

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson 2

Preparation for Interpretation

Manuscript



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# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>DEPENDENCE ON HOLY SPIRIT .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Inspiration .....	2
Divine Source.....	5
Human Means .....	7
Illumination.....	8
<b>NEED FOR HUMAN EFFORT .....</b>	<b>10</b>
Importance .....	10
Influences.....	12
Exegesis .....	12
Interaction .....	13
Experience.....	13
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>CONTRIBUTORS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>GLOSSARY .....</b>	<b>18</b>

# He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

## Lesson Two

### Preparation for Interpretation

#### INTRODUCTION

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Whenever we begin a project, it's wise to make the right kinds of preparations. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus himself illustrated this idea when he described a man who wanted to build a tower, but failed to complete the project because he had not prepared. Well, something similar is true when it comes to interpreting the Scriptures. Making sense of the Bible is a complex project that requires all kinds of activities and extends throughout our entire lives. So, we have to make sure that we prepare to interpret the Bible in the right ways.

This is the second lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, a series devoted to exploring how followers of Christ should interpret the Bible. And we've entitled this lesson "Preparation for Interpretation" because we'll be focusing on some things it's helpful to do before we read and interpret the Scriptures.

In this lesson, we'll look at two crucial elements of our personal preparation for interpretation. First, we'll consider our dependence on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And second, we'll address the need for our own human effort. Let's look first at our dependence on the Holy Spirit.

#### DEPENDENCE ON HOLY SPIRIT

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When we mention the Holy Spirit, we all know that different Christians react in different ways. Perhaps you're from a branch of the church that stresses the gifts of the Spirit — his presence and empowerment in everyday life. Or maybe you're from a branch of the church that minimizes the Spirit's activity in the daily life of believers. Well, what we're about to say about the Holy Spirit's work in the interpretation of Scripture will both reassure and challenge each one of us. As we interpret the Bible, we must consciously give ourselves to the ministry of the Spirit, but the Bible itself teaches us to do this in particular ways. To ignore the Holy Spirit is the height of foolishness; but we must pay attention to him in the ways that the Bible instructs. What then does it mean to depend on the Holy Spirit as we interpret the Scriptures?

Most evangelicals theoretically acknowledge that the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in our interpretation of Scripture. But modern academic books and lectures on biblical hermeneutics often pay almost no attention to the Holy Spirit's role. Instead, we commonly treat biblical interpretation as if it were an impersonal event, a process in which we simply implement a list of principles or methods to understand a text. But from a biblical point of view hermeneutics, or the interpretation of Scripture, is very personal because it involves interaction between human interpreters and the person of the Holy Spirit.

Conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit in interpretation is crucial for at least two reasons. First, the Spirit was the source of the inspiration of Scripture. And second, the Holy Spirit grants illumination to human interpreters. Let's turn first to the matter of inspiration.

## INSPIRATION

I remember once having the opportunity to meet a well-known author whose books had helped me at a critical time in my Christian life. I was so excited to sit down with him and to tell him how much his books meant to me. At one point in the conversation, I told him about a particularly beneficial insight that I derived from one of his books. But much to my surprise, he looked up at me and said, "You've got that all wrong! That's not what I wrote at all!" Well, to say the least, I was embarrassed. But I remember taking a deep breath and admitting to him, "Well, I guess the man who wrote the book knows what it means better than I do."

Well, in many ways, the same is true with the Bible. The Holy Spirit of God inspired every word of Scripture. And in this sense, he's the author of Scripture. So, it only stands to reason that we should seek insight into his book from him. In a very basic sense, the doctrine of inspiration says that:

**The Holy Spirit moved human beings to write God's revelation as Scripture and superintended their work in a way that made their writings infallible**

Listen to the way Peter expressed this idea in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

In this passage, Peter said that all biblical prophecy originated with the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit moved human beings to write down God's revelation. This process ensured that what they wrote was absolutely true, and that the words of the human authors were also the words of God. And in 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul indicated that all of Scripture was similarly inspired.

**The Bible is organic truth, interconnected from beginning to end, a wonderful book that is the Word of life, grounded in life, that provides for all the needs of life. It is truth because it has the Holy Spirit as the author, and it's impossible for the Holy Spirit to go against himself or contradict himself... It doesn't matter if you read Jeremiah or Paul or Obadiah or Jonah; they all use different words, but the spirit behind those words is the same, because one Spirit inspired the words that were chosen.**

— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation

Christ and his disciples were committed to the idea that the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture. And those who have attempted to follow Christ have almost always affirmed some sense in which the Scriptures were inspired. Even so, those who profess the Christian faith have tended to understand the nature of inspiration in different ways.

For our purposes, we'll focus on three views of inspiration that are prominent in the modern church. First, some people believe in what we'll call a "romantic" view of inspiration. According to this view, the Holy Spirit inspired biblical writers in the same way that secular poets or musicians might be moved to write their own works. In their view, Scripture isn't God's infallible truth, but only the personal reflections and opinions of the human authors.

Second, other Christians believe in what we might call "mechanical" inspiration. According to this outlook, biblical writers were relatively passive as they wrote Scripture. The Spirit of God essentially dictated the Bible and human writers recorded what he said.

Third, most evangelical Christians affirm that the Spirit's work of inspiration was "organic." According to this view, the Holy Spirit moved human authors to write and supervised and directed their words. As a result, the words of Scripture are the words of God. At the same time, the Holy Spirit used the personalities, experiences, outlooks, and intentions of human authors as he supervised their writing. So, the words of Scripture are also very much the words of its human authors. This third view best reflects the Scriptures' own testimony about the nature of inspiration.

**Reading the Scriptures is a very fascinating process, because it was created over hundreds of years by multiple authors, and so you see those personalities flowing out in the way they write, in the way they relate to the people around them, and in the language they use. And so, their personalities are important to the Word of God because God uses them in a lot of different ways. For example, you have priests that write, you have a farmer that writes, a herdsman that writes, you have a king that writes, you have a medical doctor that writes, and you have a man who, in our culture, would have a Ph.D. from "Hebrew University," the apostle Paul, who has a phenomenal grasp of the Old Testament as well as Greek culture and Greek language and is able to take the Greek language and pull out of it its appropriateness for the expression of theological thinking probably better than any language that's ever existed.**

— Dr. Howard Eyrich

For instance, listen to the way Peter described the organic nature of inspiration in 2 Peter 3:15:

Our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him (2 Peter 3:15).

In this passage Peter revealed how Paul's letters should be received. On the one hand, he said that, "Paul wrote." So, Peter affirmed Paul's involvement in his epistles. But on the other hand, Peter didn't just attribute these epistles to Paul. Instead, he noted that Paul wrote, "with the wisdom that God gave him." Paul's letters represented God's wisdom because of the guidance of Holy Spirit.

**This is true about the Word of God: Every word in Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit. This is also true about the Word of God: every one of those words was written by a real human being, and in an amazing way, God sovereignly superintended the gifts and experiences of each of those biblical writers so that their personality, their literary style comes through, and at the same time the Bible is the very Word of God. So when you're reading Jeremiah, for example, you get a sense of his grief and passion for the people of God; when you read the Gospel of Luke, you get a sense of his careful eye for medical details and his love for history and accurate history. I mean, the personalities of these biblical writers and their experiences shine through in Scripture, but that happens without losing any of God's own authority and inspiration and power in the Word of God.**

— Dr. Philip Ryken

Well anyone who reads the Scriptures can see that the styles differ and that the writers are using their own gifts because of the different ways in which different writers express themselves, and the different kinds of choices these writers make to present the material. For example, in the Gospels we have Mark who doesn't do much with action scenes ... or does much, rather, with action scenes, but keeps his discourses to a minimum, whereas the Gospel of John is full of discourses, which reflects a different interest. So these writers are writing out of their own style, their own background, their own expression, and that's very clear from the differences we see between various books in those areas. God is inspiring them in the sense of directing what they say and standing behind what they say, but he is letting them express it in their own way.

— Dr. Darrell L. Bock

We'll touch on two important aspects of organic inspiration that help us orient ourselves to the task of interpretation: first, the fact that the Holy Spirit was the divine source of Scripture; and second, the fact that he worked through human means to produce Scripture. Let's look first at the idea that the Spirit is the ultimate divine source of the Bible.

## Divine Source

As the one who inspired all Scripture, the Holy Spirit has intimate knowledge of the Bible's meaning and of the way it communicates that meaning. So, preparing to interpret the Scriptures involves dealing personally with the Holy Spirit as their ultimate author. We have to approach the Scriptures humbly, in full submission to him.

**It is, I think, essential to rely upon the Holy Spirit for a profound, in depth understanding of the Bible. It is clear, I think, that one does not have to rely upon the Holy Spirit to understand the message of the Bible as such. If that were the case, the Bible would have no evangelistic function. But to understand it in depth, there is good reason to think that it's absolutely critical to rely upon the Holy Spirit. Of course, the reason for that is that the church believes, and I certainly agree with its claim, that the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture. And so in order to understand fully what the Holy Spirit intended to say through these writers, we need to be in touch, as it were, with that spiritual source.**

— Dr. David R. Bauer

On a number of occasions, biblical authors openly and directly acknowledged the Holy Spirit's inspiration as they dealt with the Scriptures. Without denying the role of human writers, they recognized that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of Scripture. For instance, in Acts 4:25, Peter and John led the church in an affirmation of Psalm 2, saying:

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David (Acts 4:25).

In much the same way, Hebrews 3:7-8 speaks about Psalm 95:7-8 in this way:

So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:7-8).

In these and many other passages, biblical writers identified the Holy Spirit as the inspirer, and therefore, the ultimate author of Scripture. And they relied on this understanding of inspiration as they prepared themselves to read, interpret, and apply the Scriptures.

One of the most important implications of the divine origin of Scripture is the Bible's unquestionable veracity. Unfortunately, from time to time, well-meaning people say that they believe in the Spirit's involvement in the inspiration of Scripture, but they don't affirm that the Holy Spirit protected the Scriptures from error. But listen to what Jesus said about the Holy Spirit in John 14:16-17:

The Father ... will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17).



When Jesus called the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of truth,” he indicated that the Holy Spirit is utterly truthful. So, we can be sure that the Scriptures the Spirit inspired are also utterly truthful. They don’t lie; they don’t contradict themselves. And therefore, part of our preparation for interpretation should be to affirm the absolute trustworthiness of the Holy Spirit and of the Scriptures he inspired.

**Paul tells Timothy that the Word of God was inspired — *theopneustos* — it was breathed out by God. And if it was breathed out by God, then we know that the source is perfect, the source is inerrant, and whatever comes out of him has to be equally perfect and inerrant. That, then, is the inspiration. If the Spirit inspired it, and if the Spirit now dwells in me, when I study the Word, I need to rest, to trust in the Spirit to give me illumination and understanding, because he inspired it in such a way that my study is based on the understanding of the one who inspired the Word in the first place. There can’t be a better teacher than the author of a book, and the author of the book is the Spirit. And so, when the teacher who illumines our minds is the Spirit, there can’t be anybody who can give me a better understanding of what was said, of what was inspired, than the teacher himself, who wrote it in the first place.**

— Dr. Miguel Nunez, translation

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, expressed this conviction in his Letter 82, chapter 1, paragraph 3, where he wrote these words:

**I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: Of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.**

Augustine’s words illustrate the prevailing view of the truthfulness of Scripture in the early church and reflect the view taught in the Bible itself.

Now, everyone familiar with the Bible knows that there are many portions of Scripture that challenge even the best interpreters. From time to time, the Scriptures appear to contradict science, our personal experiences, and even other passages of Scripture. How should we deal with these apparent problems? Well, interpreters have a variety of ways to handle these types of issues. And for the most part, their solutions differ not because of the character of Scripture, but because of the interpreters’ attitudes toward God himself.

On the one hand, those who deny that the Holy Spirit authoritatively inspired the Bible interpret the Scriptures critically, elevating their own understanding over the Spirit’s authority. On the other hand, those who acknowledge the Spirit’s authoritative inspiration read the Bible submissively, expecting and assuming it to be true and harmonious, even when they can’t demonstrate or prove its truthfulness.

When we come to the Bible we do not come to just another human book. We come to a book, which has been miraculously inspired by God. That means that we cannot read the Bible simply as we read another book. Now it has to be said, God has communicated himself in our language, in our styles, and so we do start at that point of simple literary interpretation of what's there. But if we stop there, then we forget that this is a sacred book which God not only inspired in the beginning, but is continuing to inspire to our hearts, so that in order for my human fallibility, my human sinfulness not to overcome the truth of the Scripture, the Holy Spirit has to be constantly at work in me as the reader and the interpreter to understand what it is God wants to say to me through this passage.

— Dr. John Oswalt

What's the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation? A very significant question. For one thing, the Holy Spirit inspired the Scripture, so obviously we want to take into account, who is the principal author of Scripture and what we can know about him. It's the Holy Spirit who teaches us through the Word about who God is. The second thing is that the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary for a proper understanding of the Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 2 it talks about this very thing. In verse 14 it says that:

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14, ESV).

That's the person who has the Holy Spirit. So, we need to ask God to send the Holy Spirit and to fill us with his Spirit in order that we may receive faithfully what he is teaching in his Word.

— Dr. Vern Poythress

Having looked at the fact that the Holy Spirit is the divine source of Scripture, the second aspect of the doctrine of organic inspiration we'll mention is that the Holy Spirit used human means to produce the Scriptures.

## Human Means

Sometimes Christians act as if they would prefer that God had given us the Bible directly, like Mormons and Muslims claim to have received their holy books. Mormons believe that God delivered the Book of Mormon in complete form to Joseph Smith, and Islam makes a similar claim about the Koran descending from heaven. But this isn't how God gave us the Bible.

Instead, God had the Scriptures composed by means of human authors; he revealed himself through the gifts and abilities of different human beings. Without a doubt, the Holy Spirit could have eliminated any influence or presence of human writers in Scripture. He could have revealed every passage so that we could never tell that one portion was written by one man and another portion by another. But he didn't. In his infinite wisdom, he chose to involve and work through the ideas, motives and personalities of human authors. So, part of depending on the Holy Spirit in our interpretation of Scripture is honoring the way he organically inspired Scripture, and trusting the human authors he inspired. So, if we're going to interpret the Bible in the way he intends us to, we have to understand that the Scriptures were written by different people, and that they reflect the diversity of that human authorship.

For example, the gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John covered basically the same events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But their books aren't identical. Matthew is different from Mark. Mark is different from Luke. Luke is different from John. And this isn't a shortcoming of Scripture. It's a product of the way the Holy Spirit chose to inspire the Scriptures.

Because the Scriptures were organically inspired, we always have to acknowledge both their divine authorship and their human authorship. When we prepare ourselves to interpret the Bible, it's important to keep in mind that we're seeking what the Holy Spirit meant. But if we stop there, our preparation isn't complete. We also have to take into account how the Spirit works through human beings, through their personalities, their experiences, perspectives and emphases. Every word of Scripture is the word of God. But God's word comes to us through human beings that were inspired by the Spirit, and they wrote in different ways at different times. So, we must always prepare ourselves with the understanding that the Spirit of God spoke in a variety of ways through the Bible's various human authors.

Having seen how the inspiration of Scripture requires our dependence on the Holy Spirit, let's turn our attention to the way we also depend on his ongoing work of illumination.

## ILLUMINATION

In the context of biblical hermeneutics, illumination may be defined as: The Holy Spirit's work of conveying a proper understanding of Scripture to a human being.

**We can distinguish two works. One is the work of inspiration where the Holy Spirit comes to the original human authors of Scripture and empowers them so that what they write is the word of God, is what God says and not simply what the human being says. Illumination is where the Holy Spirit stands with us. He indwells Christian believers and opens our minds to understand and to receive what he has inspired in the Bible.**

— Dr. Vern Poythress

Through his illumination, the Holy Spirit grants us knowledge of his Word. And this knowledge isn't purely cognitive. It also impacts our imagination, intuition, emotion, will, motivation, desire, moral conscience — any part of us that contributes to our understanding of Scripture can be illumined by the Spirit.

Sometimes Christians assume that if we just think carefully, then we'll be able to understand what the Scriptures teach. But in reality, human beings are so deeply affected by sin that we can't understand the things of God on our own. We desperately need God himself — the Holy Spirit — to illumine us. Listen to how Paul talked about the Spirit's illumination in 1 Corinthians 2:11-13:

No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words (1 Corinthians 2:11-13).

Here, Paul explained that without the work of the Spirit, we have no hope of grasping the thoughts of God as we should. This is why the Spirit's personal illumination is so important to our interpretation of the Scriptures.

The illumination of the Spirit is a subject that has seldom been addressed at length. But one of the most important treatments appears in the well-known work of John Owen, who lived from 1616 to 1683. In Owen's work, *Spiritual Illumination Proved From Scripture*, he summarized the Holy Spirit's illumination this way:

**All divine truths necessary to be known, and to be believed, that we may live unto God in faith and obedience, or come unto, and abide in Christ; as also, be preserved from seducers, are contained in the Scripture, or proposed unto us in divine revelations. These of ourselves we cannot understand, unto the ends mentioned; for if we could, there would be no need that we should be taught them by the Holy Spirit. But this is so, he teacheth us all these things, enabling us to discern, comprehend, and acknowledge them.**

Owen wisely pointed out that the Scriptures give us all we need to “live unto God in faith and obedience,” to “come unto and abide in Christ,” and to “be preserved from seducers.” But as much as even unbelievers may be able to grasp from the Bible on their own, “we cannot understand” the Scripture “unto these ends” unless the Holy Spirit enables us “to discern, comprehend and acknowledge them.”

**When 2 Timothy 3:16 talks about all Scripture as being God-breathed, it alludes to the idea that the Bible is inspired, or perhaps more accurately “expired” — breathed out — from the heart of God, and therefore Scripture itself comes from the very being of God. When we speak about being inspired with something, we talk about being enthusiastic or apprehending something, and the word “illumination” sort of gets at what that concept's all about, that we**

**need the Holy Spirit who inspired infallibly God’s Word to give us apprehension and understanding so that our minds might be illumined by God’s truth, that we may grasp God’s truth clearly.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

**Inspiration is what God did when he inspired the writer, so, we are no longer being inspired. But we are being illuminated, which means that God is, through the Holy Spirit, shedding light, giving us spiritual discernment and giving us the ability to help to understand what these words are saying.**

— Rev. Thad James, Jr.

Now that we’ve seen how important our dependence on the Holy Spirit is, let’s explore the need for human effort as part of our preparation to interpret Scripture.

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## NEED FOR HUMAN EFFORT

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We’ll consider our need for human effort in two parts. First, we’ll look at the importance of human effort. And second, we’ll survey some of the influences that inform our human effort. Let’s turn first to the importance of human effort.

### IMPORTANCE

All too often, well-meaning Christians think of the work of God’s Spirit in biblical interpretation as the opposite of human effort. It’s true that sometimes the Spirit works beyond our efforts, without them, even against them as we study the Bible. But this doesn’t eliminate the need for human effort as we interpret the Scriptures. The most ordinary way that the Spirit illumines us is through, or in conjunction with, our hard work. For this reason, while we mustn’t reduce biblical interpretation to a human endeavor, there’s a very important place for working very hard to understand the Scriptures properly.

Unfortunately, in some circles, well-meaning followers of Christ minimize anything that looks like human effort when they prepare to read the Bible. Instead, they often prefer a “spiritual” approach, where the message of a biblical text comes to passive readers directly from God. These believers rightly acknowledge the importance of our dependence on the Holy Spirit. And we can admire them for that. But their avoidance of human effort is unbiblical. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:15:

**Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).**

In this verse, Paul encouraged Timothy to be a man who correctly handles the word of truth. But notice the metaphor Paul used to convey his perspective. Timothy was to be “a workman.” Here the apostle used the Greek word *ergates*, a term that often referred to field laborers. And Timothy was to do his best, or as some translations put it, he was to “be diligent.”

By comparing an interpreter of the Bible to a diligent, hard-working field laborer, Paul encouraged Timothy to exert strong effort in his study of Scripture. But what exactly does that mean? And how does our dependence on the Holy Spirit interact with our human effort?

**If understanding the Bible is something that the Holy Spirit does and not something that we do, why do we bother with working at biblical interpretation? And the answer to that is very simple. God does not reward laziness. God does not anoint the minister who doesn't prepare to preach. To be involved in God's work requires diligence because God is not just working through us, he is also working on us... In the process of biblical interpretation, what is happening is not just a cognitive thing where we're coming to understand what the Bible is saying, there's also a sanctifying process that God is doing in us so that we become not just people who understand what this particular passage says, but we become people who think more the way God wants us to think, the way he designed us to think, to see things his way.**

— Dr. Carey Vinzant

Dependence on the Holy Spirit doesn't imply that we should be passive when we interpret Scripture. In fact, responsible interpretation involves hard work. We might even say that dependence on the Spirit includes dependence on the tools and opportunities he's provided. After all, the Holy Spirit designed Scripture to communicate through human means, including human effort on the part of the reader.

In fact, the Holy Spirit ordinarily illumines us by means of the efforts we put into preparation. Just as our bodies normally receive nourishment through the process of eating food, the Spirit typically works through the process of our reading and study to give us a fuller understanding of his Word.

Now, it should be clear to most readers of Scripture that some portions of the Bible require more human effort than others. On one end of the scale, some passages are so clear that they require very little effort to understand. Throughout the centuries, Protestants have rightly held that what is necessary to be believed and obeyed for salvation is so clear in one place or another in Scripture that nearly everyone can understand it. On the other end of the scale, many portions of Scripture are very difficult, and some may even be impossible to understand fully.

But practically speaking, most passages of Scripture fall along a spectrum between these two extremes. The clearer portions of Scripture normally require relatively little human effort in preparation. But when we deal with more difficult passages in

Scripture, adequate preparation usually requires increased levels of human effort.

In addition to recognizing the importance of human effort in preparing for interpreting Scripture, it also helps to become aware of some of the major influences that God normally brings to bear on our human effort.

## INFLUENCES

If there's one thing that hinders well-meaning biblical interpreters today, it's that they think they can study the Scriptures in ways that don't reflect external influences on their lives. We think that somehow we can rid ourselves of our life experiences and simply go to the Scriptures without preconceived notions. But one of the most important things to remember about our human effort in biblical interpretation is that no matter how hard we try to do otherwise, we always approach the Scriptures affected by countless influences. And the more we're aware of these influences, the better we'll be able to discern whether they're positive or negative, whether they help us or they hinder us as we interpret the Bible.

We'll consider three main influences on the efforts we exert when we prepare to interpret Scripture. These influences are interrelated, but we'll treat them separately for the sake of simplicity. The first we'll mention is our prior exegesis of Scripture.

### Exegesis

For the purposes of this series, we'll define exegesis as:

#### **Drawing meaning out of biblical texts**

— especially by looking at things like the historical context, literary forms, use of grammar and vocabulary, theological setting, and so on. Although there are many things we might say about exegesis, for now, we just want to point out that the exegesis we've done in the past helps prepare us for the task of interpretation.

Every involvement we have with the exegesis of Scripture prepares us for further interpretation of the Bible. The knowledge, skills and attitudes we develop from one encounter with the Bible influence us the next time we go to Scripture. For instance, every time we study biblical vocabulary and grammar, we increase our ability to handle these aspects of Scripture more responsibly. When we work to understand the literary types of Scripture, such as narratives, laws, poetry, prophecies, proverbs and the like, we're better equipped to understand them at a later time. And as we learn about the ancient history of the Bible, we're prepared to come back to the Scriptures for further understanding. Every effort we put into the exegesis of Scripture helps prepare us for further study.

A second type of influence that affects our human efforts in hermeneutics is our interaction in community.



## Interaction

Interaction with other people is one of the most influential, but frequently underestimated, influences on our efforts to understand the Scriptures. We all want to engage in direct exegesis of the Bible. But whether we realize it or not, it's nearly impossible to interpret the Bible without being influenced by our interactions with other people. And this is a good thing.

Other people, both from the present world and from the past, have received great gifts and insights from the Holy Spirit that can help us as we interpret Scripture. They've produced valuable reference works. They give us godly counsel. They teach us about biblical languages and literature and history and all sorts of other things that help us understand and apply God's Word. Even the very Bibles we hold in our hands have come to us from other people. They've come to us through the work of scholars, translators, editors and publishers.

Beyond this, most of us have specific Christian communities where we feel at home, including our churches and our denominations. These communities share common traditions that influence the way we read and understand Scripture. And the input we receive from pastors, teachers and other individual believers helps us in many ways too.

We learn many valuable things through the successes, failures and insights of others. We learn from those who are like us and those who are different, from those in the past and those in the present, from those we know personally and those that we've never met. Whether we recognize it or not, all of our interpretations of Scripture are and should be deeply influenced by other people.

A third major influence on our efforts in preparation is our personal Christian experience.

## Experience

It's fair to say that anything we encounter in our lives as Christians is part of our Christian experience, including things we've already addressed like exegesis and interaction with others. So at this point in our lesson we want to focus on the kinds of things we normally think of when we talk about our personal Christian experience or our walk with God. These personal aspects of Christian living contribute to our interpretations of Scripture in a variety of ways.

For instance, our Christian growth and sanctification increase our ability to interpret the Bible; the ways we live deeply affect our ability to grasp the Scriptures. When followers of Christ are faithful — trying to think, act and feel in ways that please God — they usually find that they're better prepared for learning more from the Scriptures. But if we haven't brought our lives into conformity to the Word of God, studying the Bible often leads to misinterpretation and misapplication.

Our past experiences can also affect our ability to interpret responsibly. All believers have had experiences that shape the way we think, feel and behave. And these experiences influence our efforts to interpret Scripture. For example, someone who grew up in a wealthy environment may find it difficult to understand the concern for the poor expressed in Luke's gospel. Someone who was raised in a culture that stressed honor



might be more likely to understand passages concerning shame.

Beyond this, each individual has different personal strengths and weaknesses, different abilities and blind spots, different gifts from the Holy Spirit, and, of course, different sins. In one way or another, all of these things influence our competence when it comes to interpreting and applying Scripture.

**Our sins inhibit our ability to understand truth in general, including in the Bible. The Bible says that we suppress the truth in unrighteousness in our sinful nature. And so there's a distorting effect that our sin has in our ability to understand truth. And so when we come to the Bible, understanding it without that twisting effect of sin is one of the things the Holy Spirit enables us to do that we are very grateful for.**

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

**Sin can hinder our interpretation of Scripture because people tend to find in Scripture what they want to find. For example, a few centuries ago slaveholders came up with a way to interpret Scripture that justified slavery. It was in their own economic interests to do so, so they would — if they allowed the slaves to be preached to at all — they would preach from Ephesians 6:5 where slaves are supposed to obey their masters. They wouldn't pay any attention to 6:9, however, which says, "And masters, you do the same things to them." I mean, if you actually take that seriously — if masters actually have to serve their slaves — slavery probably wouldn't last very long. It kind of destroys the economic incentives. But when people have an agenda that they approach Scripture with and they're trying to justify the way they live, they're going to end up reading Scripture in that way. Now, sometimes people have the opposite problem. They may come from a setting where they're always expecting condemnation or they're always expecting guilt, and they read Scripture that way too. Instead of reading Scripture in light of our presuppositions, we need to, as best as possible, try to hear what the message of the text really is to us.**

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on our preparation for interpretation, we've looked at two critical aspects of the preparations we should make before we interpret Scripture. We've considered our dependence on the Holy Spirit in terms of the doctrines of organic inspiration and the Spirit's illumination. And we've emphasized the need for human

effort by looking at the importance of human effort and by surveying some of the influences that God normally brings to bear on our interpretive efforts.

Preparation for interpreting the Bible requires us both to depend on the Holy Spirit and to put forth a great deal of human effort. We have to approach Scripture in conscious, prayerful submission to the Holy Spirit because he inspired the Scriptures and because the Father sent him to us to illumine our minds and hearts to understand the Scriptures. But at the same time, God has ordained that we should put forth our own efforts as well, by reading, studying, interacting with others and by applying the Scriptures to our own lives every step along the way. Interpreting the Scriptures is a complex project that we must pursue throughout our entire lives, so we must be careful to prepare ourselves as thoroughly as possible. The more we pay attention both to God's Spirit and to our human efforts, the better prepared we'll be for interpreting the Bible.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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## GLOSSARY

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**Augustine** – (A.D. 354-430) Bishop of Hippo who believed in the Scriptures as our final authority in doctrine and considered the creeds of the church to be helpful summaries of scriptural teaching; wrote numerous works that continue to influence the church today

**ergates** – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “a worker” or “a laborer”

**exegesis** – From a Greek term meaning "led out of" or "derived from"; the process of drawing out the proper interpretation of a passage of Scripture

**illumination** – Divine gift of knowledge or understanding, primarily cognitive, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit

**inspiration** – Theological term that refers to the way the Holy Spirit moved human beings to write God’s revelation as Scripture and superintended their work in a way that made their writings infallible

**mechanical inspiration** – View of inspiration that proposes the Holy Spirit essentially dictated the Bible, and human writers passively recorded what he said

**organic inspiration** – View of inspiration that asserts the Holy Spirit used the personalities, experiences, outlooks, and intentions of human authors as he authoritatively and infallibly guided their writing

**Owen, John** – (1616-1683) English theologian, pastor and author of numerous important theological works

**romantic inspiration** – View of inspiration that proposes the Holy Spirit inspired biblical authors to write but did not superintend their writings

**theopneustos** – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “inspired” or “breathed out” by God