

How Do We Know God Is Trying to Tell Us Something?



Session 1



2 Timothy 3:16–17; Genesis 2:7; 1 Kings 19:11–12

Session Objective

Participants will learn that God reveals God’s self to us in many ways, especially through Scripture. Further, they will learn how to be open to God’s revelation in Scripture and what it means that Scripture is the ultimate source of authority for faith.

Faith Statement

We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.

—*Second Helvetic Confession* (5.001)

Session Overview

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Enhancements

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Scripture Connections



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

When he was a young Catholic priest and scholar, Martin Luther was accused of heresy for beliefs that eventually led to the Protestant Reformation. At his trial for excommunication, Luther defended his position, but more importantly defended that his position was based on Scripture, rather than on a history of human interpretation and reason. Consider his famous quote:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason, for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves, I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”¹

Reflect on the following questions:

- When have you had to choose between Scripture and a principle of culture, reason, or even Christian tradition?
- What motivates you to stand firm on Scripture, rather than on the world’s message?
- How do you feel when Scripture directs you to change or to a new belief?
- How can you live with Scripture as a deeper authority for your faith?



Understanding the Scripture

The eighteenth chapter of 1 Kings tells of a prophetic showdown between one prophet of YHWH and many prophets of the storm god Baal. Only Elijah manages to successfully summon a storm, thereby proving that God is the real God. In 1 Kings 19:11–12, Elijah again sees a storm, but now God waits to appear in the “sheer silence.”

As your group may find in Explore, Option B, 2 Timothy 3:16 can be controversial. Before you and your participants decide what it means for your faith journeys, consider three issues:

1. By the phrase *all scripture*, Paul means the Hebrew Bible, period. Christians do believe that the New Testament is the Word of God, but modern-day Christians must remember that Paul died before any idea of a New Testament existed.
2. By the word *inspired* (or *God-breathed* in the NIV), Paul poetically implies that God has given God’s own Spirit to the words.
3. Paul is not making a doctrinal claim. This is a personal letter, not a theological treatise. The context for verse 16, as Timothy would have

1. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehman, as quoted in Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 245.

read it, and as we should read it, is urging us to understand the history of the Hebrew Bible in light of the salvation delivered in Christ. That may not sound exciting or controversial to our modern ears, but Paul was one of the first people to contend that the history of God's people was not an end in itself. He argued throughout his ministry that Jesus was not another miraculous prophet, or even merely God's Son, but instead, that Christ is the pinnacle of sacred history, through which the past and future must be understood. In other words, Scripture is inspired—*in-Spirited*—insofar as it points to Christ.



Understanding the Faith Statement

The *Second Helvetic Confession* dives immediately into the issue for this session: God's revelation. The first paragraphs address the ultimate authority of Scripture, which has always been an emphasis of the Reformed tradition. The rest of the first chapter explains God's ability also to tell us something through sound preaching and inward illumination. The second chapter focuses further on how to interpret appropriately what God is telling us.

As opposed to the *Scots Confession*, which was written only a year earlier (1560) to distinguish the Scottish Reformed Church especially from Catholicism, the *Helvetic* rather aggressively sets apart the theology of the Swiss Reformed Church from that of all other belief systems. Almost every chapter of the confession uses Scripture to explain carefully but succinctly what the Reformed tradition *does* believe, then critiques other belief systems.



Teaching Today's Question

That Scripture is the ultimate source of authority for faith may seem like an innocuous, almost obvious Christian belief. But this simple principle has been misconstrued and misused in two distinct ways, and might confuse your group. First, it does not mean that we should not interpret Scripture; it means, rather, that our interpretations do not hold authority over Scripture itself. That distinction (although oversimplified) has been an issue of theological disagreement between Catholics and Protestants over the last five hundred years. Be clear to your participants that Catholics *absolutely* do trust the Bible, but that whereas Catholic leadership has interpreted God's Word and established its meaning in their own words, Protestants have denied that those interpretations (or their own, for that matter) can ever match the authority of the Bible.

Second, that Scripture is the ultimate authority for faith does *not* mean that one must read or interpret it in a certain way. About ninety years ago in America, some Christians began to reformulate the Reformed position on Scripture, claiming that only a literal reading of Scripture was authoritative and that denying this was tantamount to denying God. Be clear to your participants that placing authority in God's Word is about trusting God, not a particular version of faith.



Enter

Option A: Little Cabin

- Copy of "Little Cabin Song" (Web Resource 1a) for every two or three participants

As participants arrive, distribute copies of "Little Cabin Song" (Web Resource 1a). Sing together the verses of "Little Cabin in the Woods," using the words and motions provided. Invite participants to create new styles (including words and motions) in which the song could be sung. (For example, sing the song with surfer lingo, as a hip-hop song, or as a song from an opera.) Point out how many ways we can express and understand a message. Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

God, open our ears, eyes, and minds, so that we might hear and see and understand what you are trying to tell us. Be loud, be bright, and be persistent as you lead us into your truth and life. Amen.

Option B: Bible Drills

- Bibles, *optional*: small prizes

As participants arrive, make sure each person has a Bible and explain that you are going to lead the group in Bible drills. If Bible drills are unfamiliar to your group, say something like:

When your parents and grandparents were children and teenagers, they might have participated in Bible drills. The rules are simple: Hold your Bible in the air between your two palms until the leader calls out a Bible verse; the first person to read the verse "wins" the round.

Lead the participants in the drills, using the following Bible verses:

- Ephesians 6:17
- Mark 13:31
- 1 Samuel 3:8
- John 14:16–17
- Romans 10:17
- Ezekiel 36:27
- Acts 2:17
- Daniel 2:19

Consider passing out small prizes to the participants to reward them for completing the activity, and explore the following questions together:

- How well do you know the Bible?
- Do activities like this one help you know the Bible better? Why or why not?
- Is Scripture as important to your generation as to your grandparents' generation? Why or why not?

Pray the opening prayer.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Gather the participants in a comfortable location. Use the following questions to facilitate a conversation around the question for this session: How do we know God is trying to tell us something? Encourage the group members to explore their own questions that relate to the session question.



- Are you more likely to trust people or to be skeptical of people?
- How do you know when something you read on the Internet or see on television is truthful?
- What is something you believed strongly that wasn't true? What is something that you couldn't believe that turned out to be true?
- How do you know that our church is telling the truth about a God who loves you?
- How can you discern what God is trying to tell you?
- Do people ever confuse God's message with messages from popular culture? How can you stay tuned to God's message?
- What other questions do you have about God communicating with us?

Option B: Film Clip—*The Matrix*



The Matrix (1999, R) and movie-viewing equipment

Before the session, preview the following clip from *The Matrix*: 35:20–41:00. This is from Chapter 11, beginning with Morpheus saying, "I don't have to hope; I know it." *Note*: This film is rated R for sci-fi violence and brief language.

Explain to your group that in this movie, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) discovers and trains Neo (Keanu Reeves), who he believes is "the chosen one" to save the world from evil and blindness. The comparisons to John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Christian story are intentional, albeit well covered in wild science-fiction imagery. This scene begins with Morpheus saying, "I don't have to hope; I know it." He goes on to explain to Neo that everything he believed about the "real" world is false. Watch the clip together and explore the following questions about believing a message:



- What truth do you know so deeply that you don't have to hope? How do you know it's true?
- What is something you believed strongly that wasn't true? What is something that you couldn't believe that turned out to be true?
- How do you know that our church is telling the truth about a God who loves you?

- How can you discern what God is trying to tell you?
- Do people ever confuse God’s message with messages from popular culture? How can you stay tuned to God’s message?
- What other questions do you have about God communicating with us?



Explore

Option A: For the Bible Tells Me So

- Bibles, copy of “Jesus Loves Me” (Web Resource 1b) for every two or three participants

Before the session, consider asking one of your musically inclined participants to learn how to play the song “Jesus Loves Me” on a musical instrument so they can lead the group in singing.

Explain the story of Karl Barth, by saying something like:

Karl Barth (pronounced “bart”) was a Swiss pastor and one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. He is best known for standing up to Hitler’s terrible interpretation of Christianity and for reminding the Reformed (Presbyterian) branch of the church of its focus on the authority of Scripture. In a famous story, someone asked Barth to summarize his faith in one sentence. He responded with the first line of the famous children’s song: “Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.”

Distribute copies of “Jesus Loves Me” (Web Resource 1b) and sing the song together. Explore the following questions about the message of the song:

- What is the message of the song?
- Do you agree that you know that Jesus loves you because the Bible tells you so? Why or why not?
- Is the Bible a good enough reason for a Christian to believe that Jesus loves them, or should belief in Jesus rest on other reasons? What might be a better reason to believe in Jesus rather than the Bible? What makes these reasons better?
- Is the Bible a good way to convince non-Christians to believe in Jesus? Why or why not?
- How else might you convince someone who doesn’t believe in the triune God that Jesus loves them?

Make sure each participant has a Bible and read 2 Timothy 3:16–17 together. Explore the following questions:



- What does this passage mean to you?
- What does this passage have to do with “Jesus Loves Me”? Is the passage more related to the phrase “for the Bible tells me so” or to the phrase “they are weak, but he is strong”? Explain.
- What does it mean that Scripture is inspired by God?
- Is Scripture God’s way of telling us about the world, like a history or science textbook, or is it God’s way of telling us about God? Explain.

Option B: God’s Breath and Spirit



Bibles (various translations), copy of “Breath and Spirit” (Web Resource 1c) for every two or three participants, *optional*: copy of the *Book of Confessions*

Have a volunteer read out loud to the group the Faith Statement for this session (*Second Helvetic Confession*, 5.001) either from the *Book of Confessions* or from page 3. Explore the following questions about God’s revelation:



- What does it mean that God spoke to the authors of Scripture?
- What does it mean that God speaks to us through Scripture?
- When and how has God spoken to you through Scripture?

Make sure each participant has a Bible, taking care that as many translations of the Bible are available as possible. Invite a few volunteers who have different translations to read 2 Timothy 3:16 out loud to the group before exploring the following questions together:



- What did you notice about the different translations? (*God-breathed vs. inspired*)
- Do the different English words imply different meanings? If so, what is the difference?
- What does it mean about the Bible that God breathed or inspired it?
- What does it mean about our faith in the Bible that God breathed or inspired it?

Have the participants read Genesis 2:7 together. Distribute copies of “Breath and Spirit” (Web Resource 1c) and read the information on the page. Explore the following questions:



- How does knowing something about *pneuma* affect your understanding of 2 Timothy 3:16? How do you feel about the role God played in Scripture?
- Why might the writer of Genesis 2:7 have chosen to use *naphach* over *ruah*?
- What does that word choice tell you about God’s breath in you and your relationship to God?
- What is similar and what is different about God’s breath in you and in Scripture?



Express

Option A: The Power of Scripture

- Copies of "Power of Scripture" (Web Resource 1d), scissors, hole punch, string, small objects of various weights (e.g., paper clip, pen, empty water bottle, plastic coffee mug)

Before the session, cut apart the Scripture verses found on "Power of Scripture" (Web Resource 1d), making enough for each person in your group to have three. Display the collected objects of various weights. Practice this activity with a few different objects, so you know generally how much weight one or many strips of paper can hold.

Give each person one Scripture verse cut from "Power of Scripture" (Web Resource 1d). Have participants try to lift the displayed objects with their Scripture verses by punching a hole at one end of each strip of paper and connecting the paper to the object with string. Challenge the participants to lift the heaviest object they think their paper can lift without tearing. Have anyone whose paper tears read his or her verse out loud to the group.

"Scripture Braiding" (Web Resource 1e) contains a step-by-step guide with images that show how to braid the strips of paper.

Give each person another Scripture verse cut from "Power of Scripture" (Web Resource 1d). Ask the participants to form groups of three so that three different Scripture verses are represented in each group. Have the groups braid their strips of paper together using the following instructions:

- Stack the three strips of paper together.
- Punch a hole on one end of the strips of paper and tie the strips together with string.
- As you braid the strips of paper, fold each strip when you bring it back toward the middle of the braid.

Have the participants use the string attached to the braided strips of paper to try to lift the heaviest object they think the paper can lift without tearing. Have any small group whose strips of paper tear read their verses. Explore the following questions about the power of Scripture:



- How did using one Scripture verse to pick up an object compare to using the braided Scripture verses to pick up an object?
- How is this activity a metaphor for understanding God's Word?
- What does God's Word have the power to do?
- Do you hear God's message better in a catchy sentence, in a meaningful story, or in a larger theme?
- How can you listen better for God's message?

Give each person another Scripture verse cut from “Power of Scripture” (Web Resource 1d). Help the group work together to engineer all of the strips of paper to see how heavy an object they can lift together.

Option B: Stable Foundations

Shoe boxes, recyclable cans and bottles, pencils, tape, newspaper

Divide the participants into groups of three or four. Give each group a random amount of shoe boxes, recyclable cans and bottles, pencils, tape, and newspaper. Assign areas of your meeting space to the groups and establish some boundaries between them, marking them with tape if necessary. Explain the following to the group:

If you have fewer than six participants, divide the group into two equal groups. This activity can be done with as few as two people in each group.

- The goal is to make the tallest, most stable tower with the shoe boxes, cans, bottles, pencils, and tape while trying to knock down other towers with wadded-up newspaper.
- All towers must use a shoe box as the foundation.
- Everyone must stay in the assigned area for the group.
- Defense is allowed. Newspaper that lands in one area can be thrown back.

Give a few minutes for groups to consider strategy and then allow the groups to build for a few minutes. Explain the meaning of each of the items:

- Shoe boxes = God’s Word
- Recyclables = church tradition
- Pencils = teaching and doctrine
- Tape = human reason
- Newspaper = culture and self-reliance

Explore the following questions together:

- In the activity, what were the most and the least shakable items?
- In real life, which parts of your faith are the most and the least shakable: Bible, church, doctrine, or reason? Why?
- Is God shakable? If not, why is our faith shakable?
- In real life, how do culture and our own self-reliance attack faith?
- How else is this activity a useful metaphor for our faith lives?



Exit

Listening for God

Bibles, candle, matches, music player, audio recording of a thunderstorm

Make sure each participant has a Bible and have the group read 1 Kings 19:11–12 together. Explore the following questions about listening for God:



- When did Elijah finally realize God was there?
- What are the winds, fires, and earthquakes that drown out God's voice in your life?
- Where can you go to hear God's voice? What do you do when you are there?
- How can you be more open to God's communication?

Explain to the group that you will play a recording that represents the stress and tension of life and that, when you turn the recording off, they will have five minutes of total silence. Encourage the participants not to think about normal life during the silence so that God has all the room to communicate. Dim the lights and play the recording of a thunderstorm for a minute. Then light a candle as you turn off the music player, and allow for five minutes of silence before praying the closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

God of silence, God of noise, be a constant presence in our lives. Follow us with grace, and constantly—when we are alone, when we are sad, when we are excited about silly things—remind us that you love us. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

“Family Connections” (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for families to discuss for each of the six sessions in this course. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Web Connections

Send participants and their families to snopes.com to search for “Christian urban legends.” Consider bringing a few to share during the session so that participants can guess their truth before they look up the real story.

Spiritual Connections

Challenge participants to journal for a week about the times they feel God telling them something. Have them consider dreams, their consciences, coincidences, other people, or any way that God might be delivering a message.

Scripture Connections

Psalm 23 and John 3:16 are two of the most famous passages in the Bible, and they are great examples of how God communicates to us in Scripture and in flesh. Challenge participants to read and memorize both passages this week. Consider offering a prize if anyone can recite them during the next session.