



# A GUIDE FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

## SESSION 1 GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

### *Discussion of Chapter 1*

#### *Main Point: Interpretation*

The Bible needs interpretation, though people disagree about which passages and how they should be understood. For example, it contains contradictory commands that cannot be simply explained away or ignored, but must be dealt with in some way. The Bible also contains ideas, recommendations, and exhortations that we no longer agree with, though people disagree on what these are and how to deal with them.

As soon as we begin to study the Bible, we encounter several kinds of difficulties in interpretation:

- ◆ We cannot understand what the passage is saying.
- ◆ We think we understand it, but it may be influenced by cultural values that are very different from ours. We may disagree with it, and find it distasteful, immoral, or otherwise not in agreement with our values.
- ◆ We can understand the passage and are sympathetic to its underlying values, but it is exhorting us to do things that are impossible.

- ◆ We can understand and agree with the passage, but carrying it out in any systematic way is simply beyond our capabilities.

### Questions

Look up the following Bible passages:

- ◆ Genesis 49.8–12 (*a blessing on Judah*)
- ◆ Judges 11.29–40 (*Jephthah's vow*)
- ◆ Joshua 6.17–21, 8.18–29 (*on conquered cities*)
- ◆ Matthew 5.42 (*give to anyone who asks*)
- ◆ Matthew 6.25–34 (*do not worry*).

Which kind(s) of the difficulties identified above do you find with each one?

How would you interpret these passages in order to come to terms with these difficulties?

### Main Point: Types of Language

When studying the Bible it is also important to realize that different parts of the Bible have to be read in different ways, depending on what types of material they are. The Bible, like other literary works, uses language in various ways to talk about one thing while meaning something else, and is not always meant to be taken literally. These ways include:

- ◆ *metaphor*: being “born again” or “anew” (John 3.1–4)
- ◆ *irony*: those who pray ostentatiously “have received their reward” (Matthew 6.5)
- ◆ *parable*: comparing God’s kingdom to a shrub (Mark 4.30–32)
- ◆ *allegory*: comparing God’s relationship to Israel to an owner’s relationship to a vineyard (Isaiah 5.1–6).

There are any number of clues that the text is using language in nonliteral ways:

- ◆ The passage makes no sense when read literally: “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7.14).
- ◆ The larger context of the passage contains obvious exaggerations, contradictions, or other indicators of nonhistorical literature: In the book of Jonah, when the great city of Nineveh is threatened with God’s judgment, the king issues a decree that all the people *and all the animals* should repent by fasting and wearing sackcloth (Jonah 3.7–8).
- ◆ The passage has dream scenes or other clearly fanciful passages: In the Song of Songs, we read, “I slept, but my heart was awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking.” The passage which follows is likely a dream sequence, and not a real incident (Song of Songs 5.2–8).
- ◆ The passage is clearly fiction—though told for a reason (which may not be the reason that seems obvious to us): The Book of Job begins with a man, Job, who is given no ancestors (unlike almost every other character in the Hebrew Bible), and moves right from the man and his possessions to a scene in heaven (Job 1.1–12).

### Questions

Look up the following passages and consider whether they should be read literally, or as some other form of language:

- ◆ Judges 9.8–15 (*Jotham on the monarchy*)
- ◆ 1 Kings 8.62–63 (*Solomon’s offerings*)
- ◆ Matthew 17.1–8 (*the Transfiguration*)
- ◆ Matthew 18.8–9 (*stumbling blocks*).

What clues did you look for in the process of determining what form of language each passage might be?

What difference does the form of language make in how you understand these passages?

SESSION 2  
VENGEANCE AND ENEMIES  
*Discussion of Chapters 2 and 3*

*Main Points*

Even when the commands found in the Bible seem straightforward and clear, the ways in which we *apply* the Bible's rules in our own lives may not be immediately obvious. We need to think carefully about how we will apply particular rules that the Bible says we should follow. We cannot always carry them out directly, and when they are phrased in general terms we must think through how we will apply them in particular circumstances.

In some cases the Bible begins by presenting normal (though flawed or even sinful) human behavior, and even seems to be endorsing or commanding it, but later texts in the Bible will contradict those views. We have to look at the wider context and decide *on grounds that are found elsewhere in the Bible* that we will not take the Bible's lead and behave in those particular ways.

*Questions*

1. When the Bible contains contradictory commands or versions of a story, sometimes later writers or translators attempt to synthesize or reinterpret the details.

Look up the following passages:

- ◆ Exodus 12.9, Deuteronomy 16.7, and 2 Chronicles 35.11–13 (*on how the Passover lamb is to be prepared*)
- ◆ Deuteronomy 25.5–6 and Leviticus 18.16 (*on succession*)
- ◆ Matthew 19.3–12 and 1 Corinthians 7.12–15 (*on divorce*)
- ◆ Matthew 5.14–16 (*let your light shine*) and Matthew 6.3–4 (*give alms in secret*)
- ◆ Acts 9.1–9 (especially verse 7) and Acts 22.4–11 (especially verse 9) (*on the conversion of Paul*).

How did biblical writers and later commentators attempt to synthesize these contradictions?

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How would you make sense of them?

What contradictory passages have troubled you in your own reading of the Bible?

2. The Bible is by no means uniform in its views of how we deal with questions of violence and revenge, hatred and misunderstandings, peace and war. Even Jesus himself seems to offer contradictory teachings on these matters.

Look up the following passages.

- ◆ Exodus 21.22–25, Leviticus 24.19–20, Deuteronomy 19.21, Matthew 5.38–42 (*an eye for an eye*)
- ◆ Matthew 5.39 (*do not resist an evildoer*) and Luke 20.9–19 (*vengeance on the wicked tenants*)
- ◆ Matthew 10.34–39 and Matthew 26.51–53 (*swords*).

How do these and other teachings in the Bible inform your thinking on the use of force?

SESSION 3  
JUSTICE*Discussion of Chapter 4**Main Points*

There is a direct link in the Bible between *justice*—the rules by which we live, whether criminal, economic, or social—and *righteousness*—our moral nature. The biblical texts attempt to bring about communities of human beings who are righteous, communities in which people act with justice not because they are obeying a set of external laws, but because they are righteous people who want to behave in ways that conform to the will of God.

*Questions*

1. Look up the following passages describing some of the principles of justice in the Bible:

- ◆ Leviticus 19.15 (*evenhandedness*)
- ◆ Deuteronomy 15.7–11 (*care for the needy*)
- ◆ Isaiah 10.1–4 (*denunciation of those who use the law to oppress the needy*)
- ◆ Amos 2.6–8 (*punishment of those who exploit the poor*)
- ◆ Micah 6.6–8 (*what God really requires*).

In what ways do our current criminal laws, which include the death penalty, long prison sentences, and the imposition of fines but exclude mutilation and humiliation, express or contradict biblical principles?

How would you reform our current system in light of these biblical principles?

How would you decide which biblical principles to adopt or adapt or ignore?

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2. Look up these passages that describe some of the Bible's economic principles:

- ◆ Leviticus 19.9–10 (*providing for the destitute*)
- ◆ Leviticus 25.8–17 (*the Jubilee, in which all property returns to its original owners*)
- ◆ Amos 8.4–12 (*the punishment of economic oppressors*)
- ◆ Luke 16.19–31 (*rich man and Lazarus*)
- ◆ Acts 2.44–45; 4.32, 34–37; 5.1–6 (*sharing of possessions, and the consequences of not sharing*)
- ◆ James 2.1–7, 14–17; 5.1–6 (*the sins of the rich and the duty to care for the poor*).

In what ways does our current economic system express or contradict biblical principles?

What does the Bible tell us about our responsibilities for contributing to the welfare of others in our communities?

How could we be better stewards of our resources, as individuals and as communities?

SESSION 4  
TREATING THE MARGINALIZED  
*Discussion of Chapters 5 and 6*

*Main Points*

The Bible itself is not always fair to those who are “marginal” in its own terms, especially women, Jews (in the New Testament), and slaves, but most texts tell us not to marginalize those who are different (resident aliens), those who are poor, and those who are socially disadvantaged, such as widows and orphans. Who is marginal changes with the context, but the Bible’s principles about how we treat those who are marginal should not.

*Questions*

1. Who are the marginalized in our society today? Who are the marginalized in your particular community? in your congregation? Why and how are they marginalized? How do you participate, wittingly or unwittingly, in their marginalization?

What do think the Bible would have to say about those who are marginalized in your congregation, and how they are treated by the larger community?

2. The word “immoral” for us tends to mean “sexually immoral”: “living in sin” has traditionally meant “living in an irregular sexual relationship,” rather than living in any immoral manner—by extortion, fraud, robbery, exploiting the less fortunate, or any number of other possibilities.

Look up the following passages and consider what they tell us about how the Bible views immorality:

- ◆ Mark 7.20–23 (*the evil that comes from within*)
- ◆ Deuteronomy 27.15–26 (*curses on various acts of immorality—note that these include, but are not limited to, sexual immorality*)
- ◆ Proverbs 1.10–19 (*conspiring to theft and violence*)



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- ◆ Proverbs 5.1–6 (*warnings against sexual seduction*)
- ◆ Proverbs 6.16–19 (*those actions that God hates*)
- ◆ Amos 6.4–7 (*denunciation of the rich who disregard the ruin of their neighbors*).

3. Do you think social movements should influence our reading of the Bible? Why or why not?

In what ways do you think the social movements that have insisted on equal rights for women, people of all races, and gays and lesbians have influenced or changed our reading of the Bible?

4. How have you interpreted the passages in the Bible on same-gender sexual relations that are discussed in chapter 6?

How does your interpretation affect the way you relate to homosexual individuals or same-sex couples in your congregation or community?

SESSION 5  
THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE IN  
OUR MORAL REASONING

*Discussion of Chapter 7*

*Main Points*

This chapter looks at some of the ways in which the Bible's moral teaching has authority in our own lives, even when in some cases it cannot be applied directly. It also offers a method for discerning how to interpret and apply the teachings of the Bible.

*Questions*

1. How can we separate the truly moral teachings of the Bible, applicable to all times and places, from the particular aspects of the Bible's message that are no longer relevant for us?

How can we be reasonably sure that we are not simply arranging the teachings for our convenience?

2. Using the method for discernment set forth in this chapter (pages 127–131), consider the Bible's teachings on divorce as discussed in the passages below:

- ◆ Deuteronomy 24.1–2
- ◆ Malachi 2.13–16
- ◆ Matthew 5.31–32
- ◆ Matthew 19.1–9
- ◆ Mark 10.2–12 (*note that Mark, earlier than Matthew, gives a more rigorous rule*)
- ◆ 1 Corinthians 7.10–16 (*note that in this passage Paul deals with marital separations as well as divorce*).

How can we develop a view of whether divorce should be allowed, and if so, under what circumstances? What factors need to be considered?

SESSION 6  
THE COMMUNITY WE ARE CALLED TO BE  
*Discussion of Chapter 8*

*Main Points*

The Bible describes the characteristics of the earliest Christian communities as including teaching, fellowship, worship, and care for one another. It further identifies some of these communities as places in which both Jews and Gentiles and different faith practices and models of incorporation were tolerated. Christian communities today may need to reevaluate their understanding of unity and diversity based on these biblical principles of inclusion.

*Questions*

1. Look up these passages from the Bible setting forth principles of life in community:

- ◆ John 13.12–20 (*wash one another's feet*)
- ◆ Ephesians 4.11–16 (*building up the body of Christ*)
- ◆ 1 Corinthians 12.27–13.13 (*the body of Christ, united in love*)
- ◆ 1 John 3.11–24 (*love one another and help the needy*)
- ◆ 1 John 4.7–12 (*love one another, for God is love*).

Based on these and other passages that come to mind, what kind of church do you think we are called to be in the world today?

How does your view of the Bible inform your understanding of Christian community?

2. How do you deal with questions of inclusion and exclusion in your congregation?

Who is placed in positions of leadership and care in your congregation, and who is excluded? Why?

3. How does the Bible encourage us to deal with conflict and difference in the church?

In what ways have you seen groups that were formerly marginalized turn around and marginalize others?

How can individuals who disagree profoundly on how to interpret the Bible live in community together?