



# Biblical Interpretation 101

## SESSION 2

| *How can we interpret the Bible more faithfully?*

### Goal for the Session

The participants will identify and explore some of the more widely used models of biblical interpretation and reflect upon their use for personal biblical study.

### Preparing for the Session

- Begin your preparations with prayer
- During this session the class will create a time line. Hang a sturdy string, rope, or yarn across the wall of the meeting space and attach clothespins. Participants will hang prepared 8½" x 11" papers during the session; these papers can be easily moved to appropriate places in the time line using the clothespins. An alternative to this method is to put tape on the back of the papers and attach them to the wall.
- Provide copies of the Participant Handout for each group member.
- Write or print the following phrases as 8½" x 11" signs for use during the exercise:

Roughly 200 to 1500

1500 to 1750

1750 to 1950

1950 to the present

Bible as a direct, divine word to God's people

Antiochians

Alexandrians

The Bible was a direct, divine oracle, mysterious but intended for edification and spiritual growth.

Protestant Reformation

Direct access to the Bible was necessary for the people of God to discover the wonder of the gospel message.

Concentrating on the "plain sense" of a passage

Enlightenment

The discipline of biblical study in and for itself emerged.

Rhetorical criticism

Canonical criticism

Reader response

- Read through the Participant Handout. It contains many facts that will be helpful as you lead the session. Consider highlighting the phrases used in the prepared signs above.

### Teaching Tip

Many Americans do not have times of silence in their lives. Many tend to want to fill the silence with noise: a television, computer, radio, telephone, or just talking. Some have even gotten to the point where they do not know what to do in the periods of quiet. Silence has become uncomfortable. The use of bidding prayer and guided meditation in this session helps participants use the silence to get in touch with themselves and listen for God. Although the tendency may be to speed through these sections to avoid feeling uncomfortable, you should take the time to let the Spirit move.

### Opening (10 minutes)

#### 1. Prayer

Center the group and begin the session by calling upon God's presence in prayer using the following words.

Consider pausing for a few seconds between phrases, giving some time for the participants to talk with God about the topics raised.

Gracious God,  
You had a hand in gathering this group at this time  
and in this place.  
For that we are thankful.  
You inspire us, give new life through your Son, and  
move us through your Spirit.  
For that we are thankful.  
We remember those who, so long ago, were moved  
and inspired to write, to interpret, to challenge.  
For them we are thankful.  
We remember that we, too, are a part of that history,  
not so long ago, but this very day.  
For that we are thankful.  
Move us, stir us, wake us up.  
For that we would be thankful.  
**Amen.**

## 2. Time Line of Our Faith

Guide the group through a form of guided meditation. Using a similar format to the following, encourage the participants to relax and be open to some silence and a place for the Spirit to move:

Sit back, breathe deeply, close your eyes if you would like, and think about today.

How you feel . . . what you have done.

[pause]

Now go backward in time, remembering when you were a small child.

Think about who was around you and what was important.

Remember a time when you were happy. Think about what comforted you.

[pause]

Now speed up the days. As you are growing, think about people you knew . . . events that shaped you . . . experiences that changed you.

[pause]

Think about your life of faith.

Remember times that changed your faith . . . people who demonstrated Christ's message to you . . . important places that evoke God's presence for you.

[pause]

How has your faith changed? How has it grown?  
What has shaped you?

Think through your years. How have you seen God working?

[pause]

Keep those images in your mind. Open your eyes.

Write down a key word, or words, if you would like.

## Exploring (25 minutes)

### 3. Sharing Experiences

Depending upon how the group members came back from the guided meditation, there may be an opportunity and a need to share the milestones they identified. Ask the participants to briefly share their reflections on the following questions:

- What experience surprised you?
- How did you see God moving through your life?
- How might God have been moving even before you were born?

### 4. A Biblical Interpretation Time Line

Assist the participants in reviewing and experiencing God's movement throughout the Bible and the lives of some of its reformers and theologians by creating a large time line using some of the information from the Participant Handout. Making this exercise similar to a quiz show can add some excitement and fun.

Begin by introducing the major historical eras of 200 to 1500; 1500 to 1750; 1750 to 1950; 1950 to the present. Add these eras to the large time line the group will be using, allowing space in between the eras. Explain to the group that you will introduce the various ideas by showing the prepared signs. You will challenge the group to explain the concept using the information presented in the handout and to place it in the appropriate position in the time line. For help in leading this session, the signs are presented in the correct order in the "Preparing for the Session" section.

Reveal one sign at a time, allowing the group to add to the information and indicate its placement in the time line. Work with the group rather than serving as

an expert, and rely on the information in the Participant Handout for assistance.

## Responding (5 minutes)

### 5. Connecting

Ask the participants to view the time line that has been created while reflecting upon the time line of their own life they created through the guided meditation. Invite the group to work through the following questions in pairs:

- Considering your life of faith, what method of interpretation most closely matches your own view?
- How can this history inform your life of faith and biblical study?
- How, if at all, will you think of the Bible differently following this study?

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 6. Summary and Prayer

Read aloud the concluding paragraph of the Participant Handout, quoted here. Invite the participants to reflect upon the sharing that took place within the pairs.

These various forms of interpretation serve to remind contemporary readers of the complexity, challenge, and creativeness implicit in every act of interpretation. They also remind us of the fact that we cannot escape our own time and place, our own culture and worldview. Different periods in church history have provided interpretative methods suited for the day. God's Spirit continues to work among us and raise up those who will dedicate themselves to the enterprise of interpretation, some formally and many informally.

Close the session with prayer, using the following words or some of your own.

How wonderful are your words, O God. And how amazing are your works. May your Spirit continue to work and move among us, stirring us to know you more. **Amen.**

### 7. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for session 3. Ask participants to read it carefully in preparation for the next session. Encourage the group to focus on the

three themes as presented. If you are using this study as part of the Interpreting the Bible Study Pack, consider using the four-session study entitled "Great Themes of the Bible" by Jim Chatham next and then returning for the final session of this study.

## Teaching Alternatives

- If your meeting space does not lend itself to having a rope clothesline or tape on the walls, use a large piece of newsprint and sticky notes. Although these are more difficult to see in a room with many people, writing with a dark marker can improve the visibility.
- Groups who enjoy research and study may decide to divide into four smaller groups, one group per historical era. Each smaller group can then take the time of exploration to learn more about the biblical interpretation model of the period by reading the Participant Handout and other study materials more carefully. These smaller groups can present their findings to the larger group, benefiting all.
- Although this session includes an opening prayer related to the subject at hand, consider tying together the sessions in this study by opening with the prayer from the first session, included here:

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 NRSV).

#### We praise you, God!

How I love your Temple, Lord Almighty! How I want to be there! I long to be in the Lord's Temple. With my whole being I sing for joy to the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 TEV).

#### We praise you, God!

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My souls yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 NIV).

#### We praise you, God!

How lovely are your dwelling-places, Yahweh Sabaoth. My whole being yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts, My heart and my body cry out for joy to the living God (Ps. 84:1–2 NJB).

#### We praise you, God!

How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of  
the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the  
living God (Ps. 84:1–2 KJV).

**We praise you, God!**

## For More Information

Justo L. Gonzales, “How the Bible Has Been Interpreted in Christian Tradition” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Version* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

Celia Brewer Marshall, *A Guide Through the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

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## About the Writer

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