

Session One: Misunderstanding Scripture

Goals: The participants will begin to understand how the structure of the Bible contributes to it being easily misunderstood.

The books of the New Testament were written nearly 2000 years ago, and the Old Testament several centuries before that. But people who read the same scripture passages quite often reach different conclusions. If the Bible were straightforward and easy to understand, everyone should be in agreement as to its meaning and interpretation by now... right?

Conversation Starters:

- 1) Why is it so difficult for people to agree upon what the Bible means?
- 2) Have you ever disagreed with someone about scripture? What was the passage in question? What prompted the disagreement?
- 3) What are some different ways that people understand the Bible?

The contents of the Bible came together over the course of centuries. Many authors wrote the words of scripture, many other people edited and amended those words, and many other people decided which books would become a part of what we call the Bible. The books of the Bible comprise many genres – letters, histories, genealogies, songs, sayings, etc. Scripture was written by people with different viewpoints, in different times and places, to different groups of people, for different purposes.

Read these pairs of verses: A) Luke 12:10 and Joel 2:32, B) Exodus 20:13 and Exodus 32:27, C) Romans 3:28 and James 2:24.

Follow-up Questions:

- 1) What does it mean to you that these pairs of verses are in disagreement with one another? Does that affect your view of the Bible? How so, or why not?
- 2) Can you think of other places in scripture that seem to be at odds with each other? How do you rationalize these passages?
- 3) If scripture says different things in different places, then why should we continue to read the Bible, trust the Bible, and strive to do what it says?

Our attention now turns to the question of how we use the Bible in an appropriate manner. Please read Ephesians 6:10-17 and Matthew 4:1-11. Notice how Jesus uses scripture in the final passage!

Closing Questions:

- 1) What is the purpose of the Bible? What are we supposed to do with it? How do we use it?
- 2) The above passages give us the impression that scripture is a weapon that we can use to vanquish our enemies. How does that fit in with your answer to the last question?
- 3) How can you tell if someone is misusing the Bible, or using it in an inappropriate manner?

Closing Prayer: *Dear God, thank you for giving us the words of scripture. We ask you to help us read them, study them, and understand them, and to use them to draw us closer to you. Amen.*

Session Two: Weaponizing Scripture

Goals: The participants will begin to understand the many ways that scripture is used as a weapon to hurt others.

The Bible has the power to convey many different messages to many different people. Your reading of the Bible is affected by many factors unique to yourself: if you're healthy or if you're in poor health, if you're doing well financially or if you're experiencing homelessness and food insecurity, if you're someone in power or you're oppressed, if you just lost someone you loved...

Conversations Starters:

- 1) Have you had a time in your life when a Bible verse meant something different to you than it did before? What was the situation?
- 2) What are some places outside of church where you have seen Bible verses used? Who was referencing scripture, and what was the reason for them using that particular verse?
- 3) Have you ever disagreed with the way a Bible verse was being used by someone? What was the cause of your disagreement? How did that person's understanding of the verse contrast with your own understanding of the same verse?

There are many reasons we misunderstand, misinterpret, and misuse scripture. Sometimes, we fail to take into account the context of the author or the original audience, or we misunderstand the author's intent. We end up misapplying scripture in a way that can lead to violence against others.

Read these passages: Genesis 9:24-27, Exodus 3:16-22, Deuteronomy 31:1-6, John 19:1-16.

Follow-up Questions:

- 1) What are the different ways that these passages (Canaan's curse, the Exodus, the conquest of the Promised Land, and anti-Semitic attitudes in the New Testament) have been used throughout history? What acts of violence have been justified using these verses?
- 2) What do you think was the intent of the biblical authors when they wrote these verses?
- 3) What are the dangers of taking these verses out of context and applying them too literally to our own situation? Who are the groups of people that could be potentially be hurt?

At other times, people read their own meaning into Bible verses, rather than letting their understanding be informed by the context of the verse. In other words, we can hear a verse saying what we *want* it to say, rather than what it is *actually* saying. For example, read the following verses: Romans 3:28, Romans 8:28, Philippians 4:13.

Closing Questions:

- 1) How do people usually interpret these verses? In other words, what do people *want* these verses to say? Is that how *you* would interpret them?
- 2) Can you think of other Bible verses that people sometimes read their own meanings into?
- 3) What is the danger of taking these verses out of context? Is it possible that even these verses, which are intended to build people up, can be used in a manner that hurts people?

Closing Prayer: *Dear God, understanding scripture and using it correctly is tough! We need your help, because we can't do it without you. Help us to hear what you are telling us through your holy word, and help us to share that good news with others. Amen.*

Session Three: De-Weaponizing Scripture

Goals: The participants will begin to understanding different, alternative methods for interpreting scripture that do not result in harm to others.

We usually like to believe that Christianity is all about love, peace, and kindness. Unfortunately, Christians throughout history have understood and used the Bible in ways that have sometimes promoted hatred, war, and violence. Even today, Christians often use the Bible in ways that are not reflective of God's love for all humanity.

Conversation Starters:

- 1) Can you think of some times throughout history when Christians have used the Bible to justify violence?
- 2) What verses, passages, or stories in scripture have been used to justify that violence?
- 3) How do you think your understanding of scripture is different from those historical figures? If you could speak to them about the Bible, what would you say?

Here are some ideas for interpreting passages from scripture in a way that does not harm other people. 1) Consider contextual matters, such as the historical setting, the author's purpose in writing the passage, and the intended audience. 2) Consider other verses in scripture that seem to run counter to the verse in question. 3) Consider the narrative arc of the entire Bible. What are some of the major themes of the Bible? Does the verse in question support those major themes? If it does not, then how should we understand that verse?

Please consider the following passages: 1 Timothy 2:8-15, Genesis 9:24-27, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

Follow-up Questions:

- 1) How have these verses been used in a harmful manner to others – past or present?
- 2) Consider the above methods. What is the context of each passage? Are there other verses in scripture that seem to be saying something different? Do the passages support what you consider to be the major themes of the Bible?
- 3) In light of these questions, how would you interpret these verses in an alternative, less harmful manner?

Finally, when we are thinking about how to use the word of God in an appropriate and non-violent manner, we can consider the life of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh...

Consider the following passages: Mark 3:1-6, Mark 2:13-17, John 7:53-8:11.

Closing Questions:

- 1) In each passage, how were the people involved in danger of experiencing violence? How were they in harm's way?
- 2) How *could* Jesus have acted in a way that would have allowed those people to be hurt?
- 3) How did Jesus, the Word made flesh, respond instead? What does that tell us about how we should or should not use the Bible?

Closing Prayer: *Dear God, we thank you for giving us your Son, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Thank you for revealing yourself to us in his life, and in the words of the Bible. Help us to approach the task of interpreting scripture with humility, care, and awe. Inspire us to use the words of scripture to bring life and healing to others. Amen.*