

THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

Background Information for the Teacher

Objectives:

1. The student can explain how communication takes place.
2. The student can list the steps by which the Scriptures have come to us.
3. The student can explain the nature of inspiration and cite one passage that discusses it.
4. The student can give an example of how words can mean different things and thus require some interpretation.
5. The student can explain that there is an objective meaning to scripture.

Preparation:

1. Have copies of the Handout 1 ready for the class (found at the end of the lesson).
2. Have copies of the Worksheet 1 ready for the class (found at the end of the lesson).
3. Be sure all students have Bibles to look up passages and pens for writing.
4. Have access to a chalkboard, markerboard, or overhead projector. Write key words and statements on the board or show them on the projector.

Theme:

As we start on our quest to learn how to be better at understanding the Bible, it is important to know something about how communication takes place and how God has communicated His message to us.

Lesson Plan for Conducting the Class

Introduction: (about 10 minutes)

1. Call the roll or start a new one. It is important that students know you are interested in their attendance.
2. Make any necessary announcements.
3. Have a prayer and songs as may be the custom in your class. Songs you may want to use at this and later periods are: Give Me the Bible, Break Thou the Bread of Life, How Shall the Young Secure their Hearts, Jesus Loves Me, Wonderful Words of Life, Thy Word is a Lamp Unto My Feet, How Firm a Foundation, Wonderful Words of Life. Thy Word is a Lamp Unto My Feet might make a good theme song to sing each class meeting.
4. Share with the students the topic for this quarter. Say something along these lines: "This quarter we will be studying the topic of 'Understanding Scripture.' We will study some of the principles about how to understand the Bible and how to use some of the tools for Bible study. In



studying these, we will learn more about a number of interesting passages which will serve as illustrations for how to understand Scripture. We will all be better students of the Word as result of our time together." Try to give your students some "sell" about the class to motivate them to want to be part of the study. Also tell your students that learning is always improved when there is evaluation. Knowing we will be evaluated helps us remember better and to study more. So you will have for students as they enter class each week a short "written review" to pick up as they enter the classroom. The student can get one if he/she chooses and then can write in the answers. At the beginning of class each time, you will give a brief review of the previous lesson which will include the answers to the written review. "The scores will be published in the church bulletin." Just kidding. Since you will check your own paper, only you and those you tell will know how you did. If students will participate in this part of the study, they will learn a lot more. Encourage them to take notes on the worksheet each time and to review it before they come to class.

Learning Experiences: (about 30 minutes)

1. **Q:** What does the term "shoot-out" mean to you? **A:** A gunfight at OK Corral. A way to break a tie in soccer. A football game where there was a lot of scoring. A close election. (Get several possible answers from the class.) **Q:** How do we know which answer is intended when someone uses it? **A:** By the context. By who is speaking. By the situation.
2. **Q:** What does the word "run" mean? **A:** Run a race. Operate a machine. Stand for political office. Conduct a meeting. Manage a company. **Q:** How do we know which meaning? **A:** By the context. By who is speaking. By the situation.
3. **Q:** What does the word "cleave" mean? **A:** To cleave together like in marriage. To split apart as with a meat cleaver. The same word can mean "stick together" or "split apart."
4. The point is that language does take some interpretation. And we make this interpretation almost continuously as we communicate with each other. Our experience with language helps us know how to sort out meanings. And, as we shall soon see, the same ways we know how to understand each other will be the same methods we use in understanding the Bible.
5. Look at this drawing about how we communicate. (Give Handout No. 1. and begin your explanation of it. Ask the students to write in the numbered steps below the drawing as you give them.) Look first at the person "A." He has an idea he wants to send to person "B." A's goal is to make B



think the same thought he is thinking. But how does he get him to do this? Note the steps and write them in the blanks. Help me come up with the steps. **Q:** What happens first? **A:**

(1) "A" thinks the thought himself.

Q: What happens next? **A:** (2) "A" encodes the thought into words or body movements which have meaning. **Q:** What happens next? **A:** (3) "A" transmits the code. We have shown oral transmission but the transmission could also be in written form and in body language. **Q:** What can happen between the sending and receiving? **A:** (4) Static can be on the line. Interference—noise, distraction, etc. (5) "B" receives the coded thought. **Q:** After receiving the code, what does "B" do? (6) "B" decodes the message. To do this correctly, he must be giving the same meaning to the symbols as A. If he does this well, then step 7 happens. (7) "B" thinks the thought "A" wanted him to think.

6. **Q:** Where along this process can it go wrong? **A:** Fuzzy thinking on "A's" part. Poor coding by "A." Using words not clearly understood—a different language. Poor transmission—not speaking or writing clearly. Interference to the transmission. Poor reception. Poor de-coding. Receiver not thinking well.
7. **Q:** Apply this to the process of God getting His message to us. Go through each step.
A: God conceives the thought clearly, encodes the message and guides a prophet who writes it down. The written message goes through various stages of transmission in copying and translation. We receive the written message and seek to decode it. Then we think the thought God wanted us to think.
8. Give out Handout 2. Ask the students to look at the drawings on the right and try to figure out what descriptions to write on the left. **Q:** What do you think should go in No. 1? What does the drawing suggest about this first stage of the process? **A:** Not yet written down. So we can describe this stage as "God Reveals." Write this in blank 1. **Q:** What goes in No. 2? Now the message has been written down. **A:** Inspired Man Records. Write this in as No. 2. (We use the term "man" here in the general sense of human beings as the Bible often does. There were some female prophets during Bible times and their words are sometimes included in Scripture. Those whom God chose to write down Scriptures in permanent form were men.) Let's discuss this process of "Inspired Man Records." **Q:** Did God ever dictate "word for word" what the inspired man was to write? **A:** Yes. Ten commandments (Exodus 20) and seven letters to seven churches (Revelation 2 and 3), the words Jesus spoke, and other places. **Q:** Are there places where the writer does not seem to be working from dictation? **A:** Yes.



- Paul's epistles where Paul writes about particular circumstances about which he already had information and to which he gives a response. Also Luke says he did research to get information for Luke/Acts (Luke 1:3).
9. So, what does it mean for people to be inspired? To answer this let's look at three passages. Someone read aloud 2 Peter 1:20-21. **Q:** What do we learn from this passage about the process of revelation? **A:** The prophet did not originate the message. He was not speaking just from himself. Each prophet was "moved by" or guided by the Holy Spirit in what he wrote. Someone read 1 Thessalonians 2:13. **Q:** Whose word did Paul say was delivered in what he wrote? **A:** The word of God. Now read Ephesians 3:1-5. **Q:** What Paul had written to the Ephesians was revealed by what source? **A:** The Holy Spirit. Now someone read 1 Corinthians 2:10-13. **Q:** How does Paul say he received the message he had given the Corinthians? **A:** "Through the Spirit." **Q:** From whom did the Spirit get the message? **A:** God the Father. **Q:** Did the Spirit's guidance come just to give the general message or was His guidance to the level of the words used? **A:** Words "taught by the Spirit." This corresponds with the meaning of 2 Timothy 3:16 when it says, "All Scripture is inspired by God."
 10. With this level of exactness, down to the word level, Jesus would agree on the basis of His use of Scripture. Read Matthew 22:29-32. **Q:** What topic have the Sadducees asked Jesus about? **A:** The resurrection. Jesus says they are mistaken about this topic because they have "not understood the Scriptures." That's our subject: Understanding Scripture. So Jesus tells them about a passage they have not understood—Exodus 3:6. Here God said to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." **Q:** What connection does this have to the subject of the resurrection of the dead? **A:** When God was speaking with Moses, these men had been dead hundreds of years, yet God speaks of them in the present tense—I am the God. So Jesus' point turns on the tense of a verb in Scripture. That is the exactness with which we can approach Scripture. The very tense of the verb is precisely what God wanted it to be.
 11. So, sometimes God or Christ or the Holy Spirit dictated the exact words the inspired person was to write. At other times, the writer used information he already had and his own style of expression, but the Spirit guided the outcome to make it exactly like He wanted it to be. If a speech writer can write in the style of various speakers for whom he writes, we should not think it beyond the power of the Holy Spirit to utilize the style and knowledge of the person He is using to write down the message God wants delivered.



12. When we say "Inspired Man Records," then, we mean that God, through the Holy Spirit, guided those who wrote in such a way that the product was what God wanted it to be. We believe this original revelation was without error in its content and expression. The document actually written (or dictated) by the inspired person is called "an autograph." When the sixty-six such books of our Bible are taken together, they comprise "the truth" of which Jesus often spoke. Read John 8:32 and John 17:17, for example. This is an objective message from the mind of God to the mind of men. It has a meaning which God wants us to understand and use.
13. Now let's go to item 3. **Q:** What happens next in the process? What words would you put in No. 3? **A:** Copies are made of the autograph. And so we may say "Man Copies." Write that down. **Q:** Are the copyists inspired? **A:** No. But the copying was done very carefully by specially trained scribes. **Q:** Are all of the copies on your drawing exactly alike? **A:** No. **Q:** What does this represent? **A:** That some variations occasionally crept in, variations like misspellings, word order inversions, skipped words, and sometimes one scribe would write something in the margin and the next person copying might insert that into the text. **Q:** Do we have any of the autographs left? **A:** No. **Q:** So can we be sure that we have in the original language of Scripture exactly what the autograph said? **A:** Yes, for all practical purposes. And that brings us to point 4.
14. Look at item four on the chart. **Q:** What does this suggest to you? **A:** That someone has studied all the copies and returned the text exactly like it was in the autograph. Let's call this step "Man Compiles." Write that in. This step suggests the work of textual critics who examine the copies and from them determine what the original had said. These people are not inspired either, but they spend years in language study and many more years in doing their exacting work. There are about 5,000 manuscript copies of portions or all of the New Testament books, some going back to the second century within twenty-five years of the autograph. In addition to these, there are thousands of early translations of the Greek text into other languages which can also help determine the original wording. As scholars read and compare these, they are able to eliminate copying errors that have crept in over the years. To illustrate this process on a very simple level, let's suppose I were to dictate a paragraph to you and were to ask you all to write it down. Do you think everyone one would get it exactly right? Would there be misspelled words? Words left out? Words in the wrong order? Very likely. But suppose someone took what each had written down and looked at them all. Do you think that person could reconstruct what I



dictated? Of course. Most of these copies would agree on each sentence. Textual critics tell us that there are now only a few passages in which there is any doubt about the actual wording and these do not affect any essential teaching of the Scripture. For all practical purposes, then, we have the original text.

15. A very interesting illustration of the accuracy of our copies came from the Dead Sea Scrolls. Since they pre-date the New Testament, there were only copies of Old Testament passages found there. One of those was a complete text of the book of Isaiah. Prior to this time, the earliest copy available was dated about 950 AD, some 1700 years after the autograph. The Dead Sea copy from 100 BC would bring a thousand years closer to the original in one step. Great anticipation awaited the opening and reading of this scroll. The answer: no significant differences in the content from the 950 AD manuscript. The copying had been very accurate. So, Step 4—Man Compiles.
16. Look at Step 5. **Q:** What process do you believe this represents? **A.** Translation into different languages. So write in “Man Translates.” Once the original text is determined by textual critics, then comes the process of translation into different languages. Of course these translators are not inspired either, and translations differ. Some think that because the translations into a language are not all the same, that we can no longer trust the Bible. Some even have the idea that the more translations that are made, the further from the original we get. In view of this, there are three very important points to make about translations: (1) Every respected translator goes back to work with the original language. Even when an existing translation is being revised, scholars go back to check the original text. So additional translations do not necessarily mean we get further away from the original. (2) While the wording in translations differs, the message they present is so similar that one can take any well-known translation and from it learn to do what is necessary to be saved. On particular passages, one may certainly have reason to prefer one translation over another, but any of the standard translations is sufficiently accurate to convey the basic message of God. (3) A very good way to study is to use more than one translation. Comparing them is a good way to get more insights into the meaning.
17. Translations may be evaluated on the basis of three basic criteria: (1) accuracy, (2) readability, and (3) acceptance. The first two, accuracy and readability are somewhat in tension. If the translation is made more “word for word” in an attempt to be more accurate, it will likely become less easily read, for languages do not match “word for word.” As the translator, however, seeks to make his translation easier to read, he will necessarily have to do some



interpreting along with his translating. This is why it is good to compare translations. If one is a “looser” translation, such as the NIV, and the other is a “tighter” translation, such as the NASV, the student can learn from comparing the two. The third standard, “acceptance,” is important because when studying with another person, we need to use a translation in which that person has confidence. Usually, that will mean a translation done by a group of people rather than by just one person and one that is well-known.

18. Recall the communication chart? God originated the message and empowered a human agent to transmit it. It has gone through several stages in the transmission process: copying, compiling, translating. But now we can receive it, work through the meaning of language, and think the thought God wanted us to think. That’s awesome! We read the Scripture and think the thought God wanted us to think!
19. Now we come to the bottom line. How shall we view Scripture when we come to interpret it? Here are four fundamental principles that lay the basis for our approach to Bible study.
 1. The Bible is of divine origin. The Holy Spirit revealed to and guided those who wrote it so it would be exactly as God wanted it to be.
 2. The very words of the text of Scripture may be studied carefully to discern their precise meaning.
 3. Both the nature of revelation and the teaching of Scripture is that the Bible is “truth” and has an objective meaning we should seek.
 4. The process by which we have received our Bibles today is sufficiently precise for us to have confidence that we have God’s message to study.

Application: (3 minutes)

1. **Q:** If these things we have just stated are true, what conclusions would you draw about our study of the Bible?
A: We should want to study because the Bible contains God’s message for us. We can study with exactness because the Bible is revealed in a very careful manner. We should use the best tools and techniques we can for Bible study because learning correctly the message God has for us is very important.
2. Our study of this topic of understanding Scripture will help all of us be more effective in our study of and application of the Bible.

Assignment: (2 minutes)

1. Prepare for the “written review” by studying Worksheets 1 and 2 you have filled out and come to class next time ready to show what you have learned.



**Understanding Scripture
Worksheet No. 1**

Complete the chart below as you move through the lesson. Be able to write the steps at the left and make a simplified drawing (without words) to suggest the message of the drawings at the left.

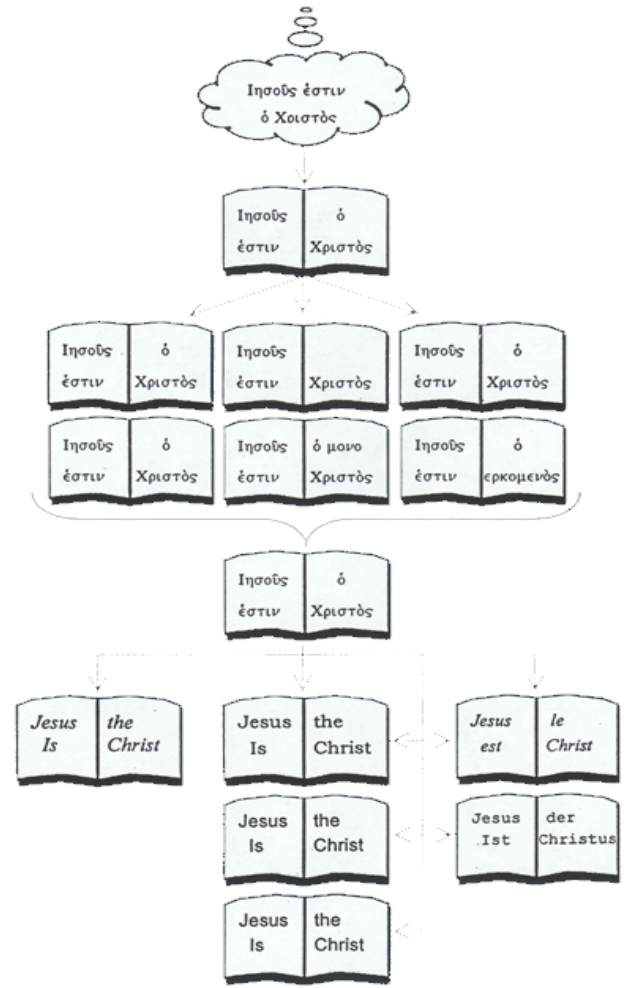
1. _____
Note that this step occurs before the message was written.

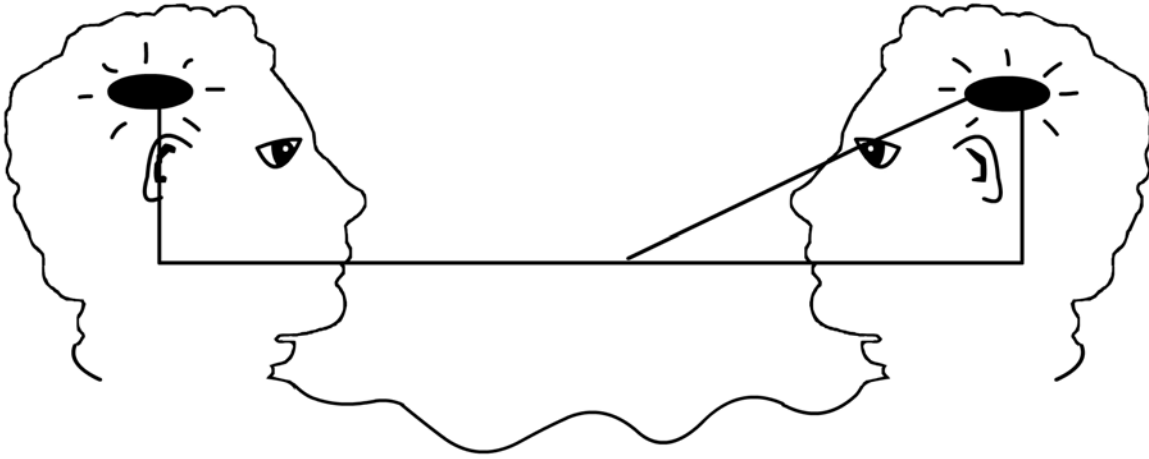
2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____
Note the arrows and that some have arrows from two places. Why?





1. A _____ the thought.
2. A _____ the message.
3. A _____ the code.
4. Possible _____ on the line.
5. B _____ the code.
6. B _____ the message.
7. B _____ the thought as A intended.

