

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

How do different perspectives help us understand the Bible?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

When has the way someone else understands the Bible helped you change your mind?



Understanding the information (20 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

The fact is that left to our own devices we can often find reading the Bible hard. This is not only because it is long and sometimes hard to understand, but because there can be an element of spiritual struggle involved in even opening it.



Before the printing press most Christians could only read the Bible together, and often did so in large chunks. Coming to the Bible with other people can help us to build the spiritual practices of studying and meditation, to establish rhythms of being with God in the Bible and to learn from each other how to approach the Bible. The best way to learn something is by watching others do it, and then trying yourself.

In addition, we can help each other interpret the Bible well.

Christians have different understandings of some parts of the Bible because it is impossible for us to read anything without interpreting it.

Reading the Bible well therefore means doing two things:

Getting as close to the original meaning as we can by using different tools to give us the background knowledge we need.

Knowing that each of us has a certain perspective – no one is likely to have the full view of what is going on.

Sometimes people get worried by talk of there being lots of different interpretations of the Bible. They might ask, “Surely there is one truth from God which we all need to find when reading it?” Acknowledging that there are different perspectives is not necessarily saying that they are all as valid as each other or denying that there is truth. But because it is impossible for any human being to have a complete view, we need to read with humility and openness to keep on learning. Rather than being threatened by this reality, our reading of the Bible can be enriched and challenged by those whose perspectives are very different from us, and who might open up new ways of seeing things.

(The technical word to describe the way we interpret things is hermeneutics, and when talking about the Bible we talk about “biblical hermeneutics”.)

There have been, and continue to be, many debates what it means to interpret well, and about which perspectives to emphasise when we interpret Scripture.

Some (like Luther and Calvin) have asked, “How do we discover the most literal way of reading the Bible, according to its original meaning and intention?” Others (like Origen) have agreed with this, but asked, “Can we interpret the Bible in any allegorical ways, with a second level of meaning?” In our own reading this might make us ask, “Can we read the account of Jesus calming the storm as only about God’s control over the weather, or more allegorically as a way of seeing His activity in our own “storms of life?” Others have emphasised a moral perspective, asking, “What might this story show us about how to live now?”

But in the last few decades another important question about interpreting well has come by people asking, “How can we make sure we are understanding the Bible better from the perspectives of those who have previously been left out or sidelined by history?”

For example, in 1949 Howard Thurman, an African-American professor, wrote a book called “Jesus and the Disinherited”. He argued that for centuries the Bible had for the most part been interpreted by those who were powerful in society – and even in order to justify slavery. He said that to understand Jesus better we need to read the Bible from the perspective that Jesus was poor and a member of a minority group. When we do this, we see that “Christianity as born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed.”

His words reflect a desire to read the Bible from a perspective of liberation – particularly for those who suffer from injustice. “Liberation theologians” look for ways in which the Bible can be understood as a resource for overturning unjust structures in the world. They offer the view that however we understand the Bible, we interpret it well when it is “good news for the poor”.

Others give better attention to the perspective of women when it comes to interpreting Scripture well. For example, while the Bible was not written for men, they notice how religion has traditionally been dominated by men and how most of the Bible has been written by men. They ask questions about what difference it makes that Jesus was a man.

How much should these other perspectives influence our reading of the Bible? Some would say that these voices have been so ignored in the past that they need to be centre stage. (Some liberation theologians would argue that liberation is the main theme of the Bible.) At the very least, they can jolt us into thinking in fresh ways about what God might be saying through the Bible.

Taking these perspectives seriously will help us when we are thinking about which themes are important throughout the Bible, but they might also help us to read particular parts of it with fresh eyes. We might ask, “How would a refugee/rich person/poor person/differently abled person/male/female/black/white/child/adult see this passage and what could I learn?”

Good questions to ask when interpreting the Bible well are:

How can I read this with others?

Are there other ways of interpreting this which are still faithful to the original meaning?

Whose voices are missing in the way that this has been traditionally understood?

Discuss: How can we make sure we become more aware of our “blind spots” when listening to God through the Bible?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Acts 15: 1-21 in which the first Christians wrestled with different perspectives.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:

What does this passage teach me about God?

What does this passage teach me about people?

How does this passage call me to obey God?

What might I do in response to this this week?



Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

Watch the video at:

<https://youtu.be/OT4k-d7GvrY>

What struck you as important in the video?



Responding to God’s leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, “What might God be showing me and how might I respond?” They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, “Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?”



Group prayer (5 minutes)

God of all people, a friend of the poor, our holy liberator.
You have promised us salvation through Christ
a heaven of justice, mercy, and righteousness.
Help us to overcome worries
and threats of life
so that everyone will live in harmony,
friendship, and solidarity of life surrounds us.
Through your Holy Spirit
make us a mouthpiece of your salvific act,
a hand that comforts,
a provider of food for the poor,
a light that ignites hope
a testimony of your love
and a champion of your peace to all.
Amen.



How can different perspectives help us understand the Bible?

We all **interpret** the Bible. If we want to read it well two things matter.



The first is getting as **close to the original meaning** as we can.

The second is about knowing that **each of us has a certain perspective** – no one is likely to have the full view of what is going on. This is true in any area of life.

Sometimes people get worried

by talk about lots of different interpretations of the Bible. They might ask, "Surely there is one truth from God which we all need to find when reading it?"

Acknowledging that there are different perspectives is not necessarily saying that they are all as valid as each other or denying that there is truth. But because it is impossible for any human being to have a complete view, we need to read with humility and openness to keep on learning – our reading of the Bible can be enriched and challenged by those whose perspectives are very different from us, and who might open up new ways of seeing things.

This requires a trust that the Bible has been given by God as something that is best read in relationship with others. (The technical word to describe the way we interpret things is hermeneutics, and when talking about the Bible we talk about "biblical hermeneutics".)

At least four different perspectives have been discovered.

"How do we discover the most **literal** way of reading the Bible, according to its original meaning and intention?"
(Luther and Calvin).



"What might this story show us about how to live **morally** now?"

"Can we interpret the Bible in any **allegorical** ways, with a second level of meaning?" (Origen) e.g. "Can we read of Jesus calming the storm as only about God's control over the weather, or more allegorically as a way of Him in our own "storms of life?"

More recently people have asked:
"How can we make sure we are understanding the Bible better from the perspectives of those who have **previously been left out or sidelined by history?**"

For example, Professor Howard Thurman argued that for centuries the Bible had for the most part been interpreted by those who were powerful in society – and even in order to justify slavery. He said that to understand Jesus better we need to read the Bible from the "**liberation**" perspective that **Jesus was poor and a member of a minority group.**



“Liberation theologians” look for ways in which the Bible can be understood as a resource for overturning unjust structures in the world. They offer the view that however we understand the Bible, we interpret it well when it is “good news for the poor”.

More recently this kind of perspective has been highlighted by people reflecting on the experience of Black Christians in the West – people who feel their experience has been missing from the way the Bible has been interpreted.

Others give better attention to the perspective of women when it comes to interpreting Scripture well.

How much should these other perspectives influence our reading of the Bible?

For example, while the Bible was not written for men, they notice how religion has traditionally been dominated by men and how most of the Bible has been written by men.

They ask questions about what difference it makes that Jesus was a man.

How could being more aware of the female imagery for God in the Bible will help lead to a higher view of women’s places in the church and society?



Some would say that these voices have been so ignored in the past that they need to be centre stage. (Some liberation theologians would argue that liberation is the main theme of the Bible.) At the very least, they can jolt us into thinking in fresh ways about what God might be saying through the Bible.

Taking these perspectives seriously will help us when we are thinking about which **themes** are important throughout the Bible, but they might also help us to read **particular parts** of it with fresh eyes. We might ask, “How would a refugee / rich person / poor person / differently-abled person / male / female / black / white / child / adult see this passage and what could I learn?”

Good questions to ask when interpreting the Bible well are:

- How can I read this with others?
- Are there other ways of interpreting this which are still faithful to the original meaning?
- Whose voices are missing in the way that this has been traditionally understood?

