

# Reading the Bible for Understanding

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## **Meet the Writer**

Boyd Lien, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has recently retired from Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. Boyd has served as pastor and educator with congregations in Verona, New Jersey; New Castle, Pennsylvania; Eugene, Oregon; Houston, Texas; Richmond, Virginia; and Augusta, Georgia. As a church educator, he has pursued his passion to share the good news by creating and publishing a wide variety of educational resources through Abingdon Press, the Logos Program, and the Kerygma Program. As an artist, he has designed logos, illustrations, and brochures for individuals, congregations, and the denomination. Most recently, he is the author of the revised resource book and leader's guide for Kerygma's *Discovering the Bible: A New Generation*.

## **Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding***

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

## To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

# Do You Understand What You Are Reading?

## Scripture

Psalm 119:97–105; Luke 24:13–35

## Main Idea

God speaks to us in the Bible. In reading the Scriptures we come to know the will and ways of God and are strengthened in ministry as disciples of Jesus. The same Spirit that first inspired the Scriptures illuminates our reading and deepens our understanding.

## Teaching Points

This session invites participants to consider:

1. How they approach Bible study.
2. The role of the Holy Spirit in understanding Scripture.
3. Guidelines for biblical interpretation.

## Resources Needed

Bibles  
Participant's books  
Christ candle and lighter  
Index cards and pens  
Newsprint and markers

## **Leader Prep**

As you prepare to lead this study, keep in mind the varying levels of biblical literacy and understanding that exist in your group. Many adults (including adults with multiple academic degrees) do not feel confident in their knowledge of the Bible. After all, as Dr. McKim notes in his introduction, the Bible comprises “ancient writings from ancient cultures, written in languages with which we are not familiar.” As a leader, be sensitive to the various backgrounds of your group members.

For Gather, place a Christ candle in the center of your meeting space. Each session in this study begins by lighting the candle, reading Scripture, and uniting in Dr. Davison’s prayers. Consider enlisting members of the group to share in the readings and the lighting of the Christ candle.

For Heart, consider reading Luke 24:13–35 in a readers’ theater format. Have one person read the text as the narrator, and have other participants read the words spoken by Jesus and the two disciples. In Hands, participants will be ranking the five guidelines for biblical interpretation mentioned by Dr. Davison. Write the guidelines on separate sheets of newsprint, and post the newsprint around the meeting space.

## **Leading the Session**

### **Gather**

- Light the Christ candle with these words of Paul: “When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).
- Pray together the prayer in the participant’s book.
- Give each person a pen and index card. Have each person write a one- or two-sentence response to the question “When you read the Bible, do you understand what you are reading?” Gather the cards, and read aloud the responses. Ask: *What makes the Bible challenging to understand?*

## Head

- Dr. Davison writes, “As someone or something guides us—perhaps a teacher, a preacher, or a Bible commentary—we can understand the passage better. Some things in Scripture are so profound, however, that we will never understand them in their full depth.”
- Ask: *Where or from whom do you seek guidance in understanding the Bible? What is your response to Dr. Davison’s claim that some things in Scripture will never be understood in their full depth?*
- Read Psalm 119:97. Dr. Davison writes, “The writer knows there are treasures in the divine writings that are only revealed by concentrated study. . . . Concentrated study can help us interpret the Bible better, and proper interpretation is highly important because of the goal: we are seeking to grow in our knowledge and love of God.”
- Ask: *Do you agree that growing in knowledge and love of God is the goal of Bible study? Why or why not? In what ways do you participate in concentrated study of the Bible?*
- Ask: *In what ways do you resonate with the attributes of the Bible (sufficiency and clarity) identified by the Reformers?*

## Heart

- Dr. Davison writes, “While admitting not everything is clear, the confessions emphasized that no intermediaries are necessary to interpret the Bible. Trained leaders can certainly help, but you and I can understand the basic message of Scripture if we read carefully and thoughtfully with open hearts.” Ask: *What steps must we take in our approach to the Bible in order to read it “carefully and thoughtfully with open hearts”?*
- Dr. Davison writes, “The Reformers believed our minds are perfectly capable of understanding the words in the Bible. However, without a further inward working of the Spirit, those words will never reach to the depths of our being.”

- Read Luke 24:13–35. Dr. Davison writes, “This wonderful story illustrates the effect of the Spirit’s interior work as we not only hear the words of God but also take them into our hearts.” He also writes, “We obviously cannot control the Spirit’s work in our hearts, but we can certainly cultivate some attitudes that will make us more receptive to the Spirit.”
- Ask: *What steps can you take in order to be more open to the Spirit?*

## **Hands**

- Dr. Davison writes, “Even when the words of the Bible are sufficient and clear and the Spirit opens our hearts to these words, we do not always escape without some hard work in interpreting individual passages correctly.” Ask: *How often do you work hard to interpret a Scripture passage? How might you work harder in the future?*
- Dr. Davison continues, “More distressing, perhaps, is that we can end up debating the appropriate doctrinal or ethical positions to take in our attempts to be faithful servants of Christ. At this point, proper interpretation becomes essential to reading the Bible.”
- Call the participants’ attention to the prepared sheets of newsprint. Give each person a marker. Have participants rank the posted guidelines from most important (1) to least important (5) by writing a number on each sheet of newsprint. When all are finished, give participants an opportunity to explain their rankings. Ask: *How can you apply these guidelines in your future study of the Bible?*

## **Depart**

- In groups of two or three, have participants compose prayers of illumination for future Bible study. Have groups incorporate one of the attitudes suggested by Dr. Davison: humility, reverence, or expectation.
- As a closing prayer, have groups read their prayers aloud.
- Extinguish the Christ candle.



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# Do You Understand What You Are Reading?

## Scripture

**Acts 8:26–40** tells the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was seeking to understand God’s message but needed someone to interpret the Scripture.

**Psalms 119:97–105** offers praise and thanks to God for the instruction and benefits that come from Israel’s sacred writings.

**Luke 24:13–35** relates the encounter of two men with Jesus on the Emmaus road following the resurrection.

## Prayer

Gracious God, by your word you created the world, and through that word you sustain it. For these things, we sing your praises. Even more, we praise you for sending your Word in the flesh, in Jesus Christ, that we might be redeemed through him. We thank you, too, for giving us the words of the Scriptures in order to know Christ and to follow him. By the power of the Spirit, illumine our hearts as we read the Bible, so that our reading will be profitable and we will grow in grace. Amen.

## Introduction

The title of this lesson reproduces Philip’s question to the Ethiopian official as he puzzled over the book of Isaiah (Acts 8:30). It’s a good question to ask ourselves, too. Do we understand the Bible as we read it? Further, how can we comprehend it more fully?

In the ancient world reading was normally done aloud. As Philip came alongside the official’s chariot, he likely realized already that this traveler was reading Isaiah 53, the familiar passage about the Suffering servant. The uncertainty expressed by the traveler reflects the fact that this passage could be interpreted in different ways—as a reference either to the nation or to an unidentified individual. For Christians, of course, the passage was quickly applied to the suffering and death of Jesus.

That the Ethiopian eunuch was on his way home after worshipping at the temple suggests that he understood something of Israel's faith. Nevertheless, this mysterious passage was beyond him, and he wished for a guide to help him understand it. As we will see shortly, the Reformation tradition has always emphasized that the basic message of the Bible can be clearly understood. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing of the mysterious in the sacred texts.

Biblical passages can be mysterious because the context or concepts are unfamiliar to us. As someone or something guides us—perhaps a teacher, a preacher, or a Bible commentary—we can understand the passage better. Some things in Scripture are so profound, however, that we will never understand them in their full depth.

There is another way in which the Bible can be mysterious. In Psalm 119:97, the writer exclaims, “How I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.” The writer knows there are treasures in the divine writings that are only revealed by concentrated study. Such study uncovers insights and riches that are “sweeter than honey to my mouth” (v. 103). Concentrated study can help us interpret the Bible better, and proper interpretation is highly important because of the goal: we are seeking to grow in our knowledge and love of God.

## **Sufficient and Clear**

The Christian tradition has always taught that we should rejoice in the Scriptures. As God's revelation, the Bible enables us to know something of both God's nature and our nature as created beings. We can thus be thankful the Lord of heaven and earth has given us the Scriptures. But can we say more than this? In the sixteenth century, John Calvin and other Reformers concluded that two specific attributes of the Bible are particularly important.

One attribute is *sufficiency*. Simply put, the Bible tells us the basics—what we need to know to live in this world and to love God. By the late Middle Ages, the church had come to believe that the biblical revelation needed to be supplemented by various beliefs and practices that had grown up across the church's long history and must be considered equally authoritative with the Bible. Examples of these beliefs and practices include indulgences, the veneration of Mary, and papal infallibility.

The confessions of the Reformation spoke of sufficiency to counter these claims. The Scots Confession of 1560 says, “We affirm that in [the Old and New Testaments] all things necessary

to be believed for the salvation of man are sufficiently expressed.”<sup>1</sup> The confessions did not deny the value of tradition in general but claimed that tradition cannot serve as an equal source of revelation. Everything we need to know, they stressed, can be found in the Bible.

Tragically, this affirmation about the Bible took on special relevance in the twentieth century when Hitler’s Nazi regime demanded the German Church to support its policies. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, in 1934, rejected the “false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation” anything beyond the “one Word of God.”<sup>2</sup>

*Clarity* is the other attribute of Scripture underlined by the Reformers. The point is not that everything in the Bible is obvious. Rather, the essential message of salvation in Christ comes through plainly in Scripture. By the late Middle Ages, the church had come to believe that the biblical revelation needed to be interpreted by a special class of people, primarily the priests. The church held that the Scriptures are obscure and liable to easy misinterpretation. Laypersons were not to read on their own because they would surely be led astray into false doctrine and an immoral, or at least improper, lifestyle.

The Reformation confessions spoke of the clarity of Scripture precisely to counter these claims. For instance, the Westminster Confession asserts that everything necessary for salvation is “so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other” that both the “learned” and “unlearned” can understand adequately.<sup>3</sup> While admitting not everything is clear, the confessions emphasized that no intermediaries are necessary to interpret the Bible. Trained leaders can certainly help, but you and I can understand the basic message of Scripture if we read carefully and thoughtfully with open hearts.

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*Trained leaders can certainly help, but you and I can understand the basic message of Scripture if we read carefully and thoughtfully with open hearts.*

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## **Illumination of the Holy Spirit**

The Protestant Reformers wanted to assure all believers in Christ that God has provided in the Scriptures sufficient knowledge of

1. *Book of Confessions*, 3.18.

2. *Ibid.*, 8.12.

3. *Ibid.*, 6.007.

God's will and ways. That knowledge is accessible to everyone, whether laypersons or members of the clergy. This is fine as far as it goes, but the Reformers were aware that something further is needed to make the message of the Bible a living Word in our hearts. "The Word will not find acceptance in human hearts," wrote John Calvin, "before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

This necessity of an inward "testimony" or "illumination" of the Spirit is a key point for our understanding the Scriptures. Not only does the Holy Spirit inspire the Bible in the first place; this same Spirit makes the words of Scripture come alive in us. That is why Word and Spirit are mentioned in tandem so often in the Reformed tradition. You truly can't have the one without the other.

The connection of Word and Spirit is also why worship liturgies frequently preface the reading of the Scripture lesson with a prayer of illumination. The prayer is an appeal to the Spirit of God to shine divine light on these words and to make them productive in the lives of the hearers.

The Reformers believed our minds are perfectly capable of understanding the words in the Bible. However, without a further inward working of the Spirit, those words will never reach to the depths of our being. The Spirit "testifies" to our spirits that these words are God's word. Said differently, the Spirit "illuminates" our hearts so that we recognize the truth of these words and come to value them for our lives.

In the Bible, this process is captured best in Luke's account of the two disciples who meet a stranger on the road to Emmaus (ch. 24). The two are traveling away from Jerusalem when the risen Jesus appears but does not identify himself. They hear his voice and listen to his words. However, until he blesses and breaks the bread with them at the table, they do not recognize him (v. 30). Then as they realize who he is, they also recall that even on the road their "hearts burned within them" while Jesus was speaking (v. 32). This wonderful story illustrates the effect of the Spirit's interior work as we not only hear the words of God but also take them into our hearts.

We obviously cannot control the Spirit's work in our hearts, but we can certainly cultivate some attitudes that will make us more

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*Not only does the Holy Spirit inspire the Bible in the first place; this same Spirit makes the words of Scripture come alive in us.*

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4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.7.4.

receptive to the Spirit. For one thing, we can approach the Bible with humility, recognizing our need for these words. We can also exhibit reverence for the Bible, knowing that these are the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Finally, we can approach the Bible with expectation, anticipating that we will hear the very word of God speaking in these pages.

## **Some Guidelines for Interpretation**

Even when the words of the Bible are sufficient and clear and the Spirit opens our hearts to these words, we do not always escape without some hard work in interpreting individual passages correctly. More distressing, perhaps, is that we can end up debating the appropriate doctrinal or ethical positions to take in our attempts to be faithful servants of Christ.

At this point, proper interpretation becomes essential to reading the Bible. Some years ago, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted a list of seven guidelines to help assure that we interpret passages adequately and accurately. Here we will look at five of them.

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*Even when the words of the Bible are sufficient and clear and the Spirit opens our hearts to these words, we do not always escape without some hard work in interpreting individual passages correctly.*

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1. *Honor Jesus Christ as the center of the Scriptures.* The whole history of the Old and New Testaments is oriented toward the salvation of the world through the work of God’s Son. Thus, while it is important to understand Old Testament passages in their own setting, it is essential to recognize that the overarching concern of the Bible is redemption in Jesus Christ.

2. *Respect the “rule of faith.”* From the church’s early history, Christians have discussed—and sometimes heatedly debated—appropriate doctrinal understandings and moral practices in relation to following Jesus Christ. Over time as a consensus was reached regarding a particular doctrinal or ethical issue, it was included automatically in what came to be called the *regula fidei*, the “rule of faith.” This guideline encourages us in our contemporary discussions always to take into account the consensus of the church and interpret the Bible in ways consistent with it.

3. *Follow the “rule of love.”* The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” goes back to Leviticus 19:18, which Jesus called one of the two great commandments (Matthew 22:39). In times of disagreement, it is easy to forget this basic admonition. This guideline calls us to maintain a loving attitude to others even if we disagree strongly with them about the appropriate interpretation of scriptural passages.

4. *Take care to interpret in light of the entire Bible.* One of the difficulties we face is a tendency to cherish favorite passages, books, and even sections of the Bible. Technically, it is called embracing a canon within the canon. The antidote is to be sure to consider the witness of the whole Bible as we seek to understand the implications of individual passages.

5. *Focus on the plain text of Scripture.* Interpreters have always been tempted to go beyond the basic meanings intended by the original authors of the Bible. From the time of the early church, the method of allegory was popular because it could discover more profound, hidden meanings in the stories and sayings in Scripture. Other times, people have simply embellished the text in order to make it, seemingly, more meaningful or useful for their teaching and preaching. The Reformed confessions, however, stress that we should seek the plain meaning, that is, the primary sense intended when the author originally composed the passage. In session 3, we will say more about this principle.

### **Spiritual Practice**

Recall a person or persons who helped you to understand what you were reading in the Bible. How did they help you, and in what way or ways was your understanding illuminated by their guidance?

## **Questions for Reflection**

How has your relationship with the Bible changed throughout your lifetime? To what do you attribute these changes?

How do you square the clarity of the biblical revelation with the many seemingly mysterious and obscure passages in the Bible?

Visualize yourself with the two disciples on the Emmaus road. How do you imagine you would have felt? What thoughts—or perhaps questions—would have been foremost for you?