


# Conditions for the cultivation of trust between theologians and church members reading the Bible together

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This article explores the conditions required for fostering trustful dialogue between theologians and church members regarding the interpretation of Scripture. The focus is on a study project initiated by the Dutch Reformed Church Western Cape Synod in response to tensions within the denomination surrounding biblical interpretation, particularly after the 2016 General Synod. The study project aimed to describe conditions for bridging the gap between theologians and non-theologically trained church members. Joint conversations between theologians and church members were facilitated, during which collaborative exploration of biblical texts took place. The findings highlight the significance of theological posture, vulnerability and the willingness of both theologians and church members to engage with the text as a living conversation rather than a static academic exercise. The role of a facilitator in guiding discussions, creating an inclusive space and encouraging self-reflection further contributed to meaningful engagement. This approach challenges the dichotomy between expert and lay reader, proposing that biblical interpretation should be a communal and dynamic process. The project emphasised the importance of authentic dialogue within collaborative academic and church settings. It stressed that trust, built on shared vulnerability between theologians and church members, is key to overcoming divisions regarding Bible interpretation and fostering a deeper connection with the living Word of God.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The study suggests that teachers in theological education should not position themselves as distant experts but as co-learners, fostering a space where dialogue and shared learning can take place. Hermeneutics should not only focus on intellectual analysis and academic understanding but also involve spiritual openness, vulnerability and communal discernment. In church settings, theologians will do better if they learn how to foster trust and allow their members to participate in conversation about the meaning of the Bible, rather than being authoritative figures.

**Keywords:** Biblical interpretation; hermeneutics; confessional and historical approaches; dialogue; theological posture; living Word; authentic conversation.

## Introduction

The Dutch Reformed Church Western Cape Synod facilitated a study project that brought together theologians and church members to engage in biblical interpretation amid growing tensions within the Dutch Reformed Church regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture.

The project was initiated by the Synod's Task Group for Doctrinal and Current Affairs (Taakspan vir Leer en Aktuele Sake – STLAS), in the wake of a special Dutch Reformed Church General Synod meeting in 2016, held in Pretoria, South Africa, about the question of whether the church should confirm civil unions between persons of the same sex. In the meeting in Pretoria, there was a thorough and candid discussion regarding the authority and interpretation of the Bible. While a broad consensus appeared to exist regarding the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, discrepancies arose when it came to the matter of biblical interpretation.

After the Synod meeting, STLAS members were concerned about the perceived difficulty of fostering trusting communication between church members with regards to biblical interpretation. They wanted to explore avenues for improving trustful dialogue and mutual understanding between those who hold a literal approach to biblical interpretation and others who don't. To this

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end, they organised and analysed facilitated conversations between formally trained theologians and interested, yet non-theologically trained, church members. In this article, I will outline the STLAS research project and discuss the observations.

It is a privilege to present the article to Nelus Niemandt at the occasion of his retirement as rector of Huguenot College. The College has done much and is still working hard in developing study courses for church members about Scripture and its interpretation. Throughout his esteemed career as a thought-leader in both church and academia, Nelus Niemandt has consistently engaged with the challenge of interpreting the biblical message for contemporary contexts. His work has always been guided by a deep trust in the indispensable, life-affirming role of the Bible in church communities. As missiologist he strongly emphasises the importance of critical engagement with the Bible in the daily lived experiences of Christians (cf. Niemandt & Pillay 2019:38). The contours of 'missional hermeneutics' are according to his view 'fundamentally centered around the biblical narrative'. Missional praxis includes Scripture reading and thorough interpretation (Niemandt 2019).

## The relationship between theologians and church members: A question of trust?

In his book, *How (not) to read the Bible*, Dan Kimball (2020:xiii) remarks that although the competence of theologians and Bible scholars should be of a high standard, it is just as important that they are trusted within the church. Kimball addresses 'ordinary' Bible readers who, already confused by many Bible passages, are disturbed even further by the 'endless cycle of complex questions' of Bible scholars and theologians.

Kimball (2020:xiii) warns against the practice of 'cherry-picking Bible verses'. His advice is not to 'read a verse on its own' but rather to learn how to interpret texts in terms of the bigger storyline of the Bible. Readers who consider the bigger storyline of the Bible as well as its historical and literary context will be better equipped to recognise its relevance and meaning. When they also engage with others in the wider faith community, they gain deeper insight into the text's significance for contemporary life. They will be guarded against at least two errors. They will not fall into the trap of locking texts up within their original contexts, subordinating them to the ideological prejudices of modern, relativistic thought. They will also not force texts over the historical gap, applying them directly and selectively to specific situations today.

Since especially 1986 the Dutch Reformed Church has carefully explained that the Bible should not be understood in an 'immediate sense', in terms of the imagination of a 'direct-one-to-one relationship between the text and our situation' (Agenda 2004:129). Understanding the texts of the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit does not exclude studying the

original languages in which they were written, their original historical contexts and their reception histories. It should also not be attempted individually. Texts should be interpreted through dialogue with the broader faith community. And they should always be understood in relation to the gospel of Jesus Christ; they should be read from the core message, from 'the heart' of the Bible (Agenda 2004:130).

Dutch theologian, Bram van de Beek, has written extensively and illuminatingly on the Christian understanding of the authority of the Bible. According to Van de Beek (2012:334–335), Protestant theology groans under the heavy load of a library full of writing about the authority of Scripture. This is because of a lack of recognition of an essential Reformation tenet, namely that the principles of *sola Scriptura* and *sola Christo* are one and the same, representing two sides of the same theological coin. When the Bible becomes a holy book and readers lose sight of the encounter with Christ to Whom the Bible witnesses, they must continuously defend the authority, trustworthiness and divine inspiration of Scripture. The Bible is not a holy book in the sense that every letter was written by God Himself, providing infallible information about different areas of human knowledge. The Bible rather directs our attention towards the main Person of the collection, the One who speaks to and touches the hearts and minds of people through the Word of His Spirit. Scripture introduces us to Christ, and Christ opens our eyes for Scripture. The Bible is a holy book because we meet Jesus Christ in it.

Recently the Dutch Reformed Church tested some attitudes of its members about the nature of Scripture and the role it plays in their lives. Morné Joubert, a post-doctoral researcher at the University of the Free State's Hebrew Department, conducted this study with the support of the General Synod's teams for Research, as well as Doctrinal and Topical Affairs (Agenda 2023:99). Table 1 shows the extent to which 1297 church members who participated in the study believe that the Bible 'is the literal words of God'. Participants indicated that they read the Bible 'with childlike faith' and that they believe the Bible's content 'may not be questioned' (Joubert 2024:14, 23).

The survey, however, revealed that although many of the respondents see the Bible as literal words of God, almost 9 out of 10 are comfortable with the idea of human involvement in the establishment of the Bible. They also indicate that information about the context and background, and an understanding of the literary genre help them understand the Bible text better (see Table 2).

It might be meaningful to further investigate the apparent discrepancy shown in Table 1 and Table 2. Why would so many church members agree with the statement that the Bible is 'the literal words of God' but at the same time accept the 'human character' of the Bible? Does admitting to the role of the human process in the composition of biblical texts, as was acknowledged by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1986 (Agenda 1986:56), not in their view tacitly compromise the authority and divinely ordained nature of Scripture?

**TABLE 1:** The extent to which church members believe that the Bible 'is the literal words of God' (*N* = 1297).

Statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
The Bible is the literal words of God	25.12	10.05	17.25	11.45	36.04
I read the Bible with childlike faith	18.24	12.44	22.02	16.62	30.68
The content of the Bible may not be questioned	23.45	9.32	14.36	9.63	43.25

**TABLE 2:** Participants' feedback on understanding the Bible text better (*N* = 1297).

Statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
The origin context and background information of a Bible book or Bible text helps me understand it better	2.00	1.54	7.86	16.73	71.86
It is important to take the literary genre into consideration when trying to understand a Bible text	4.77	4.61	17.83	21.19	51.60
I am comfortable to know that humans also worked in the establishment of the Bible	1.77	1.46	7.40	11.71	77.66

Prior to the 2016 General Synod meeting, Fanie Snyman, at the time an Old Testament professor at the University of the Free State and a member of the governing body of the Dutch Reformed Church General Synod, argued that Dutch Reformed Church Bible readers often blur the distinction between two approaches to Bible reading which have characterised the church's history. These two approaches he described as the confessional and historical approaches. The confessional approach views the Bible as a self-contained system, yielding eternal truths that can be directly applied in contemporary contexts. The historical approach, on the other hand, considers the theological traditions that thread their way through the Bible, resulting in more modest exegetical conclusions (Snyman 2016). The observed inconsistency in the responses of Dutch Reformed Church members evident in Table 1 and Table 2 might be a consequence of, broadly speaking, the blending of Snyman's two differentiated approaches.

## Observing theologians and church members reading the Bible together

As previously mentioned, in the wake of the 2016 Dutch Reformed Church Synod the members of STLAS were concerned about the question of how to facilitate dialogue within the denomination between people with expertise in critical biblical hermeneutics and others who lack formal theological and hermeneutical training. A group of Dutch Reformed Church academic theologians and ministers who were members of STLAS identified the following markers for a research process:

- Encourage participants to listen to the different voices in the conversation about the interpretation of biblical texts as different dimensions of a rich process guided by the Holy Spirit.

- Help participants to become aware of the influence of their own lenses or 'reading prescriptions' in their reading of texts, even in the choice of what they read.
- Reassure participants who might feel that their exegetical incompetency makes them unfit for participating in the dialogue.
- Lead participants to a non-anxious acceptance of the complexity of interpretation.
- Encourage participants to expect to be surprised by insights.
- Invite participants to 'take part' in the biblical narrative or, in other words, interact with the voices of the biblical tradition.
- Keep in mind that more complicated theoretical lessons about hermeneutics will not be helpful.

The research design team decided to ask three theologians to each prepare a 30 min presentation on a Bible passage of their own choice. Four to five students were invited to each of the presentations. The students were asked to carefully observe their own reactions to the presentation and subsequently take part in a reflection on the following questions: 'How did the presenter see or encounter God in the text?' and 'How did the presenter's discoveries impact your experience and perceptions?'

The presentation sessions were led by a facilitator who was by design not the presenter. This facilitator would allow 30 min of feedback of initial student reactions and then invite the presenter to take part in the conversation for another 30 min. The sessions were all video-recorded, and the recordings transcribed to be used by an analysis team who had the task of looking for contours or patterns in the data.

The analysis team viewed the recordings and discussed the transcriptions of each session in different workshops over many months. In the words of one of the members of the analysis team, the experiment created 'a small opening' for observations of the hermeneutical process in its complexity, beauty and mystery. It provided an opportunity for seeking and finding language to express these observations.

## Observations of the first dialogue session

The first presenter selected Jeremiah 36, the story of Jehoiakim burning Jeremiah's scroll. This is of course not the easiest of biblical texts to interpret.

One student told the presenter that he was 'intimidated by this "strange" text'. Others referred to the text as 'distant', 'difficult' and even 'repulsive'. One remarked that while she was 'irritated' by a text such as this and wanted to turn to a 'nicer' or more familiar part of the Bible, she in the end was glad that she stayed in the conversation. Another participant said initially she thought this was going to be 'another clinical academic exposition' and yet another that he was disappointed at first because he 'wanted the text to immediately mean something and it did not'. Both shared that they were pleasantly surprised. The group found it

challenging to adapt to the presenter's 'slower', more 'patient' tempo. But as the presentation proceeded, it became easier to follow and was even illuminating. Through the presenter's explanation of the circumstances in which the text originated 'small pieces gradually came together'. One participant remarked that it was interesting and helpful to 'see the picture of that time in your own head' and discover that 'the story of that past is the same as our own story'.

The analysis team talked about how the participants seemed to recognise that they were not proficient in reading the Bible. One student remarked that she feels like 'a lay person' when 'doing religion'. It seemed helpful that the presenter did not take the position and the posture of 'an expert' who tried to impress the listeners with 'superior knowledge'. The presenter effectively moved away from being the focal point of the encounter. He did not attempt to provide perfect answers but, although very well prepared, showed the intention of discovering and learning together with the group through the conversation. Participants were encouraged to freely share their thoughts and honestly ask difficult questions about for example the relation between human trauma and God's punishment. The presenter was honest about his own experience of the text as 'strange' and 'difficult'. The participants had permission to take part in the discussion in a relaxed, inquisitive and open way, without fear of being 'shamed'. The presenter's acceptance of not having to know and understand everything absolutely, contributed to this sense of freedom.

### Observations of the second dialogue session

The second presenter discussed Philippians 4: 1–9, which was described by the participants as easier to relate to their own stories.

One participant remarked that she had recently learnt in her senior postgraduate music studies how 'context gives meaning', and that she could see in this session how the background information provided by the presenter brought the process of interpretation to life. The presenter helped the listeners to hear Paul's words not as abstractions that could 'today be packaged in a kind of five step programme' but rather as part of a narrative that helps us to re-programme in terms of the attitude we see in Paul in his time.

It was clear that the presenter did not intend to 'side with God against the listeners' but rather embodied his own dependency on the work of the Holy Spirit. He put himself, so to speak, under the authority of the text as well. He refrained from 'correcting' the responses of participants. He did not shame anyone because of an interpretation that differed from his own developed understanding, but rather continuously created new channels for the discussion. He invited the participants, so to speak, into a refined language field of God's grace and joy in Christ. The sense of the analysis team was that this continuous invitation enabled deeper integration of meaning.

At this stage during the analysis of the sessions, the analysis team reaffirmed their view that we should not be looking for a programmatic description of the dialogue almost in the sense of a recipe, but that it would be more helpful to describe perceived conditions for participation in the collaborative discernment process. What conditions enable both theologians and non-theologians to engage together in an authentic encounter with the triune God? How are we freed from becoming consumers of texts and from our processes of control, in order to listen in such a way that we can be surprised and really challenged?

### Observations of the third dialogue session

During the third session, the listeners watched a video recording of a sermon by the presenter on Job 38:1–11 and Romans 1:18–23. The facilitator then led an in-person discussion of the group with the presenter. This time the presentation was more thematic, dealing with contentious questions around 'creation and evolution'.

At least one of the listeners at the beginning of the discussion expressed feeling 'confused' by fellow students on campus, also Christian believers, that demand belief in the young earth theory and biblical inerrancy. The presenter apparently succeeded in lowering the anxiety of the listeners by being honest about reading problems in the Bible and being at ease with her own uncertainties. By recognising her own imperfection and lack of perfect knowledge, the distance between herself as the trained and ordained person and the 'ordinary' members became less threatening – 'We all are in the same boat'.

Being in the same boat, however, does not mean that the significance of theological training and ministerial ordination has to be diminished. The third presenter, as did the previous two, showed theological confidence and radiated respect for her office as minister of the Word. The analysis team pointed out that it would not have been beneficial to the process if the presenters had downplayed the significance of their theological and hermeneutical training, focussing, for example, solely on the perspective of the readers present in the room. Although the associations made by contemporary readers play an important part in the hermeneutical process, all meaning does not lie within that. The text has a certain priority that should never be lost (Smit 1987:46, 1998:314). A delicate balance should be honoured.

The question is therefore not if the theologians have a certain authority, but rather how this authority is viewed and embodied. In this case the presenter succeeded in directing her listeners' attention towards the beauty, truth and mystery of the Gospel. She also succeeded in linking the storyline of God's creation and God as Creator with the central message of the Bible, namely that God has a relationship with us in Jesus Christ. As Kimball (2020:26; 55–56) explains, 'all of the Bible points to Jesus', which 'does not mean we should be looking at every verse in the Old Testament making allegorical connections to Jesus,



trying to find Jesus in all the details', but rather that we should remember 'that the whole storyline points to Him'. The presenter could easily have tried to impress the listeners with her own knowledge about the ancient texts and their context, and with her expertise within hermeneutics. She did not do that.

The presenter helped the listeners to move beyond the sterile campus debate by reframing the creation narrative. She helped the participants to sense how easily an awesome image of the loving Creator God becomes drowned in a joyless, rationalistic debate about faith and science. By taking our shared reality of human suffering as her point of entry, she told the creation story without having to defend the Bible against objective, scientific criticism. She did not argue only from the 'head' but also from the 'heart'. Instead of seeking 'objective, scientific truth', she put the theological question of who this God is that created, of whom not only Genesis tells us but the whole of the Bible. She made the link between the creation story and the 'heart' of the Scripture, the Christ event.

## Making meaning together

In their last round of discussions, the analysis team closely examined their observations on the three sessions, comparing notes and looking for contours or patterns.

The participants shared their experience of feeling exposed and vulnerable, even somewhat ashamed, within the situation of collaborative reading because of having less knowledge of the Bible's content than the presenters. They were intimidated by the 'gap' between the knowledge and expertise of the presenter and their own lack of orientation. The analysis team observed that when the presenters succeeded in lowering the fear of participants to be exposed or shamed, by intentionally not drawing the attention of the participants towards their own knowledge and skills but rather towards the beauty of the text, the participants took part more freely in the discussion. They were drawn into the dynamics of the texts. Their curiosity was stimulated, and their imagination and creative learning abilities enhanced. The anxiety of participants was lowered when they could sense that the presenters also submitted themselves to the authority of Scripture and showed their own dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They became more receptive when they sensed the presenters being surprised during the conversations. The three sessions in this way became more than didactic exercises for cognitive learning or information sessions about interesting historical or scientific 'facts'. The sessions became encounters of people who are vulnerable and therefore in the same boat, also in the same boat with the authors of the Bible. The participants were allowed to empathically 'enter' the experiences of the presenter and the biblical authors while maintaining the strangeness of the other. Over and against the tendency of our times to try to create for ourselves a 'separate world of comfort', a world 'away from the rest of the world',

resulting in 'a relational gap between us and those whom we see as objects', these collective reading sessions could become spaces of empathically making meaning together once the shared vulnerability of everyone in the room became clear (Thesnaar 2022:6–7).

The presenters did not proclaim their own insights but rather witnessed to the beauty of the Gospel and the transformative power of the Spirit. They so to speak 'got out of the way' for the light to fall on the beauty, truth and mystery revealed by the text. This does not mean that they tried to trivialise their roles. There was a scholarly confidence in each presentation. Their boldness, however, resonated with their respect for the text and for the interpretation of readers who were moved by the Spirit and witnessed to the Gospel long before our own time.

A surprising observation by the analysis team concerned the role of the facilitator during the three sessions. The facilitator, because he was not a presenter, did not have to be too concerned about the difficult content or complications of the discussions. His task was to liturgically create a space for a truthful encounter, and he had the freedom to do precisely that. He could also 'keep the space' by enforcing the agreed-upon rules of engagement. He could sometimes, by making use of the technique of 'mirroring', continually invite the whole group to participate as equally valuable contributors. Everyone was, through his respectful facilitation, encouraged to let go of agendas and preconceptions. The analysis team wondered how it would work if, for example, during the congregational worship service, the preacher and the liturgist were two persons, performing roles similarly to those of the presenter and the facilitator during these experimental sessions? The facilitator seemed to be able to lower anxiety, direct focus and enhance receptivity.

## Conclusion

The described exercise of setting up and observing dialogue between theologians and church members, resulted in the identification of certain conditions for meaningful interaction between them when reading and interpreting the Bible together. These conditions could be explored further:

- The theologically educated presenters did not present themselves as 'experts'. Without sacrificing the (authentic) authority that comes with their expertise, their posture was one of being receptive 'co-learners' who are subjected to the authority of the text and the guidance of the Spirit.
- The presenters did not try to disguise their own vulnerability. They acknowledged that they are 'in the same boat' as their conversation partners. They are not, so to speak, talking from the position where God is, down towards their listeners. They are fellow humans, knowing in part, seeking wisdom, making their knowledge and skills available to the group to help and guide the discernment process.
- While accepting that they dispose of valuable, essential knowledge about the historical and literary contexts of the Bible, the presenters opened themselves to be

personally addressed by the texts as the living Word of God. The participants were drawn into the narratives of the Bible story. They could experience the Bible story as also their own story.

- The confident belief of the presenters that, despite the historical distance between our own world and the world of the Bible text, personal encounter with the living God within the community of faith is possible through hearing the story of the Bible, lowered the participants' anxiety and enhanced their receptivity. One could say that the development of meaning in the hermeneutical situation is not solely dependent on the mastery of hermeneutical theory or exegetical skills. It rather involves the expectation to be spoken to by the speaking God, to 'being addressed' (Van de Beek 2000:28). It involves, in the words Calvin used when describing the activity of the speaking God, to be 'comforted', 'delighted', 'persuaded', 'moved', 'instructed', 'formed', 'transformed', 'renewed' (Smit 2013:11).

Since 1986, the Dutch Reformed Church has insisted that it is not the Bible as a book that we worship but the God of whom the Bible tells us. We are moved by the words of the apostles and the prophets because they point us towards the God of Jesus Christ. This is also the point of Kimball's book, *How (not) to read the Bible* (Kimball 2020: 51). Much confusion comes when we read the Bible without keeping in mind the full, complex, beautiful story which culminated in the unexpected Christ event. The message of the Bible, that is a Person, claims us. This Person, through the Word and the Spirit, moves us. Not with the 'force of a tyrant' but with the 'soft violence of the Spirit' (Agenda 2002:202). Christian discourse has everything to do with this 'soft violence', with being 'touched', 'surprised', 'stretched', 'formed', 'moved'.

Years ago, the Stellenbosch philosopher and theologian, Hennie Rossouw, predicted that future leaders of the church will have to be intentionally equipped with the spiritual skills to engage in conversation. Talking at the event of the celebration of 130 years of theology at Stellenbosch in 1989, he called this conversation *egte gesprek* [authentic conversation]. Rossouw was concerned by what he saw as a fragmentation of society, by growing polarisation, prejudice and mistrust in churches. His sense was that *egte gesprek*, through stretching participants beyond their original positions, could lead to the appearance of unexpected new possibilities of life orientation and foster a sense of shared meaning within the community. 'Maybe, said Rossouw (1993:136), "skills" is not the best word to use in this regard'. For *egte gesprek*, one needs a heart redeemed from self-righteousness and self-interest. He added, 'For this redeemed heart we must pray' (Rossouw 1993:137).

We need a redeemed heart, the courage to stay in conversation and the skill to consider our Bible interpretations in the light of the best of the Christian tradition. When we resist the modern threat of always having to 'solve and settle' (Marais 2021:270) and patiently continue to read the Bible together within the community of

faith, listening to the voices of our sisters and brothers and our mothers and fathers, our faith tradition, we may have the confidence that we will encounter the living Christ within our conversation. And when our discernment remains orientated towards the 'heart' of the Bible, the Person of Jesus Christ (cf. Agenda 1990, 2002), we may hope to find wisdom and life.

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### Author's contribution

P.v.d.W. is the sole author of this research article.

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All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study as they were present during formal class presentations.

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