



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Institute for Faith and Learning
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Study Guides for

Scripture

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore how to read Scripture in a faithful and theologically informed way that allows it to question our presuppositions and transform our discipleship. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture 2

The goal of any Christian engagement with Scripture is a deep and profound acquaintance with the Triune God. If this notion is lost to some degree in modernity, when the Bible is often taken to be a conduit of information about God (or the history of religions, or the moral life), its recovery is now in full swing.

The Journey of Reading Scripture 4

The developing school of theological interpretation of Scripture encourages us to read the Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship. This school of interpretation approaches Scripture as part of a transformative journey of coming to know the Triune God in Christ.

Studying the Word of God 6

When we think of "studying" Scripture, we envision a process of gathering information. Scripture, like everything else in modern life, becomes a commodity. The classical Christian approach starts from an altogether different perspective: that in the Bible God still speaks to humans.

Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian 8

Patristic and medieval biblical interpreters can help us relearn reading Scripture within the story of salvation. They do not disdain historical inquiry, but integrate those details within a larger picture of reality. Their reading of the Bible flows first and foremost from their faith.

Preaching Scripture Faithfully 10

How can we preach and hear difficult passages of Scripture faithfully in today's post-imperial-Christian, relativistic, poly-vocal milieu? Preaching is a conversation that operates on several levels: preacher with scriptural text, preacher with congregation, congregation with preacher, and, in the case of a "good" sermon, congregation with scriptural text.



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Focus Article:

📖 A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture
(*Scripture*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Inspired Translator
(*Scripture*, pp. 66-69)

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A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture

The goal of any Christian engagement with Scripture is a deep and profound acquaintance with the Triune God. If this notion is lost to some degree in modernity, when the Bible is often taken to be a conduit of information about God (or the history of religions, or the moral life), its recovery is now in full swing.

Prayer

God of love, we come to you.

You, O Lord, are the God of story and song, of wisdom and law.

You have spoken to us through the ages, binding us together in one common narrative. You have given us the Scripture, a treasure we can hold in our hands.

Draw near to us now, breathing life into our hearts. Write yourself into our hearts, that we may be written into the story of your love. Amen.

Responsive Scripture Reading: from 1 Peter 1:2-3, 10, and 12

Sisters and brothers, we have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be ours made careful inquiry.

It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but us, in regard to the things that have now been announced to us through those who brought us good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things into which angels long to look!

Reflection

The doctrine of the Triune God, whose name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20), emerges slowly in the biblical narrative. God is not addressed as Triune in the Old Testament; but this, as Daniel Treier and Stephen Pardue note, is in keeping with its prophecies “that fuller, final revelation of YHWH will accompany Israel’s renewal, Gentiles’ redemption, and accordingly God’s restored rule over creation.” Nor is the doctrine of the Trinity spelled out in the New Testament. They clarify, “By divine design the Holy Spirit takes time to help the Church develop the mind of Christ regarding the full implications of his work.” Yet many passages, like 1 Peter 2-12, clarify God’s work of salvation in a distinct threefold structure.

Treier and Pardue invite us to circle around our reflection in this way: Suppose (with the Church) that it is the Triune God that we meet in the Bible. How does this fact reshape our understanding of the nature of Scripture and how to read it?

First, it becomes clear that “the Bible is an instrument of God’s self-communication to foster communion.” We glimpse the nature of this communion in God’s design for Eden, where “the Word, the very Image of the Father, dwelt in human hearts, and the Spirit conferred upon them fellowship unique among the creatures.” After the image of God is occluded by human sin, it is partially clarified by the Law and the Prophets; but only in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,



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“the Word of God inhabiting humanity in the full power of the Spirit... is the renewal of the Father’s likeness in human hearts” finally accomplished. Thus, Scripture’s mysterious story is given to us in order to reveal and foster a “fellowship with God so deep that no eye, heart, and mind has yet grasped its fullness.”

How, then, do we read it well? “Meeting the Triune God in Scripture is not a solo enterprise: it happens in community with contemporaries and saints gone before,” they note. “In these relationships, we learn practices that build interpretive virtues and block bad interpretive habits.” They commend three practices.

- ▶ *By reading with the rule of faith*, we let “the potentially fragmentary elements of Scripture speak in a unified (though not uniform) fashion. They proclaim, celebrate, hope for, and promise the redeeming work of the Father, Son, and Spirit.”
- ▶ *Critically attending to early Christian interpretation of the Bible* can reorient us to the goal of meeting God in its pages. In contrast to some modern approaches that read the Bible without reference to doctrine, the earlier “Christian writers usually considered the Triune God to be...the main character in the story of redemption, and the divine author in whose friendship lies infinite wisdom and grace.”
- ▶ *Recognizing the Spirit’s work in guiding our interpretation*, we should include confession and openness to God with our meditation on Scripture. Treier and Pardue worry that in recent centuries “the Spirit’s work has primarily been relegated to cognitive illumination—connecting dots in readers’ minds, facilitating understanding and application.... Since reading Scripture faithfully is a whole-person affair, the Spirit’s renovation of affections, habits, and dispositions is essential.”

The Spirit also guides cultural and social forms of interpretation. As Christianity develops globally, we “have the privilege of grasping with new depth the nature of the Triune God revealed in Scripture because of cross-cultural exchanges. In these situations, we hear the Word anew when we see the Spirit’s life-giving work take cultural shape, helping us to know the love of the Triune God more fully.”

Study Questions

1. What indications of the triune nature of God do you notice in 1 Peter 1:2-12?
2. How, according to Daniel Treier and Stephen Pardue, can the doctrine of the Trinity reshape our understanding of the nature of Scripture and how we should read it?
3. Consider how each of the three practices sketched here expands the community that guides our interpretation of Scripture. What bad interpretative habits does each one inhibit?
4. The Holy Spirit inspired the scholar Jerome to translate Scripture into the Latin language and Roman culture. How is this inspiration depicted in the paintings by Antonello and Castagno that Heidi Hornik discusses?

Departing Hymn: “Many Books, One Holy Canon”



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Focus Article:

📖 The Journey of Reading Scripture
(*Scripture*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Overcoming Historicism's Dividing Wall of Hostility
(*Scripture*, pp. 81-87)

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The Journey of Reading Scripture

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Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:103-105

Responsive Prayer

For all those who seek to follow you,

your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

For the stay-at-home mom who is at the end of her rope,

your word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

For the farmer who gets up before dawn to tend and to plant,

your word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

For the teacher who is seeking moments of openness in a student's life,

your word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

For the scholar who studies diligently and faithfully,

your word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

For the child whose budding faith needs nurture,

your word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

For the pastor and the truck driver, for the nurse and the janitor, for everyone who seeks to follow you,

your word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

We do not wish to choose our own path,

but to walk the path you lay out for us, the path that leads to you. Amen.

Reflection

Have you noticed how even well-meaning believers are tempted to misuse the Bible in one of two ways? First is what Todd Billings calls "the blueprint approach." Starting with a detailed theological blueprint of what the Bible says, they "translate each passage into a set of propositions or 'biblical principles' that fit the established details of the blueprint." The other way is "the smorgasbord approach." Just as one might choose favorite foods from a huge cafeteria line based on appetite and taste, they select Bible passages to sooth their felt needs or perspectives. (Of course, their "personal" needs and perspectives often follow patterns based on age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.)

Both approaches make the mistake of limiting Scripture to our purposes. Billings explains, "We are in control. The Bible may be viewed as authoritative, but it either provides confirmation of our preconceived ideas or divine advice for felt needs."

Yes, the 'blueprint followers' realize everyone brings assumptions to their reading of Scripture, and the 'smorgasbord eaters' appreciate that God addresses us through the Bible. But we can do much better; we can let Scripture speak to us, surprise us, and guide us beyond our felt needs and preconceived theologies. That is what the theological interpretation of Scripture is about.

- ▶ *A spacious rule of faith, not a detailed blueprint, guides interpretation of Scripture. We read "as a follower of Jesus, baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." It's like having a good map rather than all the answers. Billings writes, "in particular moments of the journey, we can be confused and puzzled by what we find in a*



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particular passage in Scripture. But we trust that in this journey, the God of Scripture encounters us again and again, both with comforting signs of his presence and surprises that confound us, yet may open new vistas." Like a map, the rule does not replace the journey. "The rule gives a sense of the center as well as the periphery in biblical interpretation. It does not decide the meaning of specific Scripture passages in advance. Instead, it gives a sense of scope in the journey of reading Scripture, forging a path to deeper fellowship with the Triune God."

The rule may guide us to a careful "spiritual" reading of a text – in the form of allegory or typology – that finds import about Christ and his Church. "This...is rooted in the New Testament itself. For New Testament writers, it is not just the occasional messianic psalm or prophecy that applies to Christ. They read all of Israel's Scriptures in light of Christ."

- ▶ *Congregations around the world can prepare to interpret the Bible by allowing the Holy Spirit to illuminate Scripture and interpret it "in Christ." They do this "as they pray for the Spirit's illumination, worship the Triune God, and apply Scripture to their community of discipleship and witness," Billings notes. "The indwelling of the Spirit in the Christian community, as one located 'in Christ,' uniquely equips the Christian community to interpret the Bible as God's Word."*

Of course, the best intentioned theological interpreters can make mistakes. They would do well to rely on prayerful study of commentaries (from other cultures and eras, as well as their own) and the biblical languages. But the solution to interpretive mistakes, Billings suggests, "is not to surrender the Bible to scholarly experts. Rather, it is to regain a sense of the place of Scripture in God's drama of redemption, and to enter into the task of reading Scripture with openness to being reformed and reshaped by God on our path of dying to the old self and living into our identity in Christ."

Study Questions

1. Discuss your experiences with people using the blueprint and the smorgasbord approaches to interpreting Scripture. Why do you think these approaches are so popular today?
2. How does the rule of faith counter the blueprint and smorgasbord approaches to interpreting the Bible?
3. Why does Todd Billings commend congregational over individual interpretation of Scripture? What makes congregations capable of doing it well? Why aren't they foolproof?

Departing Hymn: "From All That Dwell below the Skies"

From all that dwell below the skies,
let the Creator's praise arise;
let the Redeemer's name be sung
through every land by every tongue.

Eternal are your mercies, Lord;
eternal truth attends your Word;
your praise shall sound from shore to shore,
till suns shall rise and set no more.

Isaac Watts (1719), alt.
Tune: DUKE STREET



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Studying the Word of God
(*Scripture*, pp. 29-38)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Urgency of Inspiration
(*Scripture*, pp. 64-65)
- 📖 Why Bother with the Bible?
(*Scripture*, pp. 78-80)

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Studying the Word of God

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Responsive Prayer

Lord, your word is both a wound for us and a balm.

With it you pierce our pride and our illusions of self-sufficiency.

You reprove our selfishness, you strip away our condescension, and we know that not one of us has yet arrived.

Forgive us our sins, and heal us with a word from you.

We confess that we have read your Word selfishly in order to justify our own thoughts.

We have failed to read it prayerfully, seeking guidance and wisdom from above.

We have used your words to serve our own ends, lording ourselves over others and rebelling against your teachings.

Heal us with a word from you, so that we may be whole. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:10-11

Reflection

“Praying and studying Scripture were once considered two complementary modes of communication with God: in prayer humans speak to God; in Scripture God speaks to humans,” Stephen Chapman observes. “It is this sense of being *addressed* that characterizes the reality of Scripture within Christian tradition.”

Yet we often dodge this holy conversation by studying the Bible as though it were “just another book” that we can mine for useful information about exotic cultures, the history of ancient Israel, the ‘real’ historical Jesus, the folkways of the first Christian groups, and so on. Or, if we think the Bible has something to say regarding our lives, we prefer to read the study Bible notes that can point us to the information we want “in short, streamlined delivery with reduced investment of time and effort.”

How can we escape such historical touring and opportunistic trawling when we read the Bible? Chapman has some ideas.

- ▶ *Repurpose historical study to critically discern what God is saying today.* “Scripture requires study [of history]...because God has chosen to speak in an ongoing way through words recorded long ago,” Chapman notes. But this study must be “critical” in two ways: on the one hand, we need “detailed knowledge of the whole Bible and profound intellectual wrestling with the substance of faith”; on the other, we must cultivate the proper dispositions and affections. Knowledge and ethics are intertwined; to hear God speaking to our communities, we need attuned minds and obedient hearts.

Though we do learn much from non-Christians and heterodox Christians about the theological meaning of Scripture, this does not refute “the early church’s basic insight: to study the Bible well means to stake one’s entire life on it, to be a disciple as well as a reader.” Of course, due to “individual human limitations and



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personal frailty, this insight means in turn that biblical interpretation will be most reliable and robust in authentic Christian community, where scriptural interpreters can complement each other's strengths ... and all are committed to the path of communal discipleship."

- ▶ *Focus on the central questions:* "What is God saying to us today through this text?" and "If our church took this scriptural word with utmost seriousness, what would we do differently this week in our local community?" and "How is God using this part of the Bible to show us what it means to be disciples of Jesus right now, right here?" One useful guide to staying focused, Chapman suggests, is what the biblical text *says*, rather than trying to fill in the silences. "While there is much to be gained from more creative approaches to the Bible, speculating about the psychology of biblical characters invariably leads away from serious reflection on the ways of God. Speculating about history ('maybe back then...') not only leaves the text behind but winds up in a cul-de-sac of undecidability ('maybe...I just don't know')."
- ▶ *Read with literary sensitivity.* The Bible is not a "pious tract"; it employs the same rhetorical strategies and effects that we might find in novels or poems. Biblical narratives not only have a "story" or plot, but a "discourse" or manner of telling their story. Therefore, Chapman says, "Perceptive readers pay loving attention to how the biblical story is told because they understand that the Bible's meaning also lies in that *how*, that the Bible does not only wish to report things that happened but also convey a point of view about them."
- ▶ *Learn to read the Bible as a two-testament document.* Chapman extends the idea of "discourse" to the Bible as a whole. When the Old Testament was not enough for them, the early Christians kept it and did not edit it to harmonize with Christian realities. They learned to read the testaments together, because "The gospel proclaims Jesus as the messiah of the Jews, and not only the redeemer of the Gentiles." Reading the Old Testament "prospectively," they peered ahead through its stories to the divine act in Christ that exceeds its boundaries; reading it "retrospectively," they re-read its events and figures with new insight as gesturing toward Christ.

Study Questions

1. How have you been tempted to read the Bible as "just another book"? Evaluate your Bible study with Stephen Chapman's four recommendations.
2. Discuss Chapman's idea that we should rename Bible study groups either "Bible action groups" or "Bible implementation squads" to show "what is at stake in consulting the Bible is not only what we are to know but how we are to live."
3. In what two major ways does Bible study matter in our lives, according to Bill Ireland? Do these match your experience?
4. How is Matthew, as he is depicted in Caravaggio's *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, a model of the faithful reader of Scripture?

Departing Hymn: "Many Books, One Holy Canon"



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Focus Article:

📖 Reading the Beatitudes
like a Christian
(*Scripture*, pp. 37-46)

Suggested Article:

📖 Reading with the Great
Cloud of Witnesses
(*Scripture*, pp. 88-93)

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Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian

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Responsive Prayer

Lord, your word is both a wound for us and a balm.

With it you pierce our pride and our illusions of self-sufficiency.

You reprove our selfishness, you strip away our condescension,
and we know that not one of us has yet arrived.

**At times we have thought that we alone hold the key to
interpreting Scripture.**

We have disregarded the voices of others – though without
them we cannot hope to hear your Word in its fullness.

Heal us with a word from you, so that we may be whole. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1-11

Reflection

When we read the Bible, we have “blind spots” – things in the text we cannot see clearly or at all. These may occur by no fault of our own: our scholarship is not defective and our devotion is not lacking, but the blind spots are conditioned by our time and culture. “So here’s the rub,” Andrew Selby notes: “when we read commentaries from our own era, we may find them to be easy to understand, but the very aspects of the biblical text we miss, their authors may miss as well – and for the same reasons.”

Most of us share a certain blind spot: a peculiarly modern notion of ‘objectivity’ leads us to bracket theological beliefs and read the Bible “just like any other book” of history or literature. We dissect it as we desire in our curiosity, but for this reason we miss things that theologically minded readers can see clearly. To help overcome this blind spot, Selby suggests that we add some pre-modern scripture commentaries to our reading list.

This makes sense, but we might still be skeptical. (That is another of our modern traits.) Can we really learn anything from patristic and medieval exegetes that we probably would not discover from our own careful study of Scripture? To find out, Selby reviews the work of Christian of Stavelot, a ninth-century commentator on the Gospel of Matthew. He discovers that Christian “can serve for us both as an *expositor* of the Beatitudes and as a *model* for putting the tradition to good use.”

- ▶ *Christian emphasizes who speaks the Beatitudes.* About the detail that Jesus “sat down” to teach, Christian says: “This means he was set apart from the crowds [as a teacher from pupils]. God’s *sitting down* has the spiritual meaning that Jesus was made incarnate, because when he became incarnate it was as if he shrank: that is to say, he was not such as he is in his divinity.” The first point is often made today. But then he relates Jesus’ divine and human natures to the ethics of the Beatitudes. Shelby observes, “Christian wants his students to know that the Lord of the universe, who inspired the prophets, has delivered the Sermon – not just a really nice man.”
- ▶ *Christian finds Jesus’ program of discipleship is possible.* Noting how Jesus himself obeys and exemplifies every instruction in the



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Beatitudes, Christian (unlike most modern commentators) does not debate whether or not it is practical to live them out. He does not “reason as if Jesus himself were irrelevant or extrinsic to carrying out the life of discipleship chartered in the Sermon,” Selby explains. “It is easy for us to forget that the blessed, flourishing life depicted in the Beatitudes only comes about *in Christ*. He himself lived it out. It is only a possibility for us to the extent that we are united to him by the work of the Holy Spirit in us as the Church.”

- ▶ *Christian hands on the tradition.* This wonderful insight comes from Augustine (354-430). Christian does not mention the source, because his main goal is to foster his students’ ability to read Scripture well. This is a model for our teaching, Selby suggests. “Unless one’s audience consists of folks with the inclination and time to actually read patristic and medieval texts, we should not present pre-modern interpretation as a necessary gateway to true understanding. Bible studies and sermons should be about Scripture, not about Augustine.”

Study Questions

1. Which modern cultural “blind spot” in reading Scripture does Andrew Selby identify? Why does he suggest that we read patristic and medieval commentators to counter it?
2. Briefly summarize the key insight that Christian of Stavelot offers for understanding the Beatitudes. How does it exemplify a theological interpretation of Scripture?
3. How is Christian a good model for using the tradition of biblical interpretation? Are there shortcomings to his approach?
4. Review what scholars know about Christian of Stavelot. How would you compare his teaching context to yours?

Departing Hymn: “Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit, Claiming Nothing as Their Own” (vv. 1 and 2)

Blesséd are the poor in spirit,
claiming nothing as their own,
but as giv’n them by their Father
that his goodness may be shown.
Blest are they who share the sorrow
of their God’s unchanging love;
they shall know his presence with them
and his promised comfort prove.

Blesséd are the strong but gentle,
trained to serve a higher will,
wise to know the eternal purpose
which their Father shall fulfill.
Blest are they who with true passion
strive to make the right prevail,
for the earth is God’s possession
and his purpose will not fail.

Norman Elliot (1967)

Suggested Tunes: BEECHER or ABBOT’S LEIGH



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Focus Articles:

- 📖 Preaching Scripture Faithfully
(*Scripture*, pp. 47-54)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Embodying Scripture through Performative Interpretation
(*Scripture*, pp. 74-77)

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Preaching Scripture Faithfully

How can we preach and hear difficult passages of Scripture faithfully? Preaching is a conversation that operates on several levels: preacher with scriptural text, preacher with congregation, congregation with preacher, and, in the case of a “good” sermon, congregation with scriptural text.

Responsive Prayer

Lord, your word is both a wound for us and a balm.

With it you pierce our pride and our illusions of self-sufficiency.

We need every word you will speak to us.

We need the words that come down through the ages to speak for us; we need the voices in the Scripture who grieve to voice our own pain; we need the stories of divine blessing to breathe purpose into our lives; we need the songs of old to draw us into their joyful refrain.

We need your words, passed down through the ages, to understand the mystery of our God, the holy three in one.

Heal us with a word from you, so that we may be whole.

Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 2:1-3:3

Reflection

Everything about Ezekiel’s calling is dramatic. God sends him to preach to a really hard audience – the “impudent and stubborn” and “rebellious” people of Israel. To prepare him, God makes Ezekiel *eat* a scroll filled with “words of lamentation and mourning and woe.” And (here’s the surprise), he finds it tasty.

Rev. Christine McSpadden’s story is not so striking. Yet she does recall that in her former job, as an art director in a Madison Avenue advertising firm, the ‘pitch’ was so much easier. “Even though advertising tells a story to convert – a shared goal with sermons – the project of preaching possesses marked differences. Where the marketing pitch lulls consumers by selling an attractive reality, preaching equips disciples, awakening in them skills of discernment. It activates sensibilities to new realities – some of those realities initially *unattractive*.” And so she wonders, “What does one do when that scriptural revelation of the Holy One looks less than attractive? ... How does the preacher put the alluring lipstick on the pig of a prickly passage from the pulpit?”

She has four ideas for allowing a so-called ‘difficult’ text to “speak on its own terms with a challenging and relevant word.”

- ▶ *Attend to its multiple senses.* The Church has a rich tradition of finding layers of meaning in each text, following a pattern found in Scripture itself. “The Gospels constantly recast Old Testament witness in light of the Resurrection; Paul consistently draws analogies between texts. Jesus himself illumines the holy writ in new ways,” she notes. In the patristic and medieval eras the *Quadrigo*, or four-fold sense, arose. “With this discipline, each text is mined for four levels of varied meaning: the literal sense, the allegorical sense, the moral or tropological sense, and the anagogical or future sense.”
- ▶ *Interpret it in canonical context.* Reading a text in light of the entire biblical narrative highlights its role in the worshiping community



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that gave it final form. The text's meaning contributes to and in turn is shaped by the "weighted witness" of the whole of Scripture.

- ▶ *Use a hermeneutic of trust or consent.* Rather than grading each passage according to one's ideological stance (e.g., a feminist, womanist, queer, non-Western, or in some significant way, marginalized perspective), McSpadden urges us to approach the Bible "with an attitude of prayer and worship, and a humble willingness to hear the otherness of the text while suspending one's own inner critic. Such an interpretive framework accords sacred writing the benefit of the doubt: it acknowledges that the text has had something to say to followers for millennia and might have something authentic to say now. It invokes the doctrine of divine inspiration that encourages an attitude of openness and vulnerability to transformation by the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit."
- ▶ *Read it as a living text.* "What can be gleaned from [the Bible] is infinitely rich, abundantly varied, and utterly inexhaustible. The doctrine of divine inspiration holds that sacred Scripture not only was composed and edited under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also continues to be interpreted and appropriated under that same divine guidance. With the Bible, we deal with a living text that continues to have meaning for the faith communities that hold it sacred."

"Dealing with hard texts with a congregation extends the invitation to take on a new ethic, one marked by the kingdom of God," McSpadden concludes. By improving their interpretive skills, such study of Scripture "persuades the listener that the Bible manifests resources for our daily lives that far surpass any worldly or material good."

Study Questions

1. Review the four levels of meaning of the *Quadrige*, or four fold sense of Scripture. Which levels of meaning have been the foci of your Bible study? Why is each level important for a Christian interpreter?
2. Consider how the doctrine of divine inspiration undergirds each of Christine McSpadden's suggestions.
3. What sort of biblical texts are 'difficult' for you? How could McSpadden's suggestions help you interpret them?
4. For Kathy Maxwell, why is it valuable to internalize and perform Scripture in the context of teaching and preaching?

Departing Hymn: "The Heavens Declare Your Glory, Lord" (vv. 1 and 5)

The heav'ns declare your glory, Lord;
in every star your wisdom shines;
but when our eyes behold your Word,
we read your name in fairer lines.

Great Sun of Righteousness, arise!
Bless the dark world with heav'nly light,
Your gospel makes the simple wise;
your laws are pure, your judgments right.

Isaac Watts (1719), alt.

Suggested Tunes: CANONBURY or HEBRON

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the biblical narrative points toward the Triune nature of God.
2. To discuss how the doctrine of the Trinity reshapes our understanding of the nature of Scripture and how to read it.
3. To introduce three practices which support a Trinitarian way of reading the Bible.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Scripture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

One of our authors, Daniel Treier, recalls attending a life-changing worship service at St. Paul's on Bloor Street in Toronto. "I was caught short by the bulletin headline: Trinity Sunday," he reports, because he did not know there was such a day in the church year. "I was even more surprised by the preacher: she centered her sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity! That was courage I definitely had never encountered before. But soon the sermon had me awestruck at the beauty of our God: a God who is love, inviting us into fellowship in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit."

At the time, Treier was a Ph.D. student in theology. He explains, "Had I already learned, enough to regurgitate adequately in writing, Trinitarian theology? Yes. Had I learned to appreciate its beauty and love its Subject? Not really. Instead, sadly, I had learned to avoid the doctrine, secretly suspecting it could not be defended with sound biblical exegesis or philosophical reasoning, and that for ministry-keeping purposes it would best be affirmed without receiving much (risky) attention."

"By God's grace, though, Trinity Sunday in Toronto did not just return me to academic theological study with renewed vigor; it changed my life, furthering a spiritual turn toward divine love, nourishment in liturgical practice, and life and healing in fellowship." (*Scripture*, 11-12)

Before that Sunday, it seemed impossible to conceive of biblical interpretation in robustly Trinitarian terms. For it seemed difficult to be confident of Trinitarian theology as really biblical.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Invite members to read responsively the reading based on 1 Peter 1:2-3, 10, and 12 in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Daniel Treier and Stephen Pardue begin by showing how Scripture points toward the Triune nature of God, but their main goal is to understand how the doctrine of the Trinity reshapes how we should read Scripture.

Does this look suspiciously circular? It becomes clear that this circling back is necessary and appropriate to connect the theological dots. A Christian way of reading the Bible should be governed by the nature of the Triune God revealed in its pages. Treier and Pardue briefly commend three practices for reading Scripture; in future study guides we will learn more about these practices and see examples of them at work.

Study Questions

1. In 1 Peter 1:2, the three persons of God are used to describe the Christian identity of the recipients of the letter: they are “chosen” by God the Father and “sanctified” by the Holy Spirit so that they can be “obedient” to Jesus Christ. A second section (vv. 3-9) highlights the relationship of the Father to Jesus Christ: by resurrecting Jesus, the Father gives believers hope to face trials and endure suffering. The Spirit is the focus of a third section (vv. 10-12): the Spirit of Christ inspired the prophets of Israel and the Holy Spirit directs the evangelists who share the good news of God’s redemption – “things into which angels long to look!”
2. Daniel Treier and Stephen Pardue summarize: “By looking at the Trinitarian relations, we encounter a dynamic of Word and Spirit, with God’s definitive self-communication in Jesus Christ creating freedom for response by the Holy Spirit. Hence the meaning of biblical texts unfolds in a history of covenant fellowship.” We begin to see the stories, poems, and teachings of the Bible as playing their roles within God’s invitation through the Spirit to know, receive, and obediently embrace the Image of God that is perfectly expressed in Jesus Christ. God is up to something through the words of Scripture: drawing us to himself through his Word, Jesus Christ. Thus, we should read Scripture not merely for truths about God, or the history of religions, or the moral life, but to glimpse the beauty of the Triune God and to respond to the call for communion with God and (through him) with one another. Treier and Pardue conclude, “We read for not just cognitive content but communion – the fullness of personal communication. We see truth and love not as opposites that have difficulty attracting, but instead as two dimensions of the one new humanity created in Jesus Christ.”
3. Form three groups to examine the practices individually and report their insights. The first practice, interpreting Scripture by the rule of faith (*analogia fidei*), maintains our focus on the big picture of the redeeming work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It inhibits interpreting passages in isolation from the whole, or in light of another theological construction. This joins us with the community of faithful Christian interpreters through the centuries. The next study, “A Journey of Reading Scripture,” will have more to say about this.

The second practice, critically attending to early Christian interpretation of the Bible, can provide encouragement and some models for seeking an experience of the Triune God through Scripture. Even when their approaches are mistaken, these early Christians’ efforts help us break the modern habit of bracketing all theological doctrines when we read Scripture. The fourth study, “Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian,” gives an example of the critical appropriation of a ninth-century commentator, Christian of Stavelot.

The third practice, attending to the fullness of the Spirit’s work, reminds us that interpretation of the Bible is guided by the Triune God. “The Father speaks in the Son, and the Spirit completes this communicative act as Lord of our hearing,” Treier and Pardue write. Openness to the Spirit requires habits of obedience, confession, and meditation on Scripture, in addition to scholarly study. Since interpretation is not an individual, but a communal project, they urge us to “recognize the Spirit’s freedom to minister through cultural and social forms. Just as the Spirit gives life to linguistic symbols (jots and tittles) as modes of God’s self-revelation, so the Spirit sanctifies cultural resources to reveal new depths of meaning in the written Word.” This includes openness to global Christian insights from other cultures.

4. Antonello’s *Saint Jerome in His Study* depicts the scholar surrounded by open books (of biblical manuscripts, theology, philological reference?): the Spirit’s inspiration is mediated by the authors and books Jerome studies. Castagno’s *Saint Jerome’s Vision of the Trinity with Saints Paula and Eustochium* depicts an inspiring vision of the Trinity, shared with two close friends. Once again Jerome’s submission to God (expressed here through bodily mortification rather than diligent study) is celebrated.

Departing Hymn

“Many Books, One Holy Canon” is on pp. 55-57 of *Scripture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Journey of Reading Scripture

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To identify and critique two popular ways of reading the Bible: the blueprint approach and the smorgasbord approach.
2. To understand the nature of the rule of faith and why it is needed to guide interpretation of Scripture.
3. To consider the role of the congregation of believers in interpreting Scripture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Scripture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "From All That Dwell below the Skies" locate the familiar tune DUKE STREET in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

In the United States, the decline in the Bible's authority has a generational dimension. A poll by the Barna Group for the American Bible Society notes, "Boomers (ages 49 to 67) and Elders (ages 68 plus) are more likely to regard the Bible as sacred [85% and 89% respectively]. Millennials (18 to 29) are the least likely generational segment to regard the Bible as sacred literature [64%]" (State of the Bible 2014, 6, online at www.americanbible.org/features/state-of-the-bible-research-2014).

But the problem involves not only a decline in the Bible's authority, Todd Billings warns, because "even when the Bible is interpreted authoritatively, it is not necessarily interpreted as *Christian Scripture*." On the one hand, there are many specialty Bibles of dubious worth. "Consider, for example, a recent Christian bestseller that offers a 'Bible diet.' The book claims to enable better concentration, improve appearance, increase energy, and reverse the process of 'accelerated aging.' To want to improve your appearance and energy level, do you have to be interested in knowing God or Jesus? Of course not. There is nothing intrinsically Christian about the advice." Such products encourage us to read the Bible according to our preferences; they do not allow it to call our felt needs into question or cause us to look beyond them.

On the other hand, Billings continues, "It is not just well-meaning writers but also many biblical scholars who fail to approach the Bible as Christian Scripture. Some approach it only as ancient history, using it as a piece of evidence in answering archeological or sociological questions about the ancient world. Other scholars try to reconstruct the thought of a book or author. A scholar can write an in-depth essay about Paul's theology without ever considering that God could be addressing the scholar's own time through Paul's ancient texts." (*Scripture*, 20-21)

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:103-105 from a modern translation.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The Trinitarian rule of faith plays an essential role in forming congregations that can interpret Scripture well for their particular time and place. The practice of using the rule of faith to guide interpretation of the Bible was introduced in the previous study, “A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture.” This study follows Todd Billings in presenting the “spacious” rule of faith as a corrective to the narrow theological straitjackets (“the blueprint approach”) and personal or group agendas (“the smorgasbord approach”) that often guide popular biblical interpretation today.

The renewed interest in the rule of faith is a central feature of the emerging movement among scholars for the theological interpretation of Scripture. Don Collett describes this movement as “one of the more exciting and promising developments in the past two-hundred years of biblical exegesis.” In *Overcoming Historicism’s Dividing Wall of Hostility*, he recommends accessible resources from the movement and evaluates its attempts to heal the rift between biblical studies and theology within both the academy and the Church.

Study Questions

1. Members may share their or others’ attempts to interpret the Bible in the “blueprint” or “smorgasbord” way in the context of a small group study. To avoid excessive finger pointing, encourage members to focus on their own struggle with these tempting approaches. Ask them to evaluate Christian books and study Bibles, televised sermons and lessons, and church presentations that veer into one of the approaches. Both approaches emphasize our mastery over Scripture in bending it to our purposes, and privilege the individual interpreter’s perspective and choice. Perhaps they are tempting to even well-meaning believers because they cater to modern consumerist and individualist tendencies.
2. Todd Billings describes the Trinitarian rule of faith as “an account of the gospel and Christian identity rooted in baptism: one reads Scripture as a follower of Jesus, baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, early baptismal creeds – statements of faith – had a Trinitarian character (e.g., the Apostles’ Creed) that provided the basic content of the ‘rule of faith.’ Why was and is this necessary? The Bible is a large book, and even careful readers can interpret it in a variety of ways. But not all of these ways are *Christian* ways of reading Scripture.”

As we read Scripture with this rule of faith as our guide, it is *similar* to the blueprint approach (in acknowledging that we read with certain assumptions about God’s nature and purpose in mind) and the smorgasbord approach (in expecting Scripture to provide insight and guidance for our lives). But the rule of faith is an important corrective to these popular approaches. On the one hand, the rule is “spacious,” like a “map” or “measure,” rather than a detailed like a blueprint; as the rule guides us, it provides plenty of latitude for exploring the text’s meaning for our discipleship of Christ and for his Church. Against the smorgasbord approach, the rule reorients our reading away from our sometimes errant preferences and felt needs. It reminds us that Scripture is not about what we happen to want or think we need, but about the Triune God’s purposes for all creation, including our growing fellowship with the Father through the work of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

3. In an individualist, consumerist culture, we are tempted to interpret the Bible alone, without others. Billings writes, “In our day, some assume that the individual is an omni-competent biblical interpreter. No need for commentators, no need for a community of faith. Just me, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit. While sometimes the slogan ‘sola scriptura’ is used to justify such an approach, it is a serious distortion of that Protestant principle. During the Reformation, the Bible was not read alone. Instead, communities of worship and discipleship were the setting of biblical interpretation. Moreover, Reformation exegetes consulted exegetes through the ages, and refined their knowledge of biblical languages and other critical skills of biblical interpretation.” Billings urges us to return to these Reformation practices.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Studying the Word of God

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on how Bible study should matter in our lives.
2. To check whether our approach to Bible study has become (in Stephen Chapman's words) "too distanced, too cerebral, too individualistic."
3. To consider Chapman's four concrete suggestions to help us resist historical touring and opportunistic trawling when we study the Bible.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Scripture (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

Are the pace of our lives and the rise of information technologies changing (and deforming) how we read Scripture? Stephen Chapman thinks so. He writes, "When people think of 'studying' Scripture today, they often envision a process of gathering information. After all, the twenty-first century is the age of Google and Wikipedia. Information is produced and gathered constantly. Internet search engines are so much a part of daily life that families access them at the dinner table. Cell phones are magic-like portals to universal knowledge. News reports rocket around the globe, minute by minute, 24/7. Even though this communications technology is a great gift, attempting to monitor the overwhelming flow of information is like trying to take a drink of water from a fire hydrant.

"Faced with this challenge, the act of reading focuses more and more on expediency and becomes fundamentally opportunistic. 'What can I get out of this text?' is the driving question. 'How can I find the information I need as quickly and efficiently as possible?' 'How can I zero in on what is important for me and use it to my best advantage?' Reading takes place so that information can be consumed, and 'studying' is just one more way for consumers to locate the right product. Scripture, like everything else in modern life, has become a commodity." (*Scripture*, 29)

If we are willing to resist this trend, Chapman has some concrete guidance to offer for our Bible study.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:10-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Stephen Chapman's worry that much of our Bible study today has become "too distanced, too cerebral, too individualistic" is certainly in line with the concerns raised in the previous two study guides in this series,

“A Trinitarian Way of Reading Scripture” and “The Journey of Reading Scripture.” This study focuses on Chapman’s four practical recommendations to resist these trends and return to the classic Christian expectation that God may speak to us in life-altering ways as we prayerfully study Scripture. Use this opportunity to evaluate your own approach to Bible study individually and in church study groups.

Study Questions

1. Stephen Chapman notes two trends of treating the Bible as “just another book.” One treats the Bible as an aid to meet our felt needs and seeks to locate the most useful passages efficiently. A plethora of specialized study Bibles, tailored lessons, and need-based sermons encourage this approach. “If this part of the Bible is not speaking to me,” we learn to say, “then it is simply not the part to which I need to pay attention.” The second uses the Bible as a sourcebook on ancient times. “Scripture is an artifact, a transcript that relates history: what God once did and how our forebears in the faith responded.” Members may identify more with one or the other of the trends, but both are temptations for every Bible study group.

Form four small groups to answer these questions: “How ‘critical’ is our Bible study in the two ways Chapman describes?” “How can we keep our focus on the central questions?” “How well are we reading the Bible with sensitivity to its literary forms?” and “How well do we read and relate the two testaments in our Bible study?”

2. Maybe Chapman is being a bit facetious, but his point is clear. The word “study” now connotes dispassionate research that separates gaining new knowledge from changing our lives. Such research pushes us to reexamine our starting points, yet the “endless modern debates about the Bible’s relation to history and science, not to mention the critical debates in academic scholarship over the history of the Bible’s literary formation, have all too conveniently served to deflect attention away from the gospel’s call for transformed lives.”

Use this opportunity to perform a spiritual checkup on your Bible study group. Has it become “too distanced, too cerebral, too individualistic”? If it has, why did it move that direction and how will you respond? Perhaps in your congregation there is a division of labor: some groups study the Bible in a scholarly way, while other groups implement the changes or programs of service that God is calling the congregation to do. If you think that is the case, how are the groups in regular communication to check and balance each other’s work?

3. Bill Ireland says that Bible study teaches us to look beneath the surface of our lives and see God at work in every situation. That is because “Time and again, people [in the Bible] discovered God working behind the scenes during difficult circumstances or revealing the hidden potential of ordinary things.” Also, Bible study challenges the cultural messages about how we should live; it gives us critical distance from the “five hundred channels on television, radio programs designed exclusively for our demographic, magazines in print and on-line that are devoted to exclusive interests and tastes” telling us what to love and how to act.

Invite members to share their experiences (in personal or group Bible study) of coming to see God at work in ordinary events or gaining a Godly critical perspective on their lives.

4. In *Inspiration of St. Matthew* (on the cover), “Caravaggio conveys urgency in Matthew, who is not seated as a scribe deep in thought, but is rushing back to the table to write down the inspiration sent from God via the angel,” Heidi Hornik writes. “Matthew becomes an example of the faithful reader of Scripture: captured by the immediacy of the experience and intent on remembering that moment of inspiration.”

How can we remember moments of divine inspiration and direction that come to us through Bible study? Perhaps members make action notes, keep a personal journal, share their experiences with a spiritual friend, or so on. Are there ways of concluding your group study that would help members respond with their lives to what they have learned?

Departing Hymn

“Many Books, One Holy Canon” is on pp. 55-57 of Scripture. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Reading the Beatitudes like a Christian

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To recognize the “blind spots” we have as modern interpreters of Scripture, and consider how reading pre-modern commentaries might help us overcome them.
2. To appreciate the work of one medieval commentator, Christian of Stavelot, as an expositor of the Beatitudes and model for relying on the tradition of biblical interpretation.
3. To discuss some contemporary resources that draw upon the patristic and medieval tradition of biblical interpretation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Scripture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit, Claiming Nothing as Their Own” locate one of the familiar tunes BEECHER or ABBOT’S LEIGH in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Andrew Selby asks you to imagine that a friend has invited you to lead a Bible study – for instance, this one! – that is studying the Beatitudes, the opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount. “Recognizing that the Sermon on the Mount is probably the most important of Jesus’s discourses in the Gospels, and is often called the charter for Christian discipleship, the stakes are accordingly high,” Selby writes. “If you succeed, you could inspire your brothers and sisters in Christ to fuller love of God and neighbor. On the other hand, if you bungle Jesus’ teaching, you may accidentally persuade the group that the Christian life is either impossible or dull. Will they find Christ’s sketch of the ‘blessed’ life compelling or just plain naïve?

“You know that you need more than personal anecdotes to unpack the passage. After all, we are all on the way, not having attained to the vision of life cast in the Beatitudes. Humbly recognizing your individual limitations, you decide to consult some Bible study resources. But which ones?

“If you have some training in biblical exegesis from a Christian college or seminary, you will probably reach for some standard modern commentaries published in the last few decades. But as you search them for insight into the Beatitudes, you begin to suspect that their being ‘up-to-date’ is not a virtue, but a liability.” The writers may have the same modern blind spots regarding the Sermon as you and the study group members! So, where will you turn? (*Scripture*, 37-38)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:1-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Each of the previous three lessons in this series has urged us to revisit the wealth of pre-modern commentaries on Scripture. In this study we do that. Andrew Selby guides us to an insight in the ninth-century commentary on Matthew by Christian of Stavelot that can correct modern readings of the Beatitudes – namely “that a more theological reading of Christ’s teaching in the Beatitudes prevents us from making them abstract statements unconnected with Jesus’ person, but assists us to live in light of the grace available to us through his Incarnation.”

For another example of reading the Beatitudes in the company of pre-modern Christians, see Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “The Beatitudes in the Desert,” *Sermon on the Mount*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 26 (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2008), 60-67, and the accompanying study guide (www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/index.php?id=52200).

In “Reading with the Great Cloud of Witnesses,” Rachel Billings reviews accessible resources to help your group become acquainted with pre-modern Christian interpreters of Scripture.

Study Questions

1. Key aspects of Scripture will be noticed only by interpreters who assume the Triune God is at work in history, Andrew Selby argues. Often modern interpreters are ill prepared to read the Bible this way. “In the last few centuries biblical scholarship has been located almost exclusively in the university, and in the same period the university has largely rejected the authority of faith over reason,” he notes. Thus, “the relation of a passage to the overarching story of creation, Israel, Christ, Church, and consummation is ignored because the grand Christian narrative is no longer assumed to be true.” Pre-modern commentators do not share this blind spot: “They emphasize the big picture over the details. They have eyes intent on the narrative of Scripture, especially on its climax in Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection – what they often called the ‘scope’ or ‘mind’ of Scripture. ... [T]hey exemplify how to read particular passages of the Bible from the standpoint of faith.”
2. Christian of Stavelot, following Augustine, offers a theological reading of the Beatitudes when he assumes that Jesus is God incarnate speaking to us. This assumption, Selby notes, “prevents us from making [the Beatitudes into] abstract statements unconnected with Jesus’ person, but assists us to live in light of the grace available to us through his Incarnation.”
3. Christian wears his scholarship very lightly. While he understands, embraces, and develops Augustine’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, Christian does not call attention to his source. “Instead, he made the church fathers’ insights his own as he introduced his students to the riches of the mysteries of faith,” Selby writes. “The point for Christian, as it is for those of us who teach the Bible, is to foster our students’ ability to read Scripture well.”

Is that the best way to use sources, or is it plagiarism? Perhaps it depends on the teaching context. For instance, one might teach differently when the point is to show listeners how to use and develop sources (e.g., in a college or seminary classroom) rather than urge them to respond to Christ’s call on their lives (in a discipleship class or worship service). Have you ever experienced a style of teaching or preaching that is inappropriate for the context?

4. “All that is known of Christian of Stavelot derives from the commentary he wrote on the Gospel of Matthew,” Selby explains. “Indeed it is not even certain that his name was ‘Christian.’ We do know that he composed his exposition for the benefit of young monks studying in the Abbey of Stavelot, located in modern Belgium.” When he discovered Jerome’s *Commentary on Matthew* was too difficult for his students, Christian decided to write his own. Selby locates this commentary in the “Carolingian Renaissance,” a ninth-century reform movement to “raise the level of education among pastors and monks to attain this goal of improved leading, preaching, and evangelizing.” Thus, “Christian was not just teaching the text of Matthew: he was teaching his students to read well.”

To what extent do Bible study groups today share the goals of helping their members to read, think, write, and speak well, to become leaders and teachers in the congregation and community, to appreciate the Christian tradition of Scripture interpretation, and so on? Are these objectives in conflict with, or supportive of the goal of helping members to become committed disciples of Christ?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Preaching Scripture Faithfully

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand preaching as a multi-level conversation.
2. To outline strategies for preaching and teaching the so-called ‘difficult’ biblical texts – those that are difficult to understand or are unattractive to modern sensibilities.
3. To consider why is it valuable to internalize and perform Scripture in the context of teaching and preaching.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Scripture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “The Heavens Declare Your Glory, Lord” locate one of the familiar tunes CANONBURY or HEBRON in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Christine McSpadden remembers how frightened she was twenty years ago when she preached her first sermon. She was not afraid of speaking before a daunting audience, because she had plenty of experience. “As an art director on Madison Avenue, my job involved presenting to clients and selling them on products, concepts, and ideas,” she recalls. “I was charged with crafting a cohesive message and then communicating that message in a creative and compelling way that could be heard in the vernacular of my audience, in order to convert perspectives and ignite desires. Hundreds of pitches honed my skills. Hours of public speaking steeled my nerves. But the first time I climbed the stairs of a pulpit to preach a sermon, my knees buckled, my heart raced, my hands perspired, and my confidence flagged. Up to this point, my presentations espoused the advantages of whitening agents and moisturizing compounds, credit card acceptance and softness assurance. Never had the stakes been so high as when I mounted those steps to proclaim Christ crucified and risen, who was, and is, and will be forever.”

McSpadden is still awestruck by the task of preaching, but she trusts “that God’s Word will work in and through me to deliver good news to those hungry to hear it.” (*Scripture*, 47)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ezekiel 2:1-3:3 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The theological interpretation of Scripture, which is the focus of these study guides, bears additional practical fruit in this lesson. We see how Christine McSpadden employs it in her preaching to shed light on the so-called ‘difficult’ biblical texts, and how Kathy Maxwell uses it to bring Scripture alive through performance in her

teaching. Another theme that runs through McSpadden and Maxwell's articles is that preaching or teaching Scripture is a multi-level conversation: of the preacher/teacher with Scripture, of the preacher/teacher with listeners, of listeners with the preacher/teacher, and (when it is a "good" sermon or lesson) of listeners with Scripture. Let this insight guide your teaching and inspire your group members.

Study Questions

1. Christine McSpadden explains: "First, the literal sense denotes what the passage says at face value, what it reports or states directly given its grammatical, etymological, historical constitution. To parse the literal sense, one might employ a wealth of study tools such as grammatical aids, archaeological evidence, historical and literary analyses, and sociological and anthropological studies." Most commentaries offer interpretations in this literal sense.
"Second, the allegorical sense indicates what the passage means in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, church doctrine, and the rule of faith." It may include "a Christocentric, symbolic reading layered upon pre- or non-Christian texts."
"Third, the moral sense suggests what the passage can teach one about how to live. It challenges one's worldview, gives guidance, models ethical response. Fourth, the anagogical sense teases out an eschatological, metaphysical meaning concerned with last things, consummation, and ultimacy."
Here is her example of interpreting the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea. "A literal reading would deal with the importance of the story for Israel's deliverance. It might ask logistical questions like 'Was the Red Sea really a 'reed' sea, shallow and marshy?' or 'Historically, what transpired when Moses and Israel crossed the sea?' Allegorically, one might wonder how the crossing represents baptism and new life, repentance and being washed clean. Morally, one might reflect on what it says about deliverance from oppressive forces, how one crosses over hardship in search of a promised land. Eschatologically, one might ask what the story anticipates about the passage from death into eternal life."
2. McSpadden invokes the doctrine of divine inspiration in regard to the last two suggestions: we can read the Bible with a hermeneutic of trust or consent, and believe Scripture is a living text with a word for our faith community because we are confident that the Holy Spirit is working through the written word to reveal Christ and transform our lives. The doctrine also undergirds the other suggestions. The allegorical, moral, and anagogical meanings of particular texts often go beyond what the human writers understood and intended to say about the figures and events they are describing; they become clear in light of later actions by God and we are guided to understand them by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2). Also, the formation of the canon of Scripture occurred through a long process of discernment in the Church guided by the Spirit.
3. Encourage members to make a list of texts that are difficult for them. McSpadden identifies the "texts encountered during lectionary-based worship ... [that are] all too lacking in marketable appeal." These might include challenging teachings by Jesus, the role of women in the biblical narrative, and apocalyptic prophecies. Beyond the lectionary are many other 'difficult' passages including stories or psalms of great violence (she mentions the story of Jephthah in Judges 8), ceremonial laws in the Old Testament, teachings about sexual purity, and parts of the wisdom literature. Of course, she does not claim that the four interpretive strategies will remove all of our difficulties quickly (or, in some cases, at all), but that they are time-honored ways of struggling more carefully with these difficult texts.
4. Kathy Maxwell performs Scripture with her faculty colleagues and assigns performance to her college students. She identifies several benefits. Performing Scripture requires the interpreter to study the text carefully in light of the larger biblical narrative; she reports that she must put herself "into the sandals of the people I am embodying, guided and informed by the story's historical and literary context." Furthermore, performance "is an effective way to communicate multiple layers of interpretation" to an audience. It engages the audience to interact with the figures in the biblical narrative. And it presents Scripture without tying up all the interpretive loose ends, which "gives Scripture freedom to work in the lives of the hearers in refreshing and unexpected ways." If your group would like to perform Scripture, contact Kathy Maxwell for guidance on selecting texts and preparing for the performance.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.