer them help in doing so, they will seize the opportunity.

Although the original intention of *The Year of the Bible* was to motivate members who hardly knew the Scriptures to read the Bible, I have been pleased to discover that the program is equally attractive to people who are already well acquainted with the Scriptures. The reason for the broad appeal of this particular program is that it is truly comprehensive.

The Year of the Bible encompasses a number of interrelated elements:

- *It centers on the whole Bible.* Those who participate will experience the entire panorama of biblical history as they read the whole of the Scriptures.
- *It challenges the whole congregation.* The program provides an opportunity that all members can undertake together regardless of differing levels of biblical knowledge.
- *It incorporates the congregation's entire life together.* The program offers a focal point for the congregation, allowing a church to tie together the various elements of its life, such as worship services, sermons, Bible studies, daily devotions, retreats, and so forth.
- *It spans the entire year.* The core of the program is a plan of daily readings that divides the material into roughly equal segments. Since each participant receives a brochure outlining the materials, it is easy for people to keep track of where they are in their readings.

All of these elements combine to make this program a unified, coherent whole. If you are looking for a program that offers a systematic and structural way to increase your congregation's familiarity with the Scriptures, you will find the program outlined in this book to be immensely helpful.

The Value of the Program

At various times, people have spoken to me about the impact that participating in *The Year of the Bible* has had on their lives. The following statements will give you an idea of how readers have reacted to their involvement in the program:

“This year of reading and study has really been a great learning experience and a wonderful discipline.”

“Reading the Bible in its entirety is something I have always wanted to do. That was a motivating factor, as was knowing that others were reading (and talking about) the same passages throughout the year.”

“When I finished the readings, I felt this was one of the most outstanding accomplishments of my life. Now several months have passed, and the pervasiveness of the Word has become intensely personal. So many things in life make sense!”

I have also heard frequently from pastors and laypeople about the impact that *The Year of the Bible* has had on their congregations. Here are some sample comments:

“This is one of the most rewarding challenges that we have ever undertaken.”

“Wonderful things arose as a result of our involvement as a congregation.”

“Throughout the year I had numerous people communicate to me how much they were enjoying reading through the Bible, many for the first time.”

“[This is] one of the greatest programs and ministries I've been involved in.”

At the outset, it is important to remember that the congregation in which *The Year of the Bible* originated is large and active. It is typical of many North American suburban churches, where members also participate in a host of nonchurch activities in their businesses, communities, schools, and social lives. There is very little social pressure for members to take part in

congregational programs or projects that do not appeal to them. In fact, because of the many demands on members' time and energy, they often pass up activities that do interest them. Nevertheless, when I first suggested the idea of *The Year of the Bible* program, people were highly enthusiastic.

Why are people attracted to such a large-scale, time-consuming commitment? There appear to be a number of reasons. First, people are motivated by a challenge. Or, to reverse this statement, it takes a challenge to motivate people. Apparently, people are more inclined to take on tasks and projects that they otherwise might not begin when some sort of commitment is involved. Thus, the challenge to commit to this project is crucial to its success.

Second, the congregation-wide scope of the program is intriguing. People seem to be more interested in becoming involved when they know that others—preferably friends and acquaintances—are engaged in the same program. This sense of connectedness with others is summed up well by one person who commented, “It’s exciting to know that others may be reading the exact same passage just when I am reading it.”

Third, many people feel a certain amount of regret about their lack of knowledge of the Scriptures. For them, this is a welcome opportunity to read the Bible, something that they would probably not undertake on their own. When offered the chance to participate in such a program, they are aware that at the end of the year they will be able to say, “Maybe I don’t know the Bible very well, but at least I’ve read the whole book.”

Fourth, the program offers people a clear and systematic approach to acquiring a higher level of biblical literacy. Rather than thinking, “I ought to know the Bible better” while feeling at a loss as to what to do about it, they recognize an opportunity to take concrete steps toward remedying their lack of biblical knowledge.

Fifth, and finally, perhaps the most profound reason is that many people feel that their spiritual lives are not as fulfilling as they would like them to be. Since the Scriptures are God’s Word, it is obvious that reading and knowing the Bible are extremely important elements in experiencing a deeper spiritual life. Sensing this, people desire to know the Bible better, not simply as an intellectual exercise, but as a way to come closer to the Lord their God.

From the interest expressed in this program over the years, it is obvious that people in many congregations share such feelings. *The Year of the Bible* provides an especially attractive program to tie into these needs so that people are able to achieve a specific, clear-cut, and useful goal.

This program works easily and effectively not only in diverse, large-church settings, but also in smaller, more homogeneous ones. It may be even more effective in smaller congregations, where outside pressures may not be as great and where ties to the church community tend to be stronger. In addition, because the primary thrust of the program is simply to read the Bible and to orient the life of a congregation around the readings for the year, the program functions effectively in churches of various denominations.

A word of caution is necessary, however. *The Year of the Bible* will require diligent effort throughout the entire year. It will demand hard work from those who commit themselves to completing the readings, and it will necessitate even more work from those who supervise the program. Among other things, as leader you will need to continually encourage those who are participating to keep up with the program. Nevertheless, the work is well worth the effort. For many people, you will be providing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. For your church, you will be offering a memorable yearlong experience.

Because of this experience, you can anticipate seeing the following kinds of results in your congregation:

- People who hardly know the Scriptures will find a completely new world opening up to them. Many will be inspired to continue their reading of the Bible after the program has concluded.
- Those who know the Bible relatively well will gain a broader overall picture of the history of Israel, the life of Jesus Christ, and the story of the early church.
- Participants will acquire a greater awareness of the significance of the Bible for their congregation as a whole. This project is a “consciousness-raising” experience. It will reaffirm how central the Scriptures are to Christian life and worship.
- People will also develop a stronger sense of oneness with others in the church. Because so many people are participating in this challenge, there will be an underlying unifying effect within the congregation as a whole.

As you can see, *The Year of the Bible* has great potential for stimulating growth and renewal in your congregation. Not only individual members, but also the congregation as a whole, will benefit from joining in the program.

Making the Program Work

What will you need to do to start *The Year of the Bible* program in your congregation? First, you must interest—and excite—the leadership of the congregation. I am thinking here not only of pastors but also of educators, musicians, governing boards, and especially significant committees in the life of your congregation. Their enthusiastic support and endorsement are essential for the program to succeed.

Second, you will need to develop enthusiasm within the membership as a whole. The idea should be presented well in advance so that people have the opportunity to become comfortable with it. In addition, they will need time to prepare for the project. In other words, you must bring it to their attention well before the beginning of the year that you have scheduled for the program.

Third, you will need to designate someone to spearhead the entire effort. Someone will have to see to it that the program develops smoothly. This person will nurture the project along during the entire twelve months. Probably this will be you!

You may be a pastor or a Christian educator. You may teach a church school class or be another leader in the life of your congregation. It does not matter what your precise capacity is, because this guide contains all the resources needed to carry out *The Year of the Bible* in your congregation. Included are schedules, plans, and other written materials, along with instructions for tailoring them to your congregation.

You will also discover suggestions about some things to emphasize and some pitfalls to avoid. With a reasonable amount of effort, you can implement the program in your church in an organized and effective fashion. In addition, there are suggestions to help you sustain the program’s momentum so that its impact can continue in your congregation after the year concludes.

To get an overview of the structure of *The Year of the Bible*, I recommend that you read the first four chapters of this book. Spend some time glancing at the materials that are provided, so that you will gain a better sense of the whole. Then you will be ready to begin developing your own plans in earnest.

It is important to develop a strategy early on, outlining how you will proceed. Next, enlist the support of a few persons whose backing will be crucial to the success of the project. When these initial steps have been taken, you will be on your way. Best wishes as you set about implementing *The Year of the Bible* in your congregation!