


Practical Ministry Skills

Exegesis and Hermeneutics for Small Groups

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EXEGESIS AND HERMENEUTICS FOR SMALL GROUPS

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How to Use This Resource

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

Here's a quick quiz for you: what in the world do exegesis and hermeneutics mean? Put simply, hermeneutics is the science of interpreting Scripture, and exegesis is the process of interpreting Scripture. In other words, we use the principles of hermeneutics to properly do exegesis on a particular passage.

Unfortunately, these words are often only found in seminary textbooks, and are not common with everyday Christians. But they should be—or at least their principles should be. The fact is that we all interpret the Bible every time we read it, and it's helpful to have some principles to rely on so that we're interpreting the Bible faithfully.

This resource will help you better prepare for Bible study with your small group and give you tips on leading your small-group members in interpreting the Bible.

Helpful Overview Information

The first four articles will help you develop a deeper understanding of exegesis and hermeneutics. You might also decide to use the articles to help your group members learn more about the topic as well. Be sure to pay special attention to Trevor Lee's article, "Common Mistakes in Interpreting the Bible," to be sure you avoid these common pitfalls in your group meetings.

How-To Information

The last three articles will give you step-by-step tools to interpret Scripture faithfully. Tom Bandy offers a guide to interpreting Scripture as a group through four key conversations in "An Ancient Bible Study Method for Today's Small Group," Mark Ingmire uses the story of the Rich Young Ruler to explain a classic hermeneutical process in "How to Apply Scripture in Your Small Group," and Brandon O'Brien helps you discover the presuppositions you bring to interpreting the Bible in "What Do We Bring to the Bible?".

—AMY JACKSON is Associate Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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Interpreting the Bible

Five keys to doing biblical exegesis together

By Scott Boren

When it comes to exegesis, interpreting the Bible in a way that seeks to understand what the authors intended, group dynamics play a huge role and may prevent you from actually working with a passage. There are two types of people who can derail freely flowing conversation on a passage. The first are those who make it so difficult that no one can understand a passage without their input. There's nothing quite like a group that is filled with the likes of Bible Scholar Bob who can't help but explain something about the history of the passage, Reference Referrer Randy who points out related verses with Bible in hand, and Famous Quote Fran who throws in something stated by C.S. Lewis or Philip Yancey as if she knew them personally. Such a know-it-all attitude can make new Christians or seekers feel out of place.

The other type could be referred to as Simple Samanthas, and you don't want a group full them either. These people make reading the Bible so easy that they take every verse they read at face value. Any and every verse has an obvious meaning, as if it had been written to them in that moment. To them the Bible is just a compilation of sayings that have little meaning outside of what it obviously says to them in the moment.

While few actually fall into these extreme cases, group members usually lean towards one stance or the other. Most don't take into account what the text meant when it was first written *and* listen to what the text means today. When I was completing my degree in New Testament studies, I found that many of the books about biblical interpretation make the task so difficult that it could easily strip away any hope that anyone can actually read and understand what the Bible is saying.

But the Bible is crucial to our life in the church and in small groups. It is our story, our guide, and our worldview shaper. We are a people "of the book." And if we are going to let this book shape our small groups, it's good to have some basic guidelines—without making things so difficult that we give up and let the "Bible scholars" do the heavy lifting, while we settle for refrigerator magnet Bible discussions.

When working with a passage, use these five basic guidelines to help you think about what the passage meant when it was penned and hear what is it saying to the group members in the present.

1. **Start with the Big Story.** Years ago, I was taking a class from Eugene Peterson. At the end of a lecture, someone asked him how to read the Bible when you've grown tired of reading it. He responded, "Read it like you would a novel." I was shocked by his statement, but it got me thinking about how any one verse, or paragraph, or chapter, or book is part of an over-arching story that opens with "In the beginning" and ends with the full redemption of the heavens and earth. As I reflected on the big story of the Bible I thought about how we read novels. No one would pick up *A Tale of Two Cities* and try to interpret chapter two apart from the rest of the book. While we all know that the Bible and Charles Dickens cannot be interpreted in the same way, Peterson's instruction helped me see the importance of starting with the big story of the Bible and then working down to the specific issues that might arise in a specific verse. What is this big story? Here's my basic summary:

God created. Man messed up this creation. God set in motion a plan to rescue creation by working through a specific people named Israel. Though Israel repeatedly rejected the opportunity to serve as God's rescue representatives to the world, God did not give up. As a result, he sent his Son to be that representative to demonstrate who God really is and set the course for the redemption of the world. Still, he was rejected, killed, and buried. But he arose, ascended, and sent the Spirit to fill Jesus' followers with power to live the way he lived. Now we live in between—a time when the full redemption of all the world has been won through the resurrection but will not be complete until Christ returns.

When we read each individual verse in the light of this grand story, it's easier to see what the specifics mean.

2. **Don't Make Yourself the Main Character.** I must confess that I have often read the Bible as if I am the main character. And, unfortunately, I see a lot of books that do this with Scripture. When we do this, we look for how we can claim for ourselves the benefits of God, or we try to figure out what the Bible is telling us to do to get right with God. Or, we treat the Bible as a book of morals that reveals the secrets to a successful life. But this grand story found in the Bible has a main character: God—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The book of Acts is traditionally called the Acts of the Apostles, and we could read this great story of the first churches as one that tells us what we are supposed to do. But a better title is the Acts of the Holy Spirit, which emphasizes how God worked through the first churches. So when we read the Bible, we need to look for what God is doing, how God is acting, and how the people are responding to God. This will open up ways for the story to soak into our hearts and minds. Then we will be much more likely to see how God is working through us.

3. **Think Context.** None of the books of the Bible were written in a time or place anything like the times or places where we live today. The language, the customs, the social norms, the landscape, and the architecture were vastly different. A couple years ago, it hit me that many of the towns where Jesus and the Apostle Paul ministered were tiny (imagine a town that's only three or four city blocks in size). When Jesus and the disciples showed up or Paul planted a house church, the entire town knew about it. It was a world so foreign that if we were to enter into it, we would be totally lost. The good thing is that if we read carefully, there are many clues about the historical context right in the text itself.

For instance, Jesus told parables that use farming references because he was talking to people who lived in rural, agrarian areas. Sometimes it's interesting to dig into the specifics of the story being told (in this case, how farming worked in the first century). But most of the time, when we take the time to let the text speak, we can hear its primary meaning without doing a lot of extra digging. One practice that can help you see the historical clues in the text is to read the passage in multiple translations. When you read only one translation, you can get stuck in a rut and assume that you know what the verse means. Then if you have further questions, a Bible dictionary is the place to start.

4. **Read Left, Read Right.** This guideline is so simple that it might border on the simplistic, but it is so often ignored it must be mentioned. We habitually lift one or two verses out as if they were written independently of what came before and what comes after. This is the way that Bible verses get twisted to say all kinds of things that people want the Bible to say. Therefore, if you want to know what a verse means, read to the left and right of it. In other words, read the text around the verse to get to know the context.

For instance, Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." This verse is often used to motivate people to set high goals, chart a path toward personal success, and work hard to meet those goals. But if you read verses 12 and 14, you can quickly see that Paul was speaking about enduring hardship and trouble in the midst of giving up his life as he followed Christ. That's a bit different than how we tend to use it.

5. **Listen to the Spirit Together.** The Holy Spirit is alive and active today. He lives within God's people and speaks through the Word of God. When we read Scripture together, the Spirit speaks through the Word, revealing truths that we might not see when reading it alone. One of the most powerful questions to use in a Bible discussion is "What stood out to you when the passage was read?" I've asked this questions countless times, often using the same passage with the same group, and every time we see something new. As we talk about the passage, it's as if the words come to life within us. Through the power of the Spirit, the words work their way into our lives, and we are transformed. The result is far beyond an intellectual Bible study. Instead, we have unpacked the meaning of the text, letting it germinate inside us and become our own.

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You can go much deeper on this topic. And if you have interest in it, I encourage you to do so. Start with the book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. Also, N.T. Wright's book *Scripture and the Authority of God* is helpful. Find a one-volume commentary or pick up a few copies of the *For Everyone* commentary series. These are simple, readable, and they lead you to do the most important thing: read the text.

Slow down. Read. Re-read. Ask questions. If you do this, you are far ahead of most. And the Spirit will speak to and through you as you study the Word.

—SCOTT BOREN is the author of [Missioretate](#) and [Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World](#); copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. Does your group have any of the people mentioned in the first few paragraphs? How might you redirect or respond to their comments so all group members feel welcome to share?
2. The author gives his brief summary of God's story. How would you summarize God's story? How might being familiar with the overarching story of the Bible help you interpret Scripture more faithfully?
3. Which of the five keys do you struggle with? Which ones does your group struggle with?

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An Overview on Hermeneutics

How to help your group interpret Scripture accurately

By Andrew Wheeler

"Judas went and hanged himself." "Go and do likewise." "What you are about to do, do quickly."

Stringing these three unrelated verses together (from Matthew 27:5, Luke 10:37, and John 13:27) could certainly cause some trouble! If you've heard the humorous anecdote about the person who opened his Bible at random to find God's will and encountered the three verses above in succession, you probably smiled at the folly of using the Bible that way. At its root, the problem pictured is bad hermeneutics—interpreting the Bible without taking into account things like context. Unfortunately, bad hermeneutics leads us to poor understanding and application of the Bible more often than we might realize.

We all interpret the Bible. We make decisions about what it means (interpretation) and how we will respond (application). Even the person who staunchly advocates simply reading and obeying isn't likely to attempt to cast out demons or raise the dead, although both of these are pictured in the life of Jesus and the apostles. On the other hand, we hold up Jesus' prayer life as a model to follow. On what basis do we make these decisions?

As a small-group leader, you've likely encountered differences in opinion about a passage's meaning. How can you help your group arrive at an accurate understanding of the passage you're studying? Or is it okay for everyone in the group to have a different opinion about what a passage means?

The question isn't whether we will do hermeneutics but whether we will do it well. Below you'll find some guidelines to help you guide your small group into good Bible interpretation.

Guidelines for General Hermeneutics

Any discussion of hermeneutics involves presuppositions. Here are the basic presuppositions we will use as a starting point:

- The Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God.
- Good modern translations faithfully represent the Word of God in our language. (See [How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth](#) for a helpful analysis of modern translations and the theories behind them.)
- Scriptural truth is objective, not relative. That is, the real meaning of a passage is what it meant to the author, not what it means to each individual reader.

While a full discussion of hermeneutics can get complicated (and lengthy), good interpretation boils down to two major concepts: understanding the content of the passage, and the context (historical and Biblical) of the passage. I'll present them in a recommended order for study.

Historical context

Who was the author and who was the original audience? What was the situation historically and culturally? What customs defined life? Answers to these and similar questions will aid in accurate interpretation of a passage. Whether reading the narratives in Genesis or the instructions in Ephesians, understanding the cultural and historical context can help us interpret Scripture correctly.

For example, we might wonder how Jacob could have spent his wedding night with Leah instead of Rachel without realizing it (Genesis 29). At the time, the custom was for the bride to be taken to the tent before the groom was brought in. The tent was kept dark and the bride remained veiled until the marriage was consummated. Understanding this custom helps explain what would otherwise be inconceivable to us.

Resources such as a Bible handbook, a Bible commentary, or the introduction in a good study Bible can help provide this background information. Consulting a resource like this as a group prior to beginning a study can help set group members on an equal footing with background understanding.

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Thought exercises on historical context

1. Consider the narrative of Gideon "casting a fleece" to confirm God's leading (Judges 6). Does this passage make a case for attempting to confirm God's will with visible signs today?
2. Read the narrative of the prayer of Jabez (1 Chronicles 4:9-10). To what extent does this passage promise God's similar answers in the future?
3. We generally accept the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) as binding on the church today. However, we interpret Matthew 10 (the sending out of the twelve) as being a point-in-time reference and a command to that specific group. Given that both instructions were originally given to the exact same group of people (minus Judas in the second case), what hermeneutical basis is there for this difference in interpretation?

Content

The majority of your discussion of a Bible passage will revolve around content. An inductive method of Bible study should help the group to arrive at an understanding based on the content of the passage. An important guiding principle here is to "major in the majors"—that is, focus on the content of the passage as a whole. Individual words and phrases contribute to that meaning, but it's important to understand whether a word or phrase reflects the gist of the passage or whether it's incidental. Repetition of words or thoughts in a passage can help differentiate the thematic from the incidental.

For narrative (historical) passages, it's important to ask whether the narrative is meant to be normative. In other words, to what extent does a description of what happened in the past constitute an example for us to follow today? One of the most common mistakes in interpreting narrative passages is assuming that they provide guidelines for behavior universally. Scripture often reports events without comment on their morality. Additionally, the fact that God acted a certain way at a point in history does not bind him to that course of action today.

Likewise, when reading passages written as commands, we must ask whether the command applies only to the original audience or is normative for us also. For example, we feel no compulsion to go see Paul at Nicopolis (Titus 3:12) but we recognize the wisdom of avoiding foolish controversies (Titus 3:9). Some commands naturally make this distinction easy, but many present greater difficulty.

Biblical context

Accurate interpretation must consider the context of the passage in relation to the whole text. Scripture was not originally written as memory verses or as snippets that fit into a 30-60 minute Bible study. The immediate context of a passage and the larger context of the book in which the passage occurs provide important clues to interpretation.

It's also important to consider the author's purpose. Sometimes, the author states the purpose (Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; 1 Peter 5:12); at other times we must deduce the purpose from the content of the book itself and from an understanding of the historical and cultural context. Many of the Epistles, for instance, were written to address specific issues in the recipient churches. Understanding those issues will help your group arrive at accurate interpretations.

For example, the Galatian church was falling into the trap of relying on circumcision and obedience to the law for their salvation, prompting Paul to write to them. A study of the Book of Galatians as a whole would lead the reader to understand the purpose of the book. Understanding that this heresy drove Paul to write the letter further helps us to interpret passages in Galatians.

The wider context of Scripture also must be considered. For example, the first-time reader of James might conclude that salvation was based on works rather than faith. Knowing the larger New Testament context helps the reader to interpret James in light of a greater understanding of the interaction between faith and works.

Concluding Thoughts

General vs. special hermeneutics

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We've focused on general hermeneutics—interpretive principles that apply to all of Scripture. Further principles apply to different genres of biblical literature (narrative, parable, proverbs, poetry, prophecy, etc.). These principles fall under the category of special hermeneutics. For an excellent discussion of special hermeneutics and application to biblical genres, see [How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth](#) by Fee and Stuart.

Interpretation vs. application

We must recognize the difference between interpretation (hermeneutics) and application. Interpretation is about discovering the author's intent in the passage; application is about deciding how to respond. Generally, a passage will have one interpretation; however, the same passage may have many valid applications. It's important to agree on the right interpretation before thinking through potential applications.

Topical vs. book studies

As a small-group leader, your choice of Bible study will impact the hermeneutics of your group. Topical studies may not permit as much time for background study. Additionally, the nature of a topical study implies the theme of a passage before you start looking at it. This isn't good or bad—just recognize the bias inherent in topical studies.

Hermeneutical biases

Everyone brings a theological bias to a passage when interpreting it. The more mature a believer is in the Scriptures, the stronger the theological bias will be. A person's beliefs about God, the continuity or discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments, the interaction between God's sovereignty and human free will, and other core beliefs will inevitably impact a person's hermeneutics. Rather than ignoring such biases, it's best to acknowledge them and how they might affect interpretation of the passage being discussed.

Additionally, people have biases based on experience. The person brought up in a church that taught that women should not preach will approach a passage about gender roles differently than the person whose mother is a pastor. Again, it's important to acknowledge these biases and their impact on interpretation.

Unity, humility, and spiritual growth

Interpreting the Scriptures in a group differs from personal study. This difference can lead to dissension and arguments, or it can lead to spiritual growth—depending on the group's approach. Is there openness to acknowledge personal and theological biases and to consider other viewpoints, or is there dogmatic insistence on preconceived ideas? Is there an honest search for truth, or a dominating desire to be proven right? While any passage generally has only one interpretation, group members may not agree on that interpretation. As a group leader, your emphasis on humility and unity in the group will help members learn from each other and, when necessary, "agree to disagree agreeably."

—ANDREW WHEELER is the author of [Together in Prayer](#); copyright 2011 Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. Are you in the habit of regularly taking into account the historical context of a passage? How might this practice help you interpret the Bible more faithfully?
2. Take some time to do at least one of the Thought Exercises. What did you discover?
3. How can you become more aware of the hermeneutical biases you hold? How can you help your group members become more aware of the biases they hold?

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Common Mistakes in Interpreting the Bible

How to avoid these errors in your small group

By Trevor Lee

Who is Herm?

The first time I heard the word “exegesis” I thought we were going to talk about Jesus. When my professor threw “hermeneutics” at me I didn’t know what to think. I quickly learned that these are two essential words for those who want to grow in their knowledge of God and obedience to him. Both of these words have to do with the way we approach the Bible and interpret what it says. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. Exegesis is the critical interpretation of a specific passage. In other words, we use the principles of hermeneutics to do exegesis.

I’m not going to spend a lot of time on the intricacies of these two words—I’ll just refer to all they encompass as biblical interpretation. Chances are, your small group is doing biblical interpretation every time you get together. “But we don’t interpret the Bible,” you object. “We just read it and talk about what it says.” You may not be working with the Greek New Testament, but every time you talk about what the Bible says, you are interpreting it. Entire schools of theology have been born from people interpreting the same passages of Scripture in different ways. Some differences in interpretation in your group can add to the richness of the passages you’re studying. However, you can also fall into errors in biblical interpretation that will detract from your spiritual growth.

How do you know when differences in interpretation are good and when they could lead to problems? This is a tricky question because it’s not always black and white. The main thing to consider in these situations is whether it’s a difference in perspective or a difference in meaning. A difference in perspective means people see different sides of the same thing. A person standing in front of a car sees the car differently than someone standing behind it, but they both see a car. They inform each other’s perspectives to have a fuller picture of the car. However, if one of those two people says they see a cat, not a car, then they have a difference in meaning. They are seeing fundamentally different things. When you talk about God’s love in a small group it is great to have people shed light on different aspects of that love through their experiences and Scripture. However, if someone says God is hateful and mean, you are no longer talking about the same God. This doesn’t mean you shout that person down, but it is important to wrestle through why they think that about God.

Three Common Pitfalls

While many errors can be made in biblical interpretation, three are most common in a small group: accepting all interpretations as valid, proof-texting, and not understanding the historical context of a passage.

In my opinion

One of the great things about small groups is that everyone gets the chance to share and interact. On Sunday morning the pastor does all the talking, but not in a small group. This interaction is important for spiritual growth. Sharing your thoughts and opinions forces you to think through things and consider how they impact your life. Getting input from everyone is important, but it is also a potential pitfall.

Often when a small group kicks around thoughts on a passage of Scripture they are simply sharing their reactions and opinions. Reactions are by nature not deeply thought out—they are the first things that come to our minds. Opinions are important because they show what we believe, but that doesn’t mean they’re right. I have opinions about what would be best for our economy, but I haven’t invested much time to educate myself on this topic. I can have a conversation with someone about the economy, but I have to recognize the flaws in my opinion and adjust as I learn more.

The end of this section contains some suggestions for how to create a climate where people can disagree, but one of the hardest parts is being open to people disagreeing with you. To foster an open spirit in yourself, remember that the goal is not to prove that you’re right, but to grow in your faith and discipleship. When someone challenges you, push yourself to see their challenge as a chance to learn and grow rather than an

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occasion for defensiveness. It's also important to assume the best. When someone challenges something you've said, assume that person is investing in your spiritual growth. When you view disagreements as an act of love rather than an attack, you can accept them more easily. Finally, if you ever feel people are criticizing you, tell them! If you don't tell people when they say something in a way that hurts you, they may never know.

The reason reactions and opinions can become dangerous is that we are often very hesitant to challenge anyone in a small-group setting. We are afraid of offending others or coming across as combative. Yet developing a group ethos where people are free to graciously challenge each other is the key to successfully having open group discussions. The Scriptures are shared community documents—they are meant to be handled by the entire body of Christ. But the body must point out each other's blind spots so everyone can grow in maturity and faith.

Here are a few suggestions for avoiding the error of accepting all interpretations as valid.

- State upfront that it's okay to disagree. This has to be done graciously and without any hint of personal attack. Have a conversation about how people handle disagreement and how your group can do this well.
- Make sure the Bible is the authority. Encourage people to support their opinions and reactions with Scripture. This has the added benefit of pushing people to grow in their knowledge of Scripture.
- Challenge people to listen to those who are mature in the faith. A 75-year-old woman who has been faithfully following Jesus her entire life has more spiritual insight than someone who became a Christian last week. That doesn't mean she is always right or that the new Christian is wrong, but we should heed the insight of those who have walked long and deep in the faith.

Cutting and chopping

It is important to get down to specific verses and phrases when you study the Bible, but properly interpreting those verses and phrases requires knowing what comes before and after. Athletes, celebrities, and politicians are made to sound ridiculous by removing what they say from the context in which they said it. For instance, shortly after his inauguration, [Bill Clinton was quoted](#) saying, "We can't be so fixated on our desire to preserve the rights of ordinary Americans." While he did say that, it was only half of a sentence in his entire speech. He was saying we can't focus on the right to own handguns to the exclusion of the millions of Americans struggling with violence in the streets. It is easy for us to be guilty of pulling things out of context in the Bible as well.

Take for example Romans 8:24. It says, "But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?" You know, I don't have an iPad, and I really want one. Paul is really encouraging me to hope for those things I want that I don't have yet. God wants me to do that!

Without context, we can make the Bible say anything we want. This practice of taking a couple of words or phrases out of context is called proof-texting. You find a little bit of text that seems to prove your point of view without taking into account the context. You cannot study the Bible faithfully in your small group without carefully considering the context of the passage. In Romans 8, Paul is talking about the hope of the consummation of the kingdom of God when Jesus returns. The hope that is not seen is a very specific hope. Without reading the entire chapter, or even better, the entire book, you and others in the group can easily read things into the Bible that aren't there.

Here are few suggestions to help your group avoid this error.

- Make sure at least one person is familiar with the context of the passage you're studying. For a story this means reading the whole story. For an epistle it means reading the entire epistle. It would be great if the whole group did this, but if only one person does it, make sure you listen to that person's opinion as you discuss the text.
- Read a commentary. These often point you to the unifying themes of the Bible and the context of passages.

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- Be aware of anomalies. When a verse seems to be saying something that contradicts everything you know about Scripture it may be because you're not reading the context. Look to see if there are other places in Scripture that say the same thing.

The Bible wasn't written yesterday

It's also important to have some awareness of the historical context. The truth of the Bible is timeless, but it was still written in a certain time. We are aware of this when we read Leviticus, but not always so much when we're reading Matthew. This is a big deal because there are some passages that we cannot understand without some knowledge of the time in which they were written. Take 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul says a woman should not pray with her head uncovered. He says it is disgraceful for her to do this.

What was the custom for women in regard to head coverings in the first century A.D.? What did it communicate to others in that time when a woman had her head uncovered? Was this command by Paul something that would set Christian women apart from culture or something that was expected by their culture? Until you can answer these questions you cannot fully understand Paul's teaching about head coverings.

The Bible was written in a time very different from ours. There was no Internet, globalization, or Starbucks. This doesn't make the Bible outdated, but it does mean that we will understand the powerful message of Scripture most clearly and faithfully when we have an understanding of the times in which it was written. Too often we make the error of approaching Scripture as though it were written last week. We apply our current culture and ways of thinking to what we read and this obscures the meaning. Faithful biblical interpretation requires taking the historical context into account.

Here are a couple of ways to become familiar with the historical context.

- Read a commentary. Most commentaries have a section on the historical context and offer important insights. Buying a commentary is great, but some websites also give you access to some commentaries. One of these sites is biblegateway.com.
- Learn some history. Read some history from biblical times on Wikipedia or at the library. It doesn't have to talk specifically about the Bible to help inform your perspective on the Bible.

Read the Bible for All It's Worth

Working hard to avoid biblical misinterpretation is an important thing for your small group. You cannot grow from your study of the Scriptures if you take them to mean something they don't. In addition to watching out for the things in this article, you may want to consult more extensive resources on the topic. *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart is one excellent resource available.

— TREVOR LEE; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. Does your group struggle with validating all interpretations? What might you do to change this?
2. How might you respond to a group member who is proof-texting? Specifically, how might you respond to this error in the group while still honoring the group member?
3. How can you help your group become familiar with the historical context of the passage you're discussing?

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How to Read the Bible Well

New strategies for interpreting Scripture turn out to be not so new

By J. Todd Billings

A wide range of voices claims that a crisis of biblical interpretation is taking place. But contrary to many pundits, the crisis does not simply involve a decline in the Bible's authority. Even when the Bible is turned to as *the* authority, it's not necessarily interpreted *Christianly*.

Consider, for example, a recent Christian bestseller that offers a "Bible diet." The book claims to enable better concentration, improve appearance, increase energy, and reverse the process of "accelerated aging." To want to improve your appearance and energy level, do you have to be interested in knowing God or Jesus? Of course not. There is nothing intrinsically Christian about the advice.

Similar trends appear in Christian books that promise biblical solutions for success in finances, relationships, and family. These books can help Christians see implications of their faith for various aspects of life, but they often communicate that the Bible is the authoritative answer book to felt needs and problems. This message centers on the individual and his or her preferences, and does not interpret the Bible in a way that calls felt needs into question or looks beyond them.

The Spacious Rule of Faith

When examining how we interpret Scripture, we should pay attention to our functional theology of Scripture: how our use of Scripture reflects particular beliefs about what the Bible is. There are two common approaches to using Scripture today.

Some readers start with a detailed blueprint of what the Bible says, and then read individual passages of Scripture as if they were the concrete building blocks to fit into the blueprint. They translate each passage into a set of propositions or principles that fit the established details of the blueprint. This approach assumes that we already know the larger meaning of Scripture; our system of theology gives us the meaning. Thus, the task of interpreting Scripture becomes a matter of discovering where in our theological system a particular passage fits.

Others prefer a smorgasbord approach. Imagine a huge cafeteria loaded with food of many kinds for many tastes; you are at the cafeteria with the members of your small-group. Can you imagine what some of the other members of the group would choose to eat? I suspect that there might even be patterns based on age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, but each person chooses which foods to feast on based on his or her appetite. In the smorgasbord approach to Scripture, the Bible becomes the answer book for our felt needs and personal perspectives, and we focus only on the parts we desire to read.

With both the blueprint and smorgasbord approaches, we end up using Scripture for our own purposes. We are in control. The Bible may be viewed as authoritative, but it provides either confirmation of our preconceived ideas or divine advice for felt needs.

Blueprint readers rightly sense that one cannot read the Bible without bringing some understanding to the table; we each come with some theological assumptions about the Bible when we open its pages. Smorgasbord readers rightly believe that the Bible is a book through which God addresses us; it's not just a book of ancient history or doctrine or worldview. A theological reading of Scripture makes use of both of these assumptions, yet in a deeper and fuller way.

Instead of providing a detailed blueprint, a theological reading brings a map for a journey. Our map does not give all the answers about a particular text. Instead, our reading sends us on a journey in which God in Scripture encounters us again and again, both with comforting signs of his presence and surprises that confound us, yet may open new vistas. Reading Scripture is not about solving puzzles but discerning a mystery. Through Scripture, we encounter no less than the mysterious triune God himself.

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Early Christians also taught that Christians should—indeed, must—approach Scripture with a basic theological map in hand. They created a "rule of faith" to use as they approached Scripture. It reminded early Christians that they read Scripture as followers of Jesus, baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Why is this necessary? The Bible is a large book, and even careful readers can interpret it in a variety of ways. But not all of these ways are *Christian* ways of reading Scripture. For example, one can read the Bible in a way that sees the God of Israel as a judging God, as the antithesis of the God of Jesus, who is supposedly only a gracious (not judging) God. But this is not a Christian reading of the Old or New Testaments. In the early centuries of Christianity, the rule of faith helped make sure that Christians held together the Old Testament with the New—that the God of creation and covenant is also the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

The term *rule* in "rule of faith" is best thought of in terms of "measure." The rule gives a sense of the center as well as the periphery in biblical interpretation. It does not decide the meaning of specific Scripture passages in advance. Instead, it gives a sense of scope in the journey of reading Scripture, forging a path to deeper fellowship with the triune God.

The Bible Is For Disciples

Does the theological interpretation of Scripture require specialized training? Two dynamics are often overlooked in contemporary biblical interpretations, especially those grounded in historical-critical assumptions. The first is the work of the Spirit in illuminating Scripture, and the second is interpreting the Scripture "in Christ." Congregations around the world cultivate a sense of these two realities as they pray for the Spirit's illumination, worship the triune God, and apply Scripture to their community of discipleship and witness. Of course, these practices don't guarantee faithful biblical interpretation, but they are indispensable dynamics for interpreting the Bible *as Scripture*. The indwelling of the Spirit in the Christian community, as one located "in Christ," uniquely equips the Christian community to interpret the Bible as God's Word.

Of course, a theological reading of Scripture can have pitfalls as well. But the solution is not to surrender the Bible to scholarly experts. Rather, it is to regain a sense of the place of Scripture in God's drama of redemption, and to enter into the task of reading Scripture with openness to being reformed and reshaped by God on our path of dying to the old self and living into our identity in Christ.

The Place of Commentaries

Still, we should avoid another extreme: interpreting the Bible alone, without others. In our day, some assume that the individual is an omni-competent biblical interpreter. No need for commentators, no need for a community of faith. Just me, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit.

The theological interpretation of Scripture movement has sought to reunite what modernity has divided: discipleship and critical study of the Bible. For example, in *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine said that Jesus Christ, as the incarnate God-human, is the "road" to our heavenly homeland. Thus, all Scripture is interpreted in light of Jesus Christ. All scriptural interpretation must lead to our growth in love of God and neighbor.

Regarding methods of reading the Bible, Fuller Seminary New Testament scholar Joel Green reminds us that "any and all methods must be tamed in relation to the theological aims of Scripture and the ecclesial context within which the Bible is read as Scripture." As Augustine suggested, a wide variety of interpretive methods can be used, but they are used in order to read Scripture as God's powerful word to the church, a community of disciples growing in the image of Christ.

Reading with Confidence and Humility

As John Webster, theologian at the University of Aberdeen and a key advocate of theological interpretation, notes, "reading Scripture is an episode in the history of sin and its overcoming; and overcoming sin is the sole work of Christ and the Spirit." Thus, "reading Scripture is inescapably bound to regeneration." As such, we read Scripture expecting to receive a divine word—one of comfort but also of confrontation. God's Word renews us as it confronts our cultural and personal idols, provides light for our paths, and equips us to serve the world.

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Thus, to read the Bible as Scripture involves delighting in, memorizing, and dwelling on it. When tempted by Satan, Jesus responds with Scripture he has memorized (Matt. 4:1-11). Colossians admonishes believers to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The Gospel of John shows a Trinitarian dynamic of dwelling in Christ's word, for the Spirit sent to believers will "glorify" Christ, and "will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16:14). Delighting and dwelling in God's Word is supremely practical, relating to our finances, family, and bodies. However, we should not enter into it for worldly "success," but rather as part of our dying to the old self and participating in the Spirit's new creation in Christ.

In this way, we can read the Bible confidently, knowing that God acts powerfully through Scripture. We do not have to master Scripture and then make it relevant to our lives; through Scripture, God opens up a new place for us to dwell, a place of fellowship with Christ on a path leading to love of God and neighbor.

We never finish the journey of sanctification in this life. Likewise, we never finish our journey of meditating on Scripture, experiencing it anew in word and sacrament. We wrestle with it even as it sometimes tells us what we don't want to hear, as well as confirming and building up our new identity in Christ. In all of this, Scripture's value to us is inexhaustible, because the Spirit uses Scripture to testify to Christ, the Word of the Father.

In reading the Bible as Scripture, we are not the masters. We are being mastered and enlivened by the triune God.

Theological Interpretation in Action

Consider the well-known story in 1 Samuel 17 in which David faces and defeats Goliath. Let me give two possible approaches to this text. Neither sees it as simply an account of a border skirmish in ancient history. Both approaches understand the Bible as authoritative.

In the first approach, the character of Goliath becomes a metaphor for the challenges faced in daily life. Hearers are encouraged to identify the "Goliaths" in their own life—low self-esteem, financial challenges, or a family problem. David becomes a model of the underdog who dares to step up to his own inner "giants" and "challenges." The Bible is the answer book, showing us the way to face challenges in our personal life: visualize a positive outcome like David (17:36), act with confidence in the face of a challenge (17:37), and take risks (17:48-9). In this way, the Bible helps us solve our problems. Who is the hero of this rendering of the story? David—more specifically, his courageous human will. David's faith in God may be noted, but it is David's courage that is highlighted. The living God is not a major character in this reading of the text.

In contrast, a theological interpretation of Scripture tries to understand the text as part of a God-centered drama. In this approach, God's saving action is at the center of the narrative. While the mighty Goliath can taunt the people of Israel, David confesses, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine" (17:37). Rather than seeing David as the self-actualized hero, the emphasis here is on the saving action of the almighty God, whom David actively trusts. For as the text repeatedly notes, it was not a "sword" of David that brings deliverance from the Philistines, for "it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (17:47; cf. 17:37; 17:50). Although David appears to be ill-prepared to encounter Goliath, David acts with covenantal trust in God that "The Lord ... will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine" (17:37).

Thus, we are invited to actively trust in this same God—the God of Israel who finally reveals the nature of his victory over his enemies in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the 1 Samuel narrative shows how God's surprising way of working contrasts with worldly appearances of power. Paul reflects on this mystery as it culminates in Christ crucified: "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:27b-30). As disciples of Jesus, we are called through the David and Goliath narrative to renew our trust in God's deliverance, acting in confidence as we love God and neighbor and witness to God's power in Christ crucified. Our confidence is in the Lord (not our faith or our commitment), for it is the Lord who uses even those who appear weak and lowly to accomplish his purposes.

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This article was adapted from an article that originally appeared in Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Do you lean towards being a blueprint reader or a smorgasbord reader? Why?
2. How might keeping the "Rule of Faith" in mind be helpful in faithful interpretation of Scripture?
3. What did you learn from the two examples of interpreting the story of David and Goliath?

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An Ancient Bible Study Method for Today's Small Group

A creative way for your small group to connect to God's story

By Tom Bandy

The most effective method of Bible study today resembles that of the earliest churches. The goal was not to understand the Bible, but rather to live like Jesus, walk with Jesus, and look for Jesus at work in the world. Bible study must be more about spiritual discernment and faithful conversation, and less about research and reading. After all, you are a small group of Christ-followers, not a classroom of students.

There are three things each group member must acquire in order to prepare for Bible study.

1. **A modern translation of the Bible.** There are many quality versions of the Bible, and conversation can be enhanced when several translations are used and compared. Avoid the King James Version because interpreting 16th century terminology sidetracks quality conversation. Also avoid Bible paraphrases, because the author's biases color spiritual discernment. Many people use the NIV, NRSV, or Common English Bible (CEB).
2. **A commentary of the Bible.** There are many good commentaries, and it is useful to compare different ones. The best commentaries provide information about the writers' viewpoints, historical context, religious debate about a passage, and the spiritual significance of the passage for faithful living. There are many single volumes like the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, and more specific series like *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* can provide detailed analysis. Compare modern and ancient perspectives by exploring the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series.
3. **A dictionary of the Bible.** This lets you look up difficult words, understand complex subjects, or identify people and places. The group only needs one for joint reference.

The group leader may also find it helpful to have a Bible atlas on hand, a concordance that helps you find verses when you only remember a word or phrase, and a Gospel parallel that compares verses from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Method

Read the Bible aloud before you read it silently. There are three big reasons why this process is more effective than private, silent reading.

- We listen better than we read. Our culture is really an oral culture. Our hearing is more acute and more alert to nuances of meaning than our memories. Reading aloud also captures the drama and power of words that are otherwise plain and unadorned on the printed page. This gives more opportunity for the Holy Spirit to touch our hearts, wrench our guts, and stir our souls.
- We stay with the text and are less likely to skip ahead. People unconsciously skip over the parts of a text that seem familiar or seem too difficult to readily understand. We can read along with a speaker, but the speaker is required to articulate every word, in the proper order, at the appropriate time, and this discipline holds us back from leaping ahead.
- We observe body language and make eye contact. When people read aloud, the slight inflections of their voice cause us to repeatedly look up and look around. We look into their eyes and see emotion. We observe their posture, interpret their gestures, sense the blush or pallor of their skin, and note changes in their breathing. Unspoken signals reveal how our fellow group members are reacting to God's Word, and we are drawn into the unfolding drama of God's real presence in our lives.

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The story of the Bible intersects with the life story of each member of the group. To help your group members discover the intersections, engage in these four conversations during each Bible study session. Each conversation is preceded by a reading of the text.

First conversation:

What is the significance of the text?

How is the passage significant for me? What is the important information I really need to know? What are the key insights that grasp my attention?

Certain words or phrases, ideas or insights, capture our attention immediately. They carry power to interpret our living, enlighten our situation, or strengthen our resolve. Ask each small-group participant to underline words or phrases of special significance during the reading.

Then the small-group leader may refer to a Bible commentary that sheds light on the writer's original viewpoint. Understanding why an author thought it so important to remember an event, tell a story, sharpen a criticism, or focus an idea helps us discern why a text might be significant for our personal lives.

Second conversation:

What is the urgency of the text?

How is the passage motivating, disturbing, or exciting me? How does it challenge the culture in which I live: my work environment, family life, circle of friendships, personal habits, and customs of daily living? What are the implications of the text for my career, stage of life, and future hopes or fears?

Certain words or phrases may be shocking and disturbing, or exciting and energizing. Have small-group participants place an exclamation point beside words or phrases that motivate, disturb, excite, or otherwise strike them.

At this time, the small-group leader may refer to a Bible commentary that discusses the historical context of the passage. Understanding the original situation that shaped a Bible passage, or the original impact on contemporary events, helps us discern why a text might be significant to our lives and times.

Third conversation:

What is the uncertainty of the text?

How does the passage confuse me? What questions are unanswered? What reference to people, places, things, events, or relationships are unknown? What ideas are bewildering? What ideas are unclear?

Certain words, phrases, verses, and stories are simply foreign to our thinking and living. They reveal the huge disparity between ancient cultures and modern-day cultures. Small-group participants place a question mark beside words or phrases that leave them uncertain or need clarification.

Then the small-group leader may refer to a Bible dictionary to clarify the text, or to a Bible commentary to understand the broader religious or ethical debate that surrounds the passage. If you are reading a passage in the gospels, the leader might compare the text in all four gospel versions. Observe the footnotes in each Bible translation, and see how the word or phrase is used in other parts of the Bible.

Fourth conversation:

What is the joy of the text?

What blessing is yours from this passage? How has God reassured, comforted, encouraged, or strengthened your spiritual journey through this passage? Has God revealed a personal message of hope? Has God opened you to new compassion or acceptance? Has he satisfied some deep longing?

Beyond the underlinings of the mind, the exclamation points of the heart, and the question marks of the gut, our soul finally meets the real presence of God in Christ. Each step has been valuable, but there is one more culminating step. Small-group participants should circle those words and phrases that are most precious to them. Sometimes these circles include the words and phrases we have underlined or marked with exclamation points and question marks. Sometimes these circles stand apart. Each small-group participant makes a note in

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the margin of their Bible (or in a journal) indicating the blessing received. Over time, these notes enhance future individual Bible reading.

Then the small-group leader may highlight how a text is used during the Christian seasons of the year or in the liturgy of worship. For example, a small-group leader might relate Isaiah 9:1-7 to Christmas, Psalm 22:1-2 to Easter, or Luke 22:14-23 to the Eucharist. Commentaries may link a passage to a saint, reformer, or great leader of the Christian movement.

Participants can build on the passage to do further meditative reading, incorporate biblical wisdom into their social service, or witness to God's grace with friends, neighbors, or work associates. For example, some participants who are impressed by the story of the Rich Young Ruler (Luke 19) might read Augustine's *Confessions*. Participants who are thrilled by divine acceptance described in 1 John 4:7-21 might share the message of God's love with people who are particularly depressed or lonely. Participants who are moved by the message of peace in Micah 4:3 might join a march against war and violence.

From Head to Heart

When we connect our minds, hearts, guts, and souls with the story of God's saving grace in Scripture, we fully participate in life with Christ. People who immerse themselves in Scripture will feel the touch of God in their whole lives and participate in a conversation with God that has been going on from the beginning of time. It is as if Jesus were walking beside us, as he did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13-35). He helps us understand Scripture, and in doing so, reveals himself to us.

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Discuss

1. How often does your group consult the resources mentioned in this article? How might these resources be helpful to your group Bible study?
2. When you read Scripture together, do you read it aloud? Why or why not? How might reading it aloud be helpful?
3. What do you think about the four conversations presented? How might these help your group move from head knowledge to fully participating in the life of Christ?

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How to Apply Scripture in Your Small Group

A proven, step-by-step plan to make your group's Bible study count

By Mark Ingmire

I hate being lost. I get an uneasy feeling in my stomach, and I start wondering if I'll ever reach my destination. Sometimes we get lost in our small-group discussions, too. We can discuss the Bible endlessly without ever reaching the true destination: application. Interpreting and applying a passage of Scripture can be done well in a few simple steps, and it will take your group to the next level in spiritual maturity.

There are a few things you will need as you get started. First you will need a study Bible in a translation that you understand (try NIV, NLT, or NASB). You also will want a Bible dictionary and a one- or two-volume commentary on the whole Bible. You can find these at any Christian bookstore. Finally, choose a Scripture passage to study. Now you are ready to take the following steps to arrive at a life-changing destination.

1. Study and Meditate on the Bible Passage.

Read the passage several times. As you do this, write down questions you have about the text. Write down what the text is trying to communicate, how it makes you feel, or how it prompts you to change. The main question is how you can apply the Scripture to your life. This is not a time to write a lecture to be shared in your small group. As the small-group leader, your role is not to be the teacher. Your role is to be the facilitator and guide, and it is best fulfilled by asking questions. Discussion allows members to wrestle with issues, retell the Bible story in their own words, and verbalize what they think and feel about a passage. Change really sticks when group members are able to verbalize the application. I firmly believe that life-change happens best when people discover Bible truth for themselves.

The process of interpreting Scripture for your small-group lesson is best done when you follow these simple guidelines.

- Study the context of the passage.
- Look up the meaning of words in the passage.
- Check out cross references listed.
- Confirm the interpretation of the passage with two or three other passages.

As you follow these guidelines, remember that scriptural revelation always trumps human reason. Plus, while there is one interpretation for any passage, there are many different ways to apply a passage.

2. Determine a Theme for the Lesson.

Make your job easier and the lesson more effective by writing down a one- or two-word theme on which you will focus your small-group discussion. If you fail to begin here, your interpretation and lesson will drift and wander wherever it wants, which may not be beneficial. Use your theme to sort through and cut out questions that don't relate and flow with the lesson.

For an example, we will walk through the passage on the Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19:16-30) and what a small-group lesson could look like. The themes for this passage could be discipleship, generosity, idols, legalism, materialism, salvation, or wealth. For our purposes, we will pick the theme of idols.

3. Write the Desired Outcome for the Lesson.

The desired outcome describes what you want the group members to feel and do as a result of the small-group lesson. This statement should include something measurable. With the story of the Rich

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Young Ruler our desired outcome could be that each group member identify at least one thing that may be getting in the way of following Jesus, and develop a simple plan to remove it.

4. Hook – Book – Look – Took Method

This method of developing a lesson not only is easy to remember, but also is very effective in mapping out the direction that brings about life change.

Hook

The Hook is an opening question or exercise that connects the group members to the theme you are about to study. The opening question should be one everyone can answer and which will connect them with the theme of the lesson. Also, this question should never be answerable with a simple “yes” or “no.”

Based on our theme of idols and the desired outcome of small-group members identifying idols in their lives, here are a couple of great opening questions:

- Besides family, what is your most valued possession?
- What item in your home do you value most?

Book

The Book step is reading the selected Scripture. To keep this activity fresh for the leader and the group, vary how you read the passages. Here are some ideas:

- Ask several people to read parts of the passage aloud. (You may want to ask them ahead of time.)
- Read the passage aloud in unison.
- Ask several people to read the passage in different translations.
- Use an audio version of the Bible to listen to the passage.
- Watch a dramatic portrayal of the passage. *The Visual Bible* by GNN International has word-for-word dramatic portrayal of the Books of Matthew, John, and Acts. These are done well and provide a fresh way to enter into Scripture passages.

Look

The Look step involves digging deeper into the passage. You have already done your digging into the passage in step one. For the group, there are two types of questions that accomplish this.

The first type of Look question is the observation question that uncovers the facts of the passage. The facts include who was speaking, who was listening (who was the original recipient), what was said, what was happening when it was said, and where it was said. If your passage isn't a narrative, the facts are similar and may include who was writing, who was written to, what the historical context was, and what the main topics are (including what words are repeated). These questions accomplish the important job of putting the passage into context. The context provides the frame on which future questions are placed. Therefore, you need only enough observation questions to set the context, not to “detail it to death.”

A couple of observation questions that set the context for our theme of idolatry are:

- What was the culture like at this time?
- What did the Rich Young Ruler ask Jesus?
- What did Jesus say in response to the Rich Young Ruler's question?
- Which of the Ten Commandments did Jesus not mention in his response? What is the theme of the omitted commands?
- How did the Rich Young Ruler respond to Jesus' answer?
- What does Jesus tell his disciples after the Rich Young Ruler leaves?

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The second type of Look questions are interpretation questions. These questions help uncover motivations. Interpretation questions ask the why and the how of the passage. They help retell the Bible story from the perspective of those in the story. The group members can then relate to people in the passage. This is an important step and should not be overlooked.

Good interpretation questions for our passage include:

- How do you think the Rich Young Ruler felt when Jesus asked him to give away everything to the poor?
- Do you think you would have felt the same way?
- Why do you think Jesus told the Rich Young Ruler to do this?
- Why do you think Jesus left out some of the Ten Commandments?
- What do you think the Rich Young Ruler did after he walked away?
- Why do you think the disciples responded as they did?
- Who do you identify with in the story? Why?

Took

The Took is the lesson's application. I have experienced small groups where the leader skipped the application questions because the group was short on time. Never skip the application questions. It's like a football team that charges the football down the field and stops and declares victory when they reach the one-yard line! Without this crucial step, we only increase the head knowledge of our group members. We need to take this knowledge from the head and implement it in the heart.

Ideas for application questions regarding the passage of the Rich Young Ruler include:

- What is keeping you from having a closer relationship with Jesus Christ?
- What are some things in your life that you would have a hard time giving up? Why?
- What is Jesus asking you to give up, and what steps will you take to do this?

Great group leaders include not only personal application questions, but also group-related application questions. These questions ask, "What are we as a small group going to do about this?"

- What things do we spend the most time on in our meetings: sharing about our weeks, eating together, reading and discussing the Bible, applying Scripture, or praying? Is there anything that we allow to keep us from meeting God together in our meetings? How should we spend our time together?
- How can we support one another as we seek to give up those things that Jesus is asking us to give up?

5. Follow Up at the Next Small-Group Meeting.

So you think you're done applying a passage after you have asked all the questions? Life-change doesn't happen just because answers are given to application questions. A good leader will take time at each meeting to follow-up on last week's application questions. This keeps the group accountable for the decisions they make at group meetings.

A Final Word

Your goal as the group leader is not to impart your knowledge of Scripture. Rather, you are to lead people to interpret and discover biblical truth and how it can be specifically applied in their lives. As you play the role of facilitator, you move your group members from being spiritually fed to learning how to feed themselves. This makes group members stronger and the group as a whole stronger. And, you're sure to reach the life-changing destination God wants for your group.

—MARK INGMIRE is the Small Groups and Adult Education Pastor at Savannah Christian Church in Savannah, Georgia; copyright 2011 Christianity Today International.

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Discuss

1. How often does your group get lost before you reach the application time? What usually causes that?
2. How might deciding on a theme for the study help keep your small group focused?
3. How much time does your group spend on the Look portion of the study? How might you encourage your group members to dig into the text more?

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What Do We Bring to the Bible?

Uncover your presuppositions to unlock a new way of understanding.

By Brandon O'Brien

Christians everywhere have a tendency to read themselves into the Bible. An obvious example of this can be seen in portraits of Jesus. In European and American art, Jesus is portrayed as a Caucasian with lots of long, beautiful hair; in African art, he is often tall, lean, and dark-skinned. In Asian art, he is Chinese, or Japanese, or Vietnamese. We all know, of course, that because Jesus was a Jew from Palestine, he didn't look like any of these portrayals. But we have a tendency to impose our own personal and cultural expectations on our image of Jesus.

We do the same thing with the Bible. Sometimes the things we assume because we were raised in a particular church or country or home can—even unconsciously—affect the way we understand a passage in the Bible. There is hope, though. Being aware of these assumptions helps us read the Bible more faithfully. It can even make the "real" meaning of a passage all the more powerful. We are not as likely to be moved by Scripture when it reinforces what we already thought. But when it confronts us with a new way of understanding things—that's a lesson we won't soon forget.

Below are a few exercises for uncovering your presuppositions. These can be helpful to do as a group and can make for exciting discussion.

1. Write down what you consider the most important details.

Especially in narrative passages, such as in the Old Testament or Gospels, the key to understanding a passage is often in the details. Unfortunately, sometimes our personal or cultural background can lead us to misidentify the most important details. One way to become aware of how your assumptions might be leading you away from the best interpretation of a passage is to write down what you consider the most important details in a story and think consciously about why you picked them.

Take the familiar story of the Prodigal Son, for example (Luke 15:11-32). What would you identify as the most important details in that story? American readers tend to identify the fact that the younger son squandered his inheritance foolishly as the most important. Interestingly, East Asian readers often say that the most important detail is that the son dishonored his father by asking for his inheritance. Russian readers regularly emphasize the fact that it was a famine that caused the son to return home. Each of these assumptions reveals something important about the cultural context of the reader. American Christians often value hard work, thrift, and savvy spending (traditional Puritan values), so they seize on the son's poor money management. East Asian Christians live in a culture where honor and shame are important, so they perceive the son's actions in that light. Russian Christians, with their history of poverty, believe the famine in the story is most important. Who is right? Once you've identified what you think are the most important details, take a moment to reference a Bible commentary on your passage. A good commentary will tell you what the original audience would have identified as the most important details.

2. Determine who you identify with in the story and why.

Another useful exercise is deciding which character(s) you identify with and why. This may help you recognize how your religious assumptions influence the way you read the Bible.

Consider the parable of the prodigal son again. With which character do you find yourself identifying: the younger son? The father? The elder son? Why do you feel like you are this person in the story?

In my experience, many Christians identify with the younger son, and for good reason. Like him, we recognize that we are sinners who have offended our heavenly Father and we depend on his gracious acceptance for

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salvation. Our application of the story, then, is to rejoice that no matter how far we stray, God always offers us the opportunity to repent and return home.

How does the story change, though, if we identify with the elder brother? The elder brother's problem was that he was not willing to extend grace to his brother, even though his father was. If we identify with the elder brother, the application of the story is that we should be eager to extend forgiveness and grace to those who were once lost in sin. Interestingly, when Jesus told this story, his audience was made up of faithful religious people (the Pharisees). Do your small-group members identify more with the lost sinner or the faithful Pharisee? Who do you think you *should* identify with?

3. Identify the key concepts in a passage and list your associations with that concept.

Sometimes our personal or cultural experiences freight certain words or concepts with considerable baggage. The associations we have with key concepts can influence the way we understand the Bible. For example, a friend of mine in college grew up in the foster care system. His dad was a deadbeat and, as a result, my friend spent his childhood with limited contact with his siblings and grandparents and without a consistent place to call home. Consequently, he had a hard time accepting the Bible's teaching that God is our "father." To him, a father is someone who causes grief and pain, not someone who loves and protects his children. If you were studying a passage in which God is called "father" (Matthew 6:32, for example), it might be helpful to brainstorm your associations with that term. How does Jesus' teaching change your associations?

Our associations with key concepts can be more cultural than personal, though. In 1 Samuel 8:1-21, Israel asks Samuel to place a king over them. What are your associations with the concept of "king"? Since the American Revolution, the term "king" has been synonymous with "tyrant" in American culture. How might that influence how I understand this passage?

Another example can be found in 1 Timothy 2:9. Paul instructs the young pastor that women should "dress modestly, with decency and propriety." It would be good to list your associations with each of those terms. For those of us in the West, the terms "modest" and "decent" might bring to mind issues related to sexual modesty and decency. That is, our first reaction might be that Paul is instructing women not to wear tight, low-cut, or revealing clothing in church. In other parts of the world, these terms might have economic associations. A reader from the global south might assume that Paul means women should not wear fancy or expensive clothing in church. If this is what Paul means, then our application would be very different. Perhaps the concept of "Sunday best" is cultural and not biblical.

The important thing in each of these exercises is to develop an awareness of what we bring to the Bible. Only when we know what we are bringing to the text can we truly hope to let it speak for itself.

—BRANDON O'BRIEN is editor at large for Leadership and author of [The Strategically Small Church](#); copyright 2010 Christianity Today International.

This article originally appeared on our sister resource [BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#).

Discuss

1. While reading the examples, did you recognize any presuppositions you may have brought to the texts? What other passages or stories might these presuppositions influence?
2. As you study passages, how can you make yourself aware of the presuppositions you may bring to it? How can you incorporate these practices into your regular study? How might you help your group members become aware of their presuppositions?
3. Why is it important to identify what you bring to the Bible? Is this always a bad thing? How can it work for good? How can you balance the need to allow the Bible to speak for itself with the benefits of personal connection with a text?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you further discover exegesis and hermeneutics with your small group

Smallgroups.com. We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [How to Prepare for a Bible Study](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Discussing Doctrine and Theology](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [The Hermeneutics Quiz](#) (Webquiz Assessment)

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. A website with articles and resources for all church leaders.

[How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth](#) by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. Covering everything from translational concerns to different genres of biblical writing, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* uses clear, simple language to help you accurately understand the Bible (Zondervan, 2003: ISBN 978-0310246046).

[How to Read the Bible Book by Book](#) by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. Written by two top evangelical scholars, this survey is designed to get you actually reading the Bible knowledgeably and understanding it accurately (Zondervan, 2002: ISBN 978-0310211181).

[Hermeneutics](#) by Henry A. Virkler and Karelyne Gerber Ayayo. This accessible text, which combines hermeneutical theory with practical steps for exegesis, outlines a five-step hermeneutical procedure (Baker Academic, 2007: ISBN 978-0801031380).

[The New Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible](#) by David L. Petersen and Beverly Roberts Gaventa. This resource is designed for pastors, students, Bible teachers, and laypersons—and anyone else who wants a portable, accessible, and trustworthy resource for deeper Scripture study (Abingdon Press, 2010: ISBN 978-0687334117).