

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 of 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.

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 [Missiorelate](#) and [Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World](#); copyright 2011 by Christianity Today International.

Discuss

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?

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?

Which of the five keys do you struggle with? Which ones does your group struggle with?

<http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2011/interpretingbible.html>; posted 12/19/11

Note: This article has been excerpted from [Exegesis and Hermeneutics for Small Groups](#).