

Common Mistakes in Interpreting the Bible

How to avoid these errors in your small group

By Trevor Lee

Who is Herm?

The first time I heard the word “exegesis” I thought we were going to talk about Jesus. When my professor threw “hermeneutics” at me I didn’t know what to think. I quickly learned that these are two essential words for those who want to grow in their knowledge of God and obedience to him. Both of these words have to do with the way we approach the Bible and interpret what it says. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. Exegesis is the critical interpretation of a specific passage. In other words, we use the principles of hermeneutics to do exegesis.

I’m not going to spend a lot of time on the intricacies of these two words—I’ll just refer to all they encompass as biblical interpretation. Chances are, your small group is doing biblical interpretation every time you get together. “But we don’t interpret the Bible,” you object. “We just read it and talk about what it says.” You may not be working with the Greek New Testament, but every time you talk about what the Bible says, you are interpreting it. Entire schools of theology have been born from people interpreting the same passages of Scripture in different ways. Some differences in interpretation in your group can add to the richness of the passages you’re studying. However, you can also fall into errors in biblical interpretation that will detract from your spiritual growth.

How do you know when differences in interpretation are good and when they could lead to problems? This is a tricky question because it’s not always black and white. The main thing to consider in these situations is whether it’s a difference in perspective or a difference in meaning. A difference in perspective means people see different sides of the same thing. A person standing in front of a car sees the car differently than someone standing behind it, but they both see a car. They inform each other’s perspectives to have a fuller picture of the car. However, if one of those two people says they see a cat, not a car, then they have a difference in meaning. They are seeing fundamentally different things. When you talk about God’s love in a small group it is great to have people shed light on different aspects of that love through their experiences and Scripture. However, if someone says God is hateful and mean, you are no longer talking about the same God. This doesn’t mean you shout that person down, but it is important to wrestle through why they think that about God.

Three Common Pitfalls

While many errors can be made in biblical interpretation, three are most common in a small group: accepting all interpretations as valid, proof-texting, and not understanding the historical context of a passage.

In my opinion

One of the great things about small groups is that everyone gets the chance to share and interact. On Sunday morning the pastor does all the talking, but not in a small group. This interaction is important for spiritual growth. Sharing your thoughts and opinions forces you to think through things and consider how they impact your life. Getting input from everyone is important, but it is also a potential pitfall.

Often when a small group kicks around thoughts on a passage of Scripture they are simply sharing their reactions and opinions. Reactions are by nature not deeply thought out—they are the first things that come to our minds. Opinions are important because they show what we believe, but that doesn’t mean they’re right. I have opinions about what would be best for our economy, but I haven’t invested much time to educate myself on this topic. I can have a conversation with someone about the economy, but I have to recognize the flaws in my opinion and adjust as I learn more.

The end of this section contains some suggestions for how to create a climate where people can disagree, but one of the hardest parts is being open to people disagreeing with you. To foster an open spirit in yourself,

remember that the goal is not to prove that you're right, but to grow in your faith and discipleship. When someone challenges you, push yourself to see their challenge as a chance to learn and grow rather than an occasion for defensiveness. It's also important to assume the best. When someone challenges something you've said, assume that person is investing in your spiritual growth. When you view disagreements as an act of love rather than an attack, you can accept them more easily. Finally, if you ever feel people are criticizing you, tell them! If you don't tell people when they say something in a way that hurts you, they may never know.

The reason reactions and opinions can become dangerous is that we are often very hesitant to challenge anyone in a small-group setting. We are afraid of offending others or coming across as combative. Yet developing a group ethos where people are free to graciously challenge each other is the key to successfully having open group discussions. The Scriptures are shared community documents—they are meant to be handled by the entire body of Christ. But the body must point out each other's blind spots so everyone can grow in maturity and faith.

Here are a few suggestions for avoiding the error of accepting all interpretations as valid.

- State upfront that it's okay to disagree. This has to be done graciously and without any hint of personal attack. Have a conversation about how people handle disagreement and how your group can do this well.
- Make sure the Bible is the authority. Encourage people to support their opinions and reactions with Scripture. This has the added benefit of pushing people to grow in their knowledge of Scripture.
- Challenge people to listen to those who are mature in the faith. A 75-year-old woman who has been faithfully following Jesus her entire life has more spiritual insight than someone who became a Christian last week. That doesn't mean she is always right or that the new Christian is wrong, but we should heed the insight of those who have walked long and deep in the faith.

Cutting and chopping

It is important to get down to specific verses and phrases when you study the Bible, but properly interpreting those verses and phrases requires knowing what comes before and after. Athletes, celebrities, and politicians are made to sound ridiculous by removing what they say from the context in which they said it. For instance, shortly after his inauguration, [Bill Clinton was quoted](#) saying, "We can't be so fixated on our desire to preserve the rights of ordinary Americans." While he did say that, it was only half of a sentence in his entire speech. He was saying we can't focus on the right to own handguns to the exclusion of the millions of Americans struggling with violence in the streets. It is easy for us to be guilty of pulling things out of context in the Bible as well.

Take for example Romans 8:24. It says, "But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?" You know, I don't have an iPad, and I really want one. Paul is really encouraging me to hope for those things I want that I don't have yet. God wants me to do that!

Without context, we can make the Bible say anything we want. This practice of taking a couple of words or phrases out of context is called proof-texting. You find a little bit of text that seems to prove your point of view without taking into account the context. You cannot study the Bible faithfully in your small group without carefully considering the context of the passage. In Romans 8, Paul is talking about the hope of the consummation of the kingdom of God when Jesus returns. The hope that is not seen is a very specific hope. Without reading the entire chapter, or even better, the entire book, you and others in the group can easily read things into the Bible that aren't there.

Here are few suggestions to help your group avoid this error.

- Make sure at least one person is familiar with the context of the passage you're studying. For a story this means reading the whole story. For an epistle it means reading the entire epistle. It would be great

if the whole group did this, but if only one person does it, make sure you listen to that person's opinion as you discuss the text.

- Read a commentary. These often point you to the unifying themes of the Bible and the context of passages.
- Be aware of anomalies. When a verse seems to be saying something that contradicts everything you know about Scripture it may be because you're not reading the context. Look to see if there are other places in Scripture that say the same thing.

The Bible wasn't written yesterday

It's also important to have some awareness of the historical context. The truth of the Bible is timeless, but it was still written in a certain time. We are aware of this when we read Leviticus, but not always so much when we're reading Matthew. This is a big deal because there are some passages that we cannot understand without some knowledge of the time in which they were written. Take 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul says a woman should not pray with her head uncovered. He says it is disgraceful for her to do this.

What was the custom for women in regard to head coverings in the first century A.D.? What did it communicate to others in that time when a woman had her head uncovered? Was this command by Paul something that would set Christian women apart from culture or something that was expected by their culture? Until you can answer these questions you cannot fully understand Paul's teaching about head coverings.

The Bible was written in a time very different from ours. There was no Internet, globalization, or Starbucks. This doesn't make the Bible outdated, but it does mean that we will understand the powerful message of Scripture most clearly and faithfully when we have an understanding of the times in which it was written. Too often we make the error of approaching Scripture as though it were written last week. We apply our current culture and ways of thinking to what we read and this obscures the meaning. Faithful biblical interpretation requires taking the historical context into account.

Here are a couple of ways to become familiar with the historical context.

- Read a commentary. Most commentaries have a section on the historical context and offer important insights. Buying a commentary is great, but some websites also give you access to some commentaries. One of these sites is biblegateway.com.
- Learn some history. Read some history from biblical times on Wikipedia or at the library. It doesn't have to talk specifically about the Bible to help inform your perspective on the Bible.

Read the Bible for All It's Worth

Working hard to avoid biblical misinterpretation is an important thing for your small group. You cannot grow from your study of the Scriptures if you take them to mean something they don't. In addition to watching out for the things in this article, you may want to consult more extensive resources on the topic. *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart is one excellent resource available.

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Discuss

1. Does your group struggle with validating all interpretations? What might you do to change this?
2. How might you respond to a group member who is proof-texting? Specifically, how might you respond to this error in the group while still honoring the group member?
3. How can you help your group become familiar with the historical context of the passage you're discussing?