

# **The Bible: Reading and Interpreting for Today**

## **Session Objectives:**

1. To provide a basic understanding of the contents of the Bible and its formation.
2. To provide an understanding of what “inerrancy” “infallibility” “authority” and “inspiration” mean in the context of biblical interpretation.
3. To start discussion towards principles for beneficial biblical interpretation.

## **Background:**

The Bible has been used throughout its inception to both give life and to negate it (Genesis 6:25-27 was used to justify American slavery). It has been used to harm and to heal (Psalm 23 is particularly soothing). Biblical interpretation is not something we are often self-critical about. We simply do it. We read a story in the Bible and we find meaning in it. There is little question in our minds of whether we are engaging a correct or incorrect reading, we simply read it. This works until we meet another person with a different reading of the same biblical story. If this reading is in conflict with ours, we immediately are able to recognize a “wrong” interpretation.

For instance one may read the Adam and Eve story as a mythical story about two young people maturing through discernment of good and evil or one may read this same story as a theological story of sin and fall. Another may read this story as the literal story of the beginning of the human race. Another may read it as all three.

Biblical understanding and interpretation is becoming increasingly important in postmodern times. There is an increasing reluctance to assign authority to traditional institutions, such as the church. And within those institutions there is a lack of central authority. No one person is thought to possess the right answer in any discipline. We are increasingly interested in a variety of voices and people are encouraged to think as independently, rather than communally. This not necessarily something to be feared, but it does make

it important to create some commonly held boundaries or guidelines for biblical interpretations.

Politics and religion are also increasingly dipping into each other's territories. Religion-based terrorism as well as discussions of homosexuality are forcing Christians to be able to define who they are as people of Christ and as people of the Book.

What is offered here is only foundational work with a focus on interpretation of the Bible when used in moral debate. We begin with a very brief introduction to the character and formation of the Bible. This may or may not be needed for your group. Next we move to a discussion of what we mean when we call the Bible, the "Word of God." Here, again, you may or may not need to go deeply into this objective. Finally the bulk of your time may be spent on the final section which offer some guidelines for biblical interpretation, some of which you, yourself, may disagree! This is fine. Simply use these as discussion starters and formulate your own guidelines for biblical interpretation.

Most importantly, Moravian documents have some helpful statements on biblical interpretation. Our Covenant for Christian Living guides us in accepting the ambiguity inherent in all biblical interpretation, stating, "We decline to determine as binding what the Scriptures have left undetermined, or to argue about mysteries impenetrable to human reason" (para. 3). The Ground of the Unity reminds us that the "Holy Scripture does not contain any doctrinal system, so the Unitas Fratrum (original name for the Moravian Church) also has not developed any of its own because it knows that the mystery of Jesus Christ, which is attested to in the Bible, cannot be comprehended completely by any human mind or expressed completely in any human statement" (pg. 4). Finally, Lukas of Prague, a Moravian leader and theologian from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, argues that the Bible is a ministrative, that it is an instrument that helps us to understand the essential: Belief in Jesus Christ. Hence, Moravians do not worship the Bible as an essential, but as the witness to that which is.

## **Materials Needed:**

List of Known Bible Stories

<http://www.familyhomesnetwork.com/christianity/biblestudy/listofbiblestories.html>

A Study Bible with subheadings and notes, e.g., Harper Collin Study Bible

Handout: *Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation*

## **Gathering:**

Play the game, "I KNOW THE BIBLE BETTER THAN YOU." You can do this by reading off the biblical stories and whoever knows the most and can tell you something about each story wins. They are the expert.

Ask people what how they would describe the Bible? What is it?

## **Session:**

Use the information in #1 and #2 as needed. These can be separate sessions or they can be made very brief. The goal is to have time to discuss in depth section #3.

### **1. Overview of the Bible and its Formation**

The Bible is written in two testaments. The word testament is Latin for covenant or promise between God and humans. The first Testament, or Old Testament was written between 1000 BCE (before the common era) and 200 BCE and contains 39 books. It collected stories of the Ancient Israelite people who worshiped a God called Yahweh. The over all theme of the Old Testament could be understood as: COVENANT OR PROMISE.

The stories in the Bible were first collected together in 587 BCE when Israelites were taken into exile by their neighbors the Babylonians. They collected and wrote down the stories that were important to their identity as Isralites. WHAT WOULD BE SOME STORIES THAT DEFINE AMERICANS AS A NATION?

After Jesus came to earth, died and rose again people began to write down Jesus's miracles and his teachings. Paul, the apostle and missionary who first started churches in Asia Minor (present day Turkey), began writing letters to churches he had started. His letters date from 50 CE and the Gospels (biographies and proclamations of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God) were written between 60 and 100 CE. These letters, gospels, as well as Acts which is a history of the church and other letters written by 1<sup>st</sup> century believers make of the 27 books of the New Testament.

The Bible contains 5 promises that God made to the people.

1. Genesis 6-9: Noah: Promise not to destroy the earth again
2. Genesis 12: Abraham: Promise to be a nation and to have land and offspring
3. Exodus 1-24 Moses: Promise to free Israel from Egypt and to be their God if the people follow God's commandments
4. 2 Samuel 7: David: God promise the Throne of Israel to David and his descendants
5. The Gospels: Jesus: God's promise of forgiveness and salvation to all believers.

These promises are the themes of many of the books of the Bible. There are many different kinds of writing in the Bible, there is history (1-2 Kings), there are historical legends (Judges, 1-2 Samuel) there are short stories (Esther and Ruth). There is mythical story (Genesis 1-11), there are ancestral legends (Genesis 12-50). There are national legends (Exodus). There is law (Exodus-Deuteronomy), religions prayers and songs (Psalms), skeptical poetry/philosophy (Job, Ecclesiastes), love poetry (Song of Songs), prophecy (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.). In the New Testament we have letter, history, and theological biography, proclamation.

**WHAT SORT OF "COMMUNICATION" WOULD YOU CREATE TO EXPLAIN OR CONTEMPLATE GOD/CHRIST/HOLY SPIRIT TODAY? (an essay, poem, movie, documentary, performance, commercial, novel, mathematical proof, etc.)**

## **2. Biblical Authority**

In this section we will talk about what sort of authority the Bible has. As believer we give the Bible authority in our lives. For non-believers it does not have authority, because they do not give it authority. Authority is something given. How do believers give the Bible authority? Why do they give it authority and what does that mean? Also what does it mean to say the Bible is true? What do we mean when we say the Bible is the Word of God?

Christians believe the Bible contains the story of God's activity in the world, including the coming of God's son, Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. We believe the events of Jesus' death and resurrection to be historically true.

What about the other parts? Like Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Daniel and the Lion's Den? There are a couple of ways to think about the Bible as true:

**INERRANCY IS THE BELIEF THAT ALL OF THE WORDS OF THE BIBLE ARE TRUE, HISTORICALLY AND SCIENTIFICALLY.**

**INFALLIBILITY IS THE NOTION THAT ALL THE WORDS OF THE BIBLE ARE TRUE – THE PURPOSE BEHIND THE WORDS AND STORIES IS ALWAYS TRUE AND TRUSTWORTHY.**

**BIBLE AS WORD OF GOD CAN MEAN TWO THINGS:**

1. God inspired men to write every word of the original Hebrew and Greek in the original texts (of which we have copies, some of which may contain human error).
2. God inspired the process of bringing the books of the Bible together and its translation and interpretation. There is no book or passage that we can cut out of the Bible. We are meant to wrestle with the whole text in the historical context that each book was written.

**HAVE THE STUDENTS WRESTLE WITH WHAT TRUTH MEANS AND HOW THEY UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE AND CREATION? OR THE BIBLE AND SCIENCE?**

### 3. Biblical Interpretation

For this section use the hand-out *Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation*. Discuss each guideline, choosing those you find most helpful.

Finally choose a text and interpret it as a group:

1. Divorce: Matthew 19:1-10
2. Homosexual Behavior: Leviticus 18:22
3. Ordination of Women: 2 Timothy 2:8-15
4. Other?

**Closing:** Read on part of Psalm 119 (this is a Psalm praising the Bible as instruction). Read it as a prayer, add your own prayers as well.