



# Faith Builders

*Discipling the head, heart, and hands*

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## Hearts Tuned To Respond:

### Five Activities Of Biblical Interpretation

BY KYLE STOLTZFUS

Kyle Stoltzfus, pastor at Shalom Mennonite Church and instructor at Faith Builders, offers five ways we can engage with Scripture so that it can guide us into people who belong to Christ.

Reading and interpreting Scripture has always been a central activity of a Christian community. Especially in times of reform and renewal, like the Reformation, the question has been: “What is the text saying? What is God, through the text, meaning to accomplish among us?”

At the same time, every age of Christian history has held challenges to the practice of understanding Scripture. Our age is no different. We have so much information. But can we listen? We are told that we matter, that we are significant. But can we appreciate times very different than our own? We hurry and rush. But can we be still long enough to examine, probe, and respond?

In this article, I want to identify five activities we can exercise to interpret a passage of Scripture. Together, these parts form a spacious and yet specific way to practice biblical interpretation. The way is spacious because it does not have the precision required by academic studies of theology or history, as legitimate as those studies are. Yet, it is specific because Scripture was given to inspire obedience, faith, and love to those “in Christ.” This is true for all believers, academically inclined or not.

The first activity is survey.

#### Survey the text

Good interpreters are good listeners.

Haste, misguided belief, or dullness are like blinders to our reading. When we insist on keeping our blinders on, we talk to Scripture instead of allowing it, by the Spirit, to talk to us. But the primary role of a disciple is to listen, not to talk, so we must learn to slow down and to carefully listen to the passage in view. We must keep ourselves alert to anything that clarifies the major themes, ideas, and intentions present in the biblical text.

To cultivate good listening, it helps to read a passage several times while ignoring chapter divisions and headings. While these reading aids can add clarity, it is important to recognize that they were added many years after the text was written and can disrupt the flow of thought intended by the author. Because of this you may wish to survey the text in an edition of the Bible that does not have these markings. You may even print (or copy by hand!) the passage so you can write observations and questions as they arise in your reading.

Pay attention to the text. Read, mark, and ask questions of the text. Who are the major characters? What are the major terms? What relationships of contrast, comparison, or cause and effect are presented? Are there any figures of speech? What verbs are used? Is there any repetition? Does the text address a major topic? What perspective on that topic does it offer?

When surveying, resist the urge to reach for commentaries. Get away from distractions. Get in the text and let the text speak. Remember – good interpreters are good listeners.

#### Appreciate historical context

For 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, Genesis 15 paints a strange picture. After Abram cleaves several animals, a smoking pot and flaming torch (representing God) passes between the halves. We gather that something important is happening. But it is difficult to grasp just how important these events are until we understand how, in Abram’s day, a king would enter a covenant relationship with his servant. God is entering a covenant relationship with Abram, and in Abram’s time this had very significant implications for Abram’s understanding of God, his relationship with God, and his grasp on the world. Much more could be said!

Genesis 15 offers one among many examples of how an appreciation for historical context matters. It matters because biblical writers lived in a world of events, customs, language, and symbols which we do not always share. Simply, they lived in a historical and cultural setting. When we fail to appreciate this, we can fail to grasp the full richness of a text. Worse, we might distort it.

I do not mean to suggest that a straightforward reading of Scripture is poor reading, or that awareness of historical context is necessary for a response of obedience, faith, hope, or love. Neither does it guarantee a more certain interpretation. I mean to say that historical awareness can unlock additional richness while safeguarding against certain kinds of misreading.

#### Examine literary context

Every word of Scripture is part of a bigger unit: the sentence.

Likewise, most sentences are best understood as part of a paragraph. Paragraphs themselves expand into chapters, which contribute to sections, before finally becoming whole books. The point is that each word contributes to a larger whole. And the larger whole, in turn, helps us to understand the words.

When examining literary context, we work to understand how a particular word or passage fits in the larger whole in which it occurs.



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To get a sense of literary context, first look to the paragraphs before and after the passage in focus, then watch for arguments or storylines which are being advanced or refined, and finally ask where the passage lies in relation to the structure of the entire book.

The point, again, is that a particular word or sentence or verse or passage is one part of a greater whole. Because of this we need to grasp not only the immediate passage, but what comes before and after as well. But context does not end at the level of a single biblical book.

### Probe canonical context

The Bible is not made up of freestanding books having no relationship to each other. Instead, it is a divinely orchestrated whole with over 60,000 connections between its parts! This is especially true of the New Testament, where there are countless connections with the Old. If the divine orchestrator saw fit to connect one passage of scripture to another passage, would it not be important for us to seek and appreciate the connection?

Perhaps a brief example would be helpful. Right at the start of the Gospel of Mark, there are three different types of canonical connections: a direct quotation, an allusion, and an echo. Verses 1:2-3, “Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.” “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight,’” is blended quotation of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. By quoting Isaiah and Malachi, it is like Mark is inviting us to read these entire passages alongside Mark 1:2-3. Then, in Mark 1:11, a voice from heaven declares: “You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” It is generally agreed that this is an allusion to Psalm 2:7, which is worth reading in its entirety and then merging into your understanding of Mark 1:11. Finally, Mark 1:12-13 recounts details of Jesus’ wilderness temptation that echo several Old Testament stories describing Israel’s wilderness tests.

Would Mark’s opening narrative make sense if we overlook these connections? Of course. But when we see and appreciate them the effect is astonishing. It’s like turning on a Messianic floodlight

that illuminates Jesus Christ as God’s messenger, appointed Son, and the one who overcomes temptation where Israel failed.

Noticing and appreciating these connections requires a working knowledge not only of the passage in focus, but the whole of Scripture. Clearly, this activity of interpretation is a massive task requiring Spirit-led, community discernment. But no interpretation is complete without application.

### Seek to Respond

The 16<sup>th</sup>-century scholar and poet John Donne wrote, “Search the Scriptures, not as thou wouldst make a concordance, but an application; as thou wouldst search a wardrobe, not to make an inventory of it, but to find in it something fit for thy wearing.”

Donne reminds me that the goal of interpretation is not only to extract the meaning of the text, nor to unearth its original context, but to allow the text to challenge, question, and form me. To those who have ears to hear, it is “quick and powerful,” a living Word. It is also a world to enter, a mirror in which to examine ourselves, an arena for action, a seed to sow, a sword – or a wardrobe.

Another way to say this is that Scripture is given to form churches of disciples who can faithfully and resourcefully live out the Scriptures. Discipleship and the formation of the church is not an afterthought to our interpretative process. Instead, responsive interpretation builds the church by promoting the activities and goods which are peculiar to the church. Like Paul reminds us, “though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge ... but have not love, I am nothing (1 Cor. 13:2).”

We must ask: What is our appropriate response of faith and life to this Word? What does the text urge us to believe? What does the text urge us to hope for? What does the text urge us to do?

Biblical interpretation can be an exciting and joyous way to exercise our identity in Christ together. These activities can serve as signposts for the way.



## Study at Faith Builders!

**EARLY APPLICATION DEADLINE: DECEMBER 2**

Faith Builders Training Institute emphasizes a whole-person approach to education through academic course work, hands-on apprenticeship, and relational discipleship.

Find more information and begin applying at [FBEP.ORG/ACADEMICS/SEMESTER](https://fbep.org/academics/semester). Students who apply by December 2 will receive an application decision by January 15.

Browse options for scholarships at [FBEP.ORG/SCHOLARSHIPS](https://fbep.org/scholarships).



## Teacher Assistant Needed

Faith Builders Christian School needs a volunteer as a teacher assistant. This man or woman will assist in homerooms and tutoring.

The teacher assistant could be someone who wishes for an opportunity to work alongside more experienced teachers before taking on a classroom of their own. The assistant could also be someone who has been teaching but needs a year break.

Volunteers are supported financially by their church and must be at least 18 years old. For more information or an application, visit [FBEP.ORG/VISIT-SUPPORT/VOLUNTEER](https://fbep.org/visit-support/volunteer).

## Winter Term

**JANUARY 6 - FEBRUARY 7**

This five-week term serves students from a range of ages and walks of life. Youth seek spiritual growth and academic study at the same time that seasoned ministry workers come for refreshment and learning.

For a full list of course descriptions and schedule:  
**Visit** [FBEP.ORG/WT](https://fbep.org/wt)  
**Email** [fbep@fbep.org](mailto:fbep@fbep.org)  
**Call** (814) 789-4518 ext. 220

### *courses offered in 2025 include*

Creating Life-Giving Spaces  
*Cynthia Brubaker*

Anabaptism as Worldview  
*Steven Brubaker*

Themes in Leadership  
*Steven Brubaker*

Preparing & Delivering Devotionals & Sermons  
*Brandon Byler*

The Sermon on the Mount  
*Brandon Byler*

Discipleship in the Local Church  
*John Coblenz*

Issues in Human Sexuality and Gender  
*John Coblenz*

Life & Leadership for Men  
*Melvin Lehman*

Music Fundamentals  
*Nelson Martin*

Beginning Choral Conducting  
*Brandon Mullet*

Class Voice  
*Brandon Mullet*

Growing Into A Godly Woman  
*Marie Mullet*

Poetry of Faith  
*Josh Nisley*

Church Growth  
*Allen Roth*

Church Planting  
*Allen Roth*

Anabaptist History  
*Stephen Russell*

Systematic Theology  
*Stephen Russell*

Reading the Bible  
*Kyle Stoltzfus*

*Additional courses to be confirmed.*



## Upcoming Events

### Teachers Conference

OCTOBER 4-8

Find details about this annual event for teachers at [FBEP.ORG/TC](https://fbep.org/tc).

### Heart & Voice Men’s Choir

NOVEMBER 8-10

The choir plans to give programs in Stuarts Draft and Harrisonburg, VA. Find details at [FBEP.ORG/HV](https://fbep.org/hv).

### Open House · NOVEMBER 22

Experience FB for a day! We welcome parents, pastors, and potential students for this free, interactive event. Register at [FBEP.ORG/OPEN-HOUSE](https://fbep.org/open-house).

### Early Application Deadline

DECEMBER 2

To begin a two-year study program in August 2025, apply at [FBEP.ORG/ACADEMICS/SEMESTER](https://fbep.org/academics/semester).

### Winter Term

JANUARY 6 - FEBRUARY 7, 2025

Applications will be available late September. Apply at [FBEP.ORG/WT](https://fbep.org/wt).

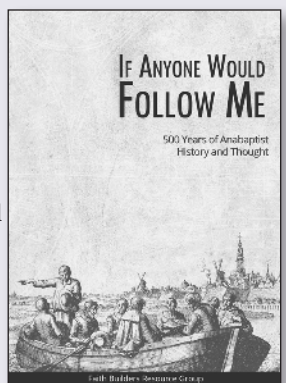
### Administrators Conference & Retreat · JAN. 30-FEB. 1, 2025

This annual event is designed to equip administrators with vision for schools. For information and registration, visit [FBEP.ORG/ACR](https://fbep.org/acr).

## New Study Coming!

We are developing a 13-lesson study guide on Anabaptist history and thought to commemorate the 500-year anniversary of Anabaptism.

This quarterly study is designed for youth/adult Sunday school classes or similar contexts. It should be available by November 2024. For information, email [kendallm@fbep.org](mailto:kendallm@fbep.org).







# Faith Builders

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The Faith Builders newsletter is published quarterly and serves to inform, inspire, and equip its readers. Subscription is free upon request.

## Join us at REACH 2025!

MARCH 13, 14, 2025, PITTSBURGH, PA

REACH brings together Christian workers from all walks of life. Farmers, businessmen, and young men and women share vision with missionaries in Belize, food distributors in the Ukraine, school teachers in city missions, and producers and distributors of Christian literature.

REACH includes six main sessions, 114 breakout sessions, 61 ministry displays, and opportunity to spend time connecting with new and old friends.

Breakout sessions on the first day address common challenges and build skills for ministry.

The second day focuses on people considering ministry opportunities. Ministry presentations share about the work God is doing around the world and how others can join that work.

We welcome high schools, youth groups, retirees, and anyone else who is interested in being a positive contribution to their world!

REACH 2025 will be held at the David Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh, PA. Our guest services team will have lodging and parking advice on the website.

Registration opens in October!

Find more information and register at [FBEP.ORG/ATTEND/EVENTS/REACH/](https://fbep.org/attend/events/reach/).

