
Struggling with Scripture

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Study Guide by Trace Haythorn

Introduction

This study guide is intended to guide groups through four sessions to explore the book *Struggling with Scripture*. The first session is designed to bring participants together and encourage the sharing of commitments, perspectives, and assumptions already held. The following three sessions explore each of the authors' arguments in depth with some questions offered to invite integration between the different chapters. Leaders are encouraged to open and close each session with prayer. ("Prayers for Illumination" in the *Book of Common Worship* make for wonderful opening prayers.)

Ideally groups would consist of no more than 12 participants, and leaders may choose to break large groups into smaller sections for discussions. In such instances, please adapt time suggestions to allow groups an opportunity to report back to the larger class. Also, all activities and questions are merely suggestions. Please adapt, add to, or delete them to fit your group. The goal of this study guide is not to lead groups to *the* correct understanding of Scripture but instead to facilitate a process by which thoughtful people of faith can engage one another in dialogue about the central text of our Christian faith.

Leaders are encouraged to leave ample time for participants to respond (for example, try counting slowly to 15 before commenting or offering your own response). Also, leaders should work to encourage the broadest participation of the group, avoiding monopolization of the discussion by any one individual (including the leader).

Each session is designed to last one hour, with activities varying in duration. This study may fit within a Sunday morning class structure, an evening discussion, or a retreat format. Church leadership and/or Christian education committees are encouraged to explore using this book and guide as a retreat study.

The role, shape, and character of biblical authority are unquestionably central to the life of the church today. Our hope in offering this guide is to invite your congregation into deeper reflections about how we use and attend to the Bible personally, communally, and denominationally as we profess the gospel of Jesus Christ in a new millennium.

In the introduction to *Struggling with Scripture*, William Sloane Coffin states that “if we conclude the Bible is a human product . . . we are simply admitting that there is no escaping our personal and cultural history . . .” (p. 2). In this session, participants will explore their current personal understanding of and relationship with the Bible.

Introductions (10 minutes)

While many participants may know each other and may have known each other for years, few have ever talked with one another about their engagement of the Bible. Ask participants to go around the group, sharing their names and recalling how and when they received their first Bible. Can they recall where that Bible is today?

Discussion (20 minutes)

1. What do you enjoy most about the Bible? What do you find most difficult or least appealing?
2. How present was the Bible in your home when you were growing up? How present is it today?
3. Who was raised to write in their Bible? Can anyone recall rules from their home or church about how to treat or use their Bible?
4. How often were you encouraged to read the Bible when you first came to own one? How often do you read it now, and what is the nature of your reading? (For example, do you read it devotionally? Do you study it, using commentaries and/or other supplemental resources? Do you pray using Scripture?)
5. When you try to think about someone who faithfully reads and studies the Bible, who comes to mind? Why do you describe their engagement of the Bible as faithful and studious?

Continuum activity (20 minutes)

This activity will require participants to get up and move around a room. It is designed to provide some visual context for participants to recognize not only their diverse perspectives but also the different terms and understandings they bring to their understanding of the Bible. The leader of this activity needs to work hard to listen well to participants.

The leader will offer two perspectives that are intended to be poles of a continuum. The participants should place themselves along the line of the continuum with the poles at opposite ends of the room. When everyone is set, the leader should ask participants why they placed themselves where they did. Once folks have heard the responses of their co-participants, the leader can ask if anyone wants to move to a new space and, if so, why.

Leaders should allow and encourage participants to “play” with this activity. For example, some participants may find that they are outside of the continuum. Others may discover that someone they thought held an opposite view actually sees him- or herself holding a similar perspective. Leaders should watch especially for those participants who hesitate to place themselves anywhere or always choose the middle. After a couple of questions, it is important to probe those who aren’t moving. Remember: this activity is not meant to suggest that one pole or the other is “right”; rather, participants are encouraged to explore their assumptions about themselves and others as they reveal to one another how they understand the Bible.

Possible poles (choose five or six that would be most helpful to your group)

The Bible is the literal inerrant Word of God.

The Bible is of human composition and therefore fallible.

I find it easy to talk about the Bible with others.

I find it difficult to talk about the Bible with others.

Everything we need to understand about God's will is in the Bible.

The Bible is but one source of God's plan for creation.

Disagreeing with the Bible is always wrong.

One should never take what the Bible says at face value.

I'm confident in my knowledge of the Bible.

I know very little about the Bible.

Contradictions or discrepancies appear only because of the lack of human understanding.

Contradictions or discrepancies add evidence to the argument that the Bible is a human product.

The Bible is the greatest gift you can give anyone.

You should give a Bible only to someone you know really well.

Jesus said everything that is in red print in my Bible.

Jesus probably said very little of what is in red print in my Bible.

The Bible has an answer for every question, every moral dilemma.

The Bible can speak only to contemporary issues through careful study and then only indirectly.

Christians should read the Bible daily.

Christians should read the Bible when they find time.

The Bible is the central resource for my faith.

The Bible is one of many resources for my faith.

The Bible is God's Word unchanging.

We need to update the Bible to make it more useful for contemporary contexts.

The Bible's account of creation, and other events is historical (that is, the events happened as the Bible recounts them).

The Bible's account of creation, the flood, and other events is metaphorical (that is, meant to tell a story to give meaning and purpose, not to be taken as literal truth).

Closing discussion (10 minutes)

William Sloane Coffin writes, “Wrestling with Scripture, far from a sign of weakness, is a reflection of religious faithfulness. What else should you wrestle with if not the Bible? What struggle offers more reward?” (p. 3). Respond to Coffin’s questions, particularly in light of the opening discussion and continuum activity.

Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection

Walter Brueggemann

In this session, participants will discuss and explore the reflections of Walter Brueggemann.

Materials

- chalk or dry erase board
- pencils or pens for each participant
- piece of paper for each participant

Large group discussion (15 minutes)

1. On pp. 6–7, Brueggemann shares the story of his confirmation, recalling the confirmation verse that was selected by his pastor (who also happened to be his father). Reflect on your own life. Do you have a “confirmation verse”? If not literally, is there a verse that serves as your confirmation verse, a marker or reminder of your faith journey? Invite participants to share his or her name again and to share their verse. Leaders may choose to include names and verses on a chalk or dry erase board as a means of gathering the group.
2. On p. 7 Brueggemann offers the following slogan as a framework for approaching the Bible, a framework that has been widely adopted by Reformed churches throughout the world: “In essentials unity; in nonessentials liberty; in all things charity.” Where and how does your congregation place the greatest emphasis in its practice of biblical study, worship, mission, and devotion? Give illustrations to support your answer.
3. Brueggemann describes the experience of some “whose faith is powered by the text to live lives of courage, suffering and sacrifice” as having encountered the Bible as “a wind and source and energy for the fullness of the true life lived unafraid” (p. 9). How does this assessment speak to your own encounter with the Bible?

Small Group Discussion (15 minutes)

Leaders should ask participants to divide into groups of no more than four to discuss the following passage and questions. Leaders may choose to write the questions on the board and direct participants to the passage in the book.

Brueggemann argues that “how we read the Bible . . . is partly a plot of family, neighbors, and friends (a socialization process) and partly the God-given accident of long-term development in faith. From that come two learnings.

1. “The real issues of biblical authority and interpretation are not likely to be settled by erudite cognitive formulation or by appeal to classic settlements, but live beneath such contention in often unrecognized and uncriticized ways that are deeply powerful, especially if rooted (as they may be for most of us) amid hurt, anger, or anxiety.
2. “Real decisions about biblical meanings are mostly not decided on the spot but are long-term growths of habit and conviction that emerge, function, and shape, often long before they are recognized. And if that is so, then the disputes require not frontal arguments that are mostly exercises in self-entertainment but long-term pastoral attentiveness to each other in good faith” (p.10).

First, do you agree with his two-fold assertion of how we read the Bible? Why or why not?

Second, is Brueggemann arguing in #1 that the issue of biblical authority for our contemporary situation is primarily a social-psychological issue as opposed to a spiritual or academic issue?

Third, who in your congregation models “long-term pastoral attentiveness . . . in good faith”? Give examples.

Individual exercise (10 minutes)

1. Using the paper and pencil or pen provided, draw a roadmap of the role of the Bible in your life. Where are the peaks and valleys? What was happening at those points?

2. When that map is complete, chart the central moral, ethical, or theological issues in your life and note what role the Bible played in those issues. Share your results with a neighbor.

Leaders should instruct participants to tuck these “maps” into their book or Bible and to refer to them as this study progresses, especially as they encounter familiar feelings or arguments, so that participants can work to integrate the present study with prior learning and experience.

Large group discussion (20 minutes)

1. Brueggemann states that the “forceful and consistent . . . main theological claim” of the Bible “concerns the conviction that the God who creates the world in love redeems the world in suffering and will consummate the world in joyous well-being. That flow of conviction about the self-disclosure of God in the Bible is surely the main claim of apostolic faith upon which the church is fundamentally agreed” (p.11). How does this theological frame facilitate discussions within the church about how to approach people of other faiths? How we address issues related to the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in congregations? How we look to develop new churches or renew struggling parishes?
2. Brueggemann argues that “the Bible requires and insists upon human interpretation that is inescapably subjective, necessarily provisional, and . . . inevitably disputatious.” Within that context, he offers the following guidelines for biblical interpretation: We “(1) make our best, most insistent claims, but then, with some regularity, we may (2) relinquish our pet interpretations and, together with our partners in dispute, fall back in joy into the inherent apostolic claims that outdistance our all too familiar and too partisan interpretations The process of interpretation that precludes final settlement on almost all questions is self-evident in the Bible itself” (pp. 13–14). Where do you find yourself within this interpretive frame? Are you more likely to offer insistent claims, to fall back into the joy of inherent apostolic claims, or find yourself constantly precluded from final settlement on all claims?

3. What is the role of imagination in reading Scripture? What is the role of inspiration? What is the difference?
4. Brueggemann defines ideology as “the self-deceiving practice of taking a part for the whole, of taking ‘my truth’ for *the* truth, of running truth through a prism of the particular and palming off the particular as a universal” (p. 20). Discuss how ideology has historically shaped biblical interpretation. How has ideology functioned in your church?
5. Asserting that reading Scripture is important, Brueggemann states “that reading Scripture is for the sake of the missional testimony of the church to the news for the world” (p. 26). What do you think is the purpose of reading Scripture?

Struggling with Scripture

William C. Placher

In this session, participants will discuss and explore the reflections of William Placher.

Materials

- chalk and chalkboard or markers and dry erase board
- homework handouts

Large group activity (20 minutes)

Placher begins his article by discussing his own dilemma of finding a home among conventional renderings of approaches to Scripture. Imagine that you are making a home for Scripture in your congregation. Using the chalk or dry erase board, generate a list of those qualities or attributes that make your congregation's approach to Scripture "home" for you. What are the attitudes, practices, disciplines, commitments, etc.? What evidence do you see of them in your church?

Here's the catch: any participant can veto anything that doesn't feel like home. Leaders should work not from a model expecting uniformity but from a model seeking consensus: people don't have to like everything they see on the board, but can they live with it?

When the list feels complete, challenge the group to summarize the list in a way that might serve as a part of the church's mission statement. After the class, the leader and/or participants might share the statement with the church leadership and ask for feedback.

Large group discussion (15 minutes)

1. Placher states that his thesis is "that taking the Bible most seriously means one does not affirm its truth apart from struggling to understand its meaning" (p. 33). How does this thesis critique understandings of the Bible as history? as science? as economic theory? What distinction is Placher making between "truth" and "meaning"?

2. Placher states, “One of the convictions guiding the Reformed tradition in [biblical interpretation] matters has always been that those things needful for salvation will be clear enough if we are studying Scripture as a whole. If we study the whole Bible, its central concerns come through clearly enough. We learn that we are all sinners, that God loves us anyway, and that knowing our salvation rests on grace frees us to live in the service of God and neighbor without worrying about how we will be rewarded” (p. 37). How does Placher’s argument compare/contrast with Brueggemann’s assertion regarding the main theological claim of the Bible as a whole? (p. 11).
3. On pp. 40–43, Placher addresses the first chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, particularly Paul’s concern about the righteousness of God. After presenting a substantial introduction, he raises several questions about same-sex intercourse and the context of such in Rome at the time of Paul’s writing. He asks the following:
 - a. “Is Paul teaching that same-sex intercourse is wrong? Or is he *teaching* something about the relationship between human responsibility, the failure to worship the true God, and ethical faults, and in the process *assuming*, as a Jew moving out into Hellenistic culture in the first century would have, that same-sex intercourse is a good example of sin? Is this last point an example of something taught, or is it an example of a shared assumption of a particular culture, taken for granted in the process of making a point about something else?” (pp. 41–42).
 - b. Referring to Romans 1, “What is the point of this passage? What is it calling us to do? Where is it going? And in contrast, where is it just assuming something that people of that time and culture would have assumed, in passing, as it heads toward its real goal?” (p. 43).
 - c. How does this passage illustrate the difficulty we have in distinguishing between the essentials and nonessentials so that we might have unity and liberty? Can we expect unity with Placher’s questions as our guide? Why or why not?

Small group discussion (15 minutes)

Participants should divide into groups of 3 or 4 and address the following questions:

1. Placher raises the question as to whether some sins “are more serious than others.” He goes on to argue, “Those who judge same-sex intercourse as obviously the most serious of all are not deriving that conclusion simply from what Paul says” (p. 45). Where do you believe such conclusions come from, if not solely from Paul? What verses primarily inform your understanding of sin? Based on your reading of Scripture, what sins seem to be most serious? Based on your life experience, what sins seem most serious?
2. Placher asserts, “If we seek to be followers of Jesus and mean to give anyone the benefit of the doubt, it should be those our society is inclined to condemn. Similarly, practices that drive away rather than welcome, that set strict limits to the grace of God rather than marvel at its superabundance—such practices are not in accord with the practices of Jesus” (p. 48). Part of the challenge of crafting identity as a group means setting definitional boundaries of membership. Often these boundaries are not formal and can even be intentionally hidden. What are some formal and informal boundaries for the Church? What are they for your congregation? How does Placher’s assertion speak to your responses?
3. Placher begins to draw his chapter to a close with his understanding of “what it means to take the Bible seriously: to struggle over a lifetime of reading or preaching, to try to see the relation of parts to whole, to admit what we cannot understand, to recognize all the different ways the genres of the Bible can mean and teach” (p. 49). What does it mean for you to take the Bible seriously? Can your group come to a consensus on this question? Be prepared to share your response to what it means to take the Bible seriously with the larger group.

Groups report back (10 minutes)

Leaders will invite small groups to share their responses to what it means to take the Bible seriously. To conclude, leaders will offer Placher's own argument (p.50):

“So might we, in addition to our political strategizing, commit ourselves to this: that in our preaching and teaching, our lives and our conversations, we mean to be manifestly Bible-believing Christians, yielding priority to no one in our fidelity to this book. We will be so engaged with Scripture that no one else can credibly claim that they are the Presbyterians [or your denomination] who take the Bible seriously. We insist, indeed, that in believing what the Bible means and teaches, rather than in misunderstandings of it, we are *most* faithful to it. We vow to manifest ourselves as the people who take the Bible most seriously, who struggle hardest to be faithful to it, recognizing that faithfulness always does involve struggle and the recognition of complexity, even as we find this book shaping our lives and our faith and guiding us to the knowledge and love of God.”

Homework

Leaders should hand out the following questions to participants at the end of the session:

1. How many Bibles do you have in your home?
2. What versions are they?
3. What version do you most like to read? Why?
4. What version do you trust as most accurate? Why?
5. How many other biblical study resources do you have (books, videos, CD-ROMS, etc.)? Of these, which do you find most reliable? Helpful?

Be prepared to share your responses next week.

The Last Word on Biblical Authority

Brian K. Blount

In this session, participants will discuss and explore the reflections of Brian Blount. The closing activity is designed to integrate the different lessons and begin imagining next steps for participants.

Homework report (10 minutes)

Leaders should begin by asking class participants for the responses to questions 1 & 2 from the homework and should record their responses on the chalk or dry erase board. After compiling the first list, go back and ask for their responses to questions 3 & 4. Take note of what versions of the Bible participants tend to favor. These responses may lead to future lessons on the differences among translations and interpretations.

Large group discussion (20 minutes)

1. Blount discusses God's voice and the way the human spirit serves as our inner ear to which God speaks. When, where, and how does God speak to you?
2. What are some aspects of your socio-cultural, economic, or political context that shape the way you "hear" God's voice? How do we faithfully hold one another accountable for these contexts in ways that open us to others who "hear" God differently, even in ways that contradict our own hearing?
3. In a discussion of the Bible's use by those who supported slavery, Blount states, "The text must be in line with God's being and God's agenda of liberation. Where it is not, the text, because of the frailty of the humans who composed it, must be challenged and, if need be, resisted as much as the system of slavery it was purported to support" (p. 59). How is the text used today in ways that you believe are not "in line with God's being and God's agenda of liberation?" What other criteria would you add to Blount's hermeneutic (that is, interpretive lens)? What tools do congregations have to engage in such discernment?

4. Like Placher, Blount notes that Paul's writings at times critique culture and at other times mirror culture (p.63). How do we as contemporary readers discern the difference?

Small group discussion (15 minutes)

Participants should divide into groups of 3 or 4 and address the following questions:

1. Blount writes, "Paul's understanding of God's actions in Christ lead him to the almost insane conclusion that even the categories that God established in the act of creation have now been superseded. *Even the biblical words of human creation are not the last words for human living*" (p. 65). Further, "When [Paul's] theology operates from the radical thing that God has done through Christ Jesus, then boundaries break down and people rise up and are brought together. This is Paul's *living* word, the one that continues into our own time and gives us hope for the way in which all people who have been created as God has created them, just as they are, might be treated equally and accepted faithfully *together* in the one body of faith" (p. 66). Discuss Blount's argument and how it feels to you personally. Is it liberating? Does it cause you to feel like you're losing your bearings? Does it evoke an emotional response? If so, what is your response?
2. Blount states that Christianity is like baseball: it's hard, otherwise everyone would do it (p. 67). How does this understanding critique the ways many of us are drawn to churches that make our participation easy, that offer us options but ask little in return?
3. Following on the previous question, Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace* recalls an advertisement for the Episcopal Church (U.S.A.) that shows a picture of Jesus below which was printed, "He died to take away your sins, not your mind" (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* [New York: Riverhead Books, 1998], p. 239). What responsibility to God do we have to study Scripture?
4. Does the hard work of studying Scripture feel as though it can "take away your faith"? Why or why not? What is your faith?

Commit to one another to write your personal statements of faith within the next week or two. Plan a time to share them with one another.

Closing discussion (15 minutes)

1. What question(s) would you like to ask the authors after having completed this study?
2. What is one thing that you have learned that will change the way you read and/or study Scripture?
3. What is one hope you have for your congregation as you continue to struggle with Scripture? What is one hope you have for your denomination? For Christians in general?
4. If this study has been particularly meaningful, your group might consider drafting a letter to respond to the authors individually or as a group. Part of what they seek is open dialogue. Taking them at their word, what would you like to share with them? How can you help them glimpse into the process your group has shared? (You may send letters to the authors in care of their publisher, Westminster John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202.)