



“This is simply the best book about the nature and function of the Bible that I have ever read! It is outstanding in describing the overall narrative of Scripture and in insisting that the individual ‘bits’ of the Bible are read in the context of that ‘big picture.’ It is outstanding in applying that same technique to people’s lives. It is outstanding in the number of concrete examples he uses to illustrate his points. And it is outstanding most of all because it, like the Bible, clearly points to Jesus. Dr. Emlet has written a superb book, which anyone who wants to understand and apply the Bible really MUST read!”

SAMUEL T. LOGAN JR., PhD, International Director of the World Reformed Fellowship; theologian; author

“If you want to see how the gospel works in your life, transforming you by the renewing of the mind (the principle on which Jesus and the apostles ‘fixed’ broken lives) then here is a very good place to begin. Rather than offer you a prescription ‘to get you through the next few weeks,’ Dr. Emlet writes one that transforms deeply and lasts a whole lifetime.”

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, PhD, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC; theologian; author of *The Christian Life*

“Depression. Divorce. Death of a loved one. Life can be messy, and pat ‘Christian’ answers won’t help. That’s why Mike Emlet wrote *CrossTalk*—to equip you to tackle real issues with practical, life-transforming truth from God’s Word. If you want to enhance your clinical practice and learn how the Bible intimately connects with your clients’ daily struggles, don’t miss this book!”

DR. TIM CLINTON, President of the American Association of Christian Counselors; licensed therapist; author of *Turn Your Life Around*

“*CrossTalk* isn’t your typical cut-and-paste counseling guide. No, it’s deeper and richer than that. Its pages are filled with light, demonstrating a gloriously redemptive interpretation of Scripture and deep understanding of the condition and needs of the human heart. I highly recommend it.”

ELYSE FITZPATRICK, Counselor, Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship; author of *Women Helping Women*

“Ministry of the Word happens somewhere in between the proof-text snippet and the broad generalities of redemptive history. God’s person, promises, purposes, actions, and commands catch fire in a person’s struggle with personal sins and situational struggles. Mike Emlet probes for the places truth ignites and probes for the ways Christ indwells hearts and conversations.”

DAVID POWLISON, PhD, Faculty and counselor at CCEF; author of *Seeing with New Eyes* and *Speaking Truth in Love*

“Mike Emlet’s *CrossTalk* gives biblical counselors crucial lessons in applying the Scripture both accurately and wisely when working with broken and hurting people. Even seasoned counselors will find themselves challenged to dig harder into applying and living out the truths of God’s Word.”

LESLIE VERNICK, Speaker; counselor; author of *Lord, I Just Want to Be Happy*

“Rejecting widespread and simplistic ways of connecting Scripture to our lives, Emlet heads down a more faithful path. He offers helpful insight as well as concrete models that make the Bible come alive in the concrete details of human life. Anyone who wants to live more faithfully in the biblical story as well as help others to do so will benefit from reading this book.”

MICHAEL W. GOHEEN, PhD, Geneva Professor of Worldview and Religious Studies, Trinity Western University; coauthor of *The Drama of Scripture*

“As a trained physician and now teacher and counselor, Emlet brings an immense wealth of knowledge and experience—helping us mine the whole counsel of God for the whole person. *CrossTalk* just moved to the top of my required reading list and is one I will commend to my parishioners to take and heed.”

ALFRED POIRIER, DMin, Author of *The Peacemaking Pastor*

“Thank you Michael Emlet for reminding us that we spend far too much time reducing the story of God’s redemption to a digest version, rather than opening all of Scripture to connect it to people as saints, sufferers, and sinners.”

ROD MAYS, DMin, National Coordinator, Reformed University Ministries

“Here’s a book I’ve been waiting for a long time: one that deals with the interpretation of the Bible for counseling. It is sophisticated in its understanding of the issues involved, but also practical and well within the reach of laypeople and counselors-in-training. Only two hundred pages, it is bigger than it looks. Its importance is evident in its grasp of the central message of Scripture—the story of Christ—and its instruction in how to use that story to help transform ours. Throughout, the spirit of the author comes across as a compassionate and biblical lover of souls.”

ERIC JOHNSON, PhD, Professor of Pastoral Care, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Michael Emlet’s practical insights on bringing Scripture to bear on the challenging problems of life are both simple and powerful. Anyone who masters these principles and uses them in the love and grace of Christ, will be a channel of life-changing truth and wisdom into the lives of others. I thank God for this book and will recommend it to everyone I know.”

KEN SANDE, President, Peacemaker Ministries; author of *The Peacemaker*

# CrossTalk

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## Where Life & Scripture Meet

Michael R. Emlet



[www.newgrowthpress.com](http://www.newgrowthpress.com)

New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404  
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Published 2009.

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Cover Design: The DesignWorks Group, Nate Saliccioli and Jeff Miller,  
[www.designworksgroup.com](http://www.designworksgroup.com)

Typesetting: Lisa Parnell, [lparnell.com](http://lparnell.com)

ISBN-13: 978-1-935273-12-7

ISBN-10: 1-935273-12-4

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Emler, Michael R.

CrossTalk : where life & Scripture meet / Michael R. Emler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-935273-12-7

ISBN-10: 1-935273-12-4

1. Christian life—Biblical teaching. 2. Bible—Use. I. Title.

BS680.C47E46 2009

220.07—dc22

2009022216

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14

10 11 12 13 14

*To Jody*

With gratitude and joy

I'm privileged to wake up next to you each morning.



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# Acknowledgments

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No one can write a book about the intersection of life and Scripture without a profound debt of gratitude to many people, past and present. I am acutely aware that I stand on the shoulders of giants.

Although I didn't fully grasp it at the time, the seeds of a redemptive-historical, Christ-centered approach to Scripture were consistently sown by Joe Novenson, my pastor in the early 1990s, in his preaching, teaching, and counseling. Through his mentoring and the encouragement of Tuck and Stacy Bartholomew, I came to Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) in 1996, blithely unaware of the Copernican revolution that was about to take place in my approach to Scripture and to people.

I am deeply thankful for the rich biblical-theological training I received from my professors at Westminster Theological Seminary, 1996–2001. Most particularly, Douglas Green and Richard B. Gaffin Jr. profoundly shaped my approach to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Ed Welch, David Powlison, and Winston Smith have twice blessed me: by serving as my wise teachers during seminary and by welcoming me as their colleague at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF), where I have been privileged to work since 2001. CCEF's biblically rooted approach to people and to the process of spiritual growth has profoundly benefited me, both personally and pastorally. My thanks to John Bettler, then executive director of CCEF, for bringing me on board. Tim Lane, current executive director of CCEF, has remained enthusiastic (and patient!) throughout this project. I am thankful for the gracious

provision of a sabbatical in the spring of 2007 to begin in earnest the writing of this book.

The real impetus for writing on this subject has come from teaching a course each year on biblical interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary. This course, taken mostly by counseling students, has served as the testing ground for many of the ideas in this book. My students have shown me that just when I think I have something “nailed down,” they are able to ask a question that sends me scurrying back to the drawing board! I am thankful for their insights over the years. I had the privilege of coteaching the course with Bill Smith for several years and profited from his biblical wisdom and pastoral approach to people. My thanks also to Adrian Smith for lively, thoughtful conversations over coffee at the now defunct Phriends Café in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, in the early years of teaching the course.

I have had many other conversation partners over the years. Jayne Clark, friend, colleague, and wise counselor, has consistently pointed me to Christ and is one who models what it means to “bring the Bible to life.” David Powlison’s thoughtful approach to the Bible as practical theology is foundational to this work. He is the epitome of one who connects—no, rivets(!)—Scripture to his own life. Steven Badorf, from the earliest days of our friendship in seminary to the present, has consistently pushed my approach to Scripture in thoughtful ways. Mike Kelly has been my teacher, colleague, elder, and close friend. I am especially grateful for many hours of conversations over the years regarding the intersection of biblical interpretation and personal ministry (among many other topics!).

Mari Stout and Adrian Smith read an early draft of the book and provided helpful feedback. Tuck Bartholomew, the organizing pastor of City Church Philadelphia, where my family and I are members, has been a wise and dear friend over many years. I have appreciated the opportunity to use some of the ideas of the book in our small-group leaders training.

I am grateful to have had several other opportunities to present this material, at various stages of development, outside the classroom: at the CCEF Annual Conference (November 2007) and at Christ Community Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (May 2008). I would like to thank the Society for Christian Psychology for the opportunity to do a preconference in September 2008; I appreciated Eric Johnson’s kind invitation.

I am deeply grateful to Sue Lutz, who served as my editor. It's not an easy task to tackle an author's first book. She encouraged this project for many years before it ever took shape. I have appreciated both her careful editing and her wise approach to Scripture and people. She kept me from using too many polysyllabic words and consistently pushed me to take the material to the most concrete and pastoral of levels.

I am thankful for New Growth Press. I do not take lightly the opportunity that Karen and Mark Tears have offered me in publishing this book. I thank Karen, especially, for her enthusiasm and flexibility throughout a writing process that has taken longer than either of us anticipated. Thanks also to Barbara Juliani, editorial project manager at New Growth, who carefully shepherded the manuscript to publication.

My parents, Marvin and Miriam Emler, have been warmly encouraging throughout my life. They never blinked an eye when I left medicine to pursue full-time ministry but welcomed this call of God. They, along with my sister Mileen, have undergirded this book with hours of prayer.

My gratitude to my family is more than words can say—but I'll try anyhow! My daughter Lydia and my son Luke are a delight to my heart. Perhaps more than anyone on earth, they have pushed me to practice what I preach. They eagerly anticipated the day when they could hold "Daddy's book" in their hands. I pray that they will continue to fall in love with the One to whom this book points. Finally, I dedicate this book to my wife Jody. Her love for God and for others grows out of the fact that she consistently lives by the redemptive plotline of Scripture. She knows Jesus—and it shows—every day. I am so thankful for the privilege of being her covenant companion for life.

Michael R. Emler



# Introduction

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Rick sat in his chair, his eyes downcast. Despite a renewed commitment to Christ that was demonstrated in months of patient, self-sacrificial living at home, his wife of twenty-two years had decided to file for divorce. He looked up, furrowed his brow, and said, “What good was all this work to end up like this? I know God is up to something, but it feels like my efforts were in vain.”

Max, his good friend and Bible study leader, responded, “Rick, I hardly know what to say. I know that this is deeply hurtful and disappointing to you.” He sat in silence for a few moments then quietly said, “Your grief reminds me of the words of the Lord’s servant in Isaiah 49:4: ‘But I said, “I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.”’”

Rick looked up. “That really does describe how I feel. I know I need to take to heart the second part of that verse, but it’s hard to have that perspective right now.”

For the next two hours Rick and Max talked about dashed hopes and unfulfilled dreams, framing Rick’s experience through a biblical lens. Ultimately they talked about Jesus, the true Servant of the Lord, who had every earthly reason to take Isaiah’s lament upon his lips as he hung on the cross. Yet Jesus remained faithful, confident that he would be vindicated by his Father and that his reward lay with his God (Heb. 12:2; 1 Pet. 2:23). Although many more late-night discussions would occur, Rick left

that evening more confident that the words of the Servant could become his own.

Who wouldn't want the privilege of using Scripture to help someone in trouble, as Max did? How does that happen? If you're like me, you have probably received more instruction on how to study the Bible than you have on how to practically *use* it in your life and ministry. The fact is, there are many books about how to interpret the Bible, but most of these are heavy on the side of theory, not application, which is the spiritual task of connecting Scripture with life. These resources help us study the grammatical and literary details of a passage, do research into the original historical setting and audience, and draw some conclusions about what the passage might have meant to the original hearers/readers. All of this is valuable—in fact, it's absolutely essential. But the equally important step of relating that study to the messy complexity of life in the here and now is given relatively little attention, even in very good books on biblical interpretation. Too often, we remain people who are all messed up with no place to go!

Resources that focus more fully on the challenge of application tend to concentrate on public ministry such as preaching or teaching<sup>1</sup> or on broader questions of ethics in the life of the church.<sup>2</sup> But if we are asking how the Bible addresses the complexities of our personal lives (or another's life), there are fewer places to turn.

Of course, there is great overlap between using the Bible “macro-ethically” (e.g., applying its teaching to broader issues like divorce, urban blight, and homosexuality) and “micro-ethically” (e.g., learning to minister on a personal level to a friend struggling with the loss of a job or wrestling with anger). Broader issues always filter down to the level of personal decisions and actions, and personal issues always have a broader social context. The common concern is how the Bible should function ethically in our lives, whether one-on-one in personal ministry or in a larger church and cultural setting. In either case, we need a resource that helps connect the wisdom of Scripture with the details of our daily lives, a resource that helps us learn how to bridge the gap between then and now.

And now for a true confession: I wrote this book because *I* need this resource! As a biblical counselor who also trains other counselors, my daily challenge is to bring the good news of God's redemption to my counselees' lives—and to help others do the same. Questions (often from

my students) frequently arise: “Why did you choose *that* passage?” “Why didn’t you open your Bible that session?” “Why did you address that particular theme in this person’s life?” “How could you be more gospel-centered with this brother?” “How do you build biblical hope for change in this sister?” These questions have prodded me to write about the process of connecting life and Scripture.

When we hit a personal “wall” in counseling or pastoral ministry, it provokes a more proactive, thoughtful approach to both people and the Bible. “How can I better understand this person biblically?” “I thought that Scripture was relevant; why didn’t it connect with him?” “Why is this person ‘stuck?’” “What biblical truth might help her grow?” All these questions from the trenches led me to investigate the intersection of biblical truth and peoples’ lives—what is commonly referred to as “application.”

## The Focus of This Book

It might help you to know up front what this book will and will not cover. This book is not a comprehensive approach to biblical interpretation. It will not address in detail the interpretive process, but it will build on many of the concepts laid out in books that do. So, for example, I will not cover (in depth, at least) the guidelines for examining a passage in its original context, what biblical scholars call “grammatical-historical exegesis.” I *will* mention several solid resources on biblical interpretation that can help if you have not received formal training in biblical interpretation. Similarly, I won’t address how the varied literature types (genres) of the Bible—such as narrative, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and epistle—impact the way you interpret and use Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Nor will I discuss the philosophical intricacies of where the meaning of a text comes from.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, this book is not a comprehensive approach to discipleship, counseling, or pastoral care. It *does* provide a biblical “take” on people that I believe is foundational for personal ministry, but if you are looking for a book-length treatment on the nature of people and how to help them, this book probably will not address all your questions.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, this book is not a survey of the major ethical challenges that confront the church today. I won’t be discussing how to use the Bible to address issues such as homosexuality, global warming, women in ministry, and poverty, to name a few. No doubt, the way I propose that we

understand the Bible, understand people, and understand the link between the two will impact our approach to “macro-ethical” issues. But my main focus is “micro-ethics”—how we use Scripture to meaningfully intersect with a *particular* person’s life as we minister to him or her.

Consider this book a hybrid of sorts, a resource to help you understand both people and the Bible more thoroughly. This book gives attention to interpreting the biblical text and interpreting the person. Both skills are necessary if you are to minister in a way that correctly “handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Both are necessary for effective ministry.

To sum it up, this book can help you read the Bible and “read” people in a way that promotes gospel-centered, personally relevant use of Scripture in ministry to others. It describes a way to use the Scriptures to help people grow to love God and others more fully in the midst of their complex daily lives.

### **This Book’s for You!**

What kind of reader do I envision you to be? I’m hoping you are someone actively engaged in personal ministry—counselor, pastor, discipler, spiritual mentor, small-group leader, campus ministry worker, youth leader, crisis pregnancy worker, or intentional friend. I’m also hoping that you’re someone who, like me, has wrestled with how to connect God’s Word to the lives of people around you (and sometimes failed!). I hope you desire to see how two worlds fruitfully meet head-on: the unfolding story of God’s redemption and the complex tapestries of peoples’ struggles, sufferings, sin, triumphs, and joys.

If you are primarily involved in a more “public” ministry of the Word such as preaching and teaching, I believe the book will sharpen your approach to Scripture and to people. It’s true that preaching and teaching tend to be more “proclamatory” in nature, whereas “private” ministry of the Word, which occurs one-on-one or in the context of small groups, tends to be more “dialogical” or conversational in nature. But whatever the sphere or scope of your work with others, I believe you will find help to grow in ministry wisdom.

Here’s the bottom line: this book is for anyone who takes the “one another” passages of the Bible seriously and is eager to use the richness of Scripture to minister wisely to the people God has placed in his or her

sphere of influence. It is for anyone who has been captured by Paul's vision for God's people, namely, "that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12–13).

## **How Firm a Foundation**

As we start exploring this topic, let's affirm two foundational truths about the Bible. These truths will support the weight of what follows in the rest of this book.

First, the Bible is God's "breathed-out" word, according to 2 Timothy 3:16a. Second Peter 1:20–21 notes, "Above all, you must understand that 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." Because the Bible is God's truthful word and not the flight of human fancy, it has authority (applicational weight) for God's people. It is, as Paul goes on to say, "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16b). Peter puts it this way: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Pet. 1:3–4). Peter connects the knowledge of God, the Word (promises) of God, and our participation in God's nature or character. Both apostles would affirm that the Bible is a divinely authored means of God's grace to grow us into the likeness of Christ. God speaks to change us.

Second, God in his wisdom used human authors to bring his words to his people. The Bible did not drop out of the sky as a completed document, nor were the writers of Scripture mindless drones who merely took dictation from God. Rather, in some mysterious divine-human collaboration, the human writers of Scripture wrote words that were truly their own, yet simultaneously the exact words that God the Holy Spirit intended, specifically tailored for God's people living within a certain historical and cultural moment.<sup>6</sup> Jeannine Brown connects these two aspects of Scripture by

describing the Bible as “culturally located divine discourse.”<sup>7</sup> Keeping this balance reminds us that (1) God revealed himself progressively in history through the Bible’s human authors *and* (2) the Bible, because God is the ultimate author, remains authoritative for his people throughout all time.

## The Story of God and the Stories of People

From what I have just said, it is clear that God’s Word is meant to *inform* and *transform* God’s people. How God’s redemptive message does that is the focus of this book. But for now, realize that the Bible proclaims one comprehensive true story of God’s relationship with people. It moves from creation to the fall of humanity into sin, suffering, and death, to redemption—ultimately accomplished through Jesus—and finally, to a vision of God’s kingdom, complete at Jesus’ second coming.<sup>8</sup> It is the story of God creating a people to rule the world on his behalf, for their good and his glory. It is a story of their rebellion against God’s wise design. But it is also a tale of God rescuing his people from their sin and misery, and the climax of that narrative comes in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

Everything in the Old Testament looks forward to this climax and everything in the New Testament looks back to it and/or works out its implications for the lives of God’s people. Of course, the New Testament also looks *forward* to Jesus’ second coming. This is what the gospel is all about: the good news that God entered history as the man Jesus to bring about the redemption of a people and a world bound in sin and suffering.

But not “generic” redemption. Not “generic” sin and suffering. This good news reaches God’s people in the trenches of life and is tailored to the particularities of life. Any attempts at ministering God’s Word that do not fundamentally connect the good news of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, with the details, themes, and plotlines of people’s lives will miss the mark (or land off the target altogether!). Hence, it is appropriate to call the approach of this book “redemptive-historical”<sup>9</sup> or “gospel-centered” application. It is an approach that takes the narrative (storied) nature of the Bible seriously in order to make wise connections with the narratives of our lives. Understanding both the Story of God and the stories of the people we serve is necessary to help others embrace the transformation the Bible envisions for God’s people.

## The Goals of This Book

What specific goals do I have in mind for this book? What do I hope to see happen in your life as a result of reading it? The first goal has to do with your own relationship with God. The apostle John wrote, “these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). That life does not begin in some future place following death. It starts right here, right now, as God brings restoration into the midst of a broken creation (2 Cor. 5:17). God intends our lives to reflect the life of Christ as we encounter him through his Word (2 Pet. 1:4). So, one goal for this book is that your life would be increasingly shaped and transformed by the sweeping story of Scripture. As Eugene Peterson says, “If Holy Scripture is to be something other than mere gossip about God, it must be internalized.”<sup>10</sup>

A temptation in ministry is to think that just because we prepared for a Bible study, a sermon, or a discipleship appointment (or wrote a book like this!), we are deeply engaging with the God of the universe. But that’s not necessarily true. It’s easy in ministry to live more as a “pipe” than a “reservoir.” That is, it’s easy to live merely as a conduit to others of the transforming truths of God’s Word, rather than as a changed and transformed reservoir who overflows with lived-out gospel truth. You wouldn’t imagine cooking meal after meal for your family without sitting down to enjoy that nourishment yourself, would you? To paraphrase James 1:22, let’s not merely be hearers or speakers or counselors of the Word but doers, first and foremost.

A second goal relates to your relationships with others. If you want to speak helpfully to a struggling brother or sister, this book should increase your ability to listen, ask thoughtful questions, and use biblical categories for interpreting their experiences. Perhaps you have been in a situation where someone asked for your input on a matter. But when you tried to bring biblical truth to the table, it felt as though you were changing the subject (at least from the other person’s perspective)! This book should help you interpret people as well as Scripture and suggest relevant biblical applications that will benefit those around you. This should be true whether you are involved in a formal teaching or discipling ministry, in professional counseling, or in impromptu discussions at the local café.

A third goal relates to your attitude toward the Bible and the way you use it in ministry. As you grow to appreciate the unified story line of the Bible *as well as* the uniqueness of individual books and passages, I hope that your Bible will “grow” in size. That is, I hope you will see the wonder and beauty of the gospel in whatever Old or New Testament passage you are reading. This should encourage you to dive into portions of the Bible you previously neglected. It should motivate you to explore the way these passages relate to Jesus Christ—and how they relate to your own situations in life and ministry.

Put simply, the overall goal of this book is to help you live a biblically rich, Christ-centered life in community with fellow believers. It will equip you to make more sense of the details of the Bible and the details of people’s lives. It will equip you to see how the diverse writings of Scripture have a cohesive, kingdom-centered thrust. And it will help you discern life patterns, themes, and plotlines that underlie the details of people’s experiences. Ultimately, it should equip you to more carefully read the story of the Bible and the diverse stories of the people you know and to make meaningful connections between the two.

The title *CrossTalk: Where Life & Scripture Meet* captures several of these ideas in overlapping ways. First, *CrossTalk* highlights the interpersonal aspect of ministry and carries the idea of redemptive dialogue occurring between two or more people. Second, the title emphasizes the centrality of the gospel. It highlights personal ministry that points to the Redeemer, Jesus Christ—his life, death on the cross, resurrection, ascension, and future return. Finally, *CrossTalk* focuses our attention on the intersection of two kinds of “speech”—the story of Scripture and the stories of people’s lives. This is the place of application. This is *CrossTalk* in action.

Let’s begin by exploring the real challenges of connecting the Bible to life.

## Discussion Questions

1. What questions and struggles do you have in applying Scripture to life?
2. Describe your current method of studying and interpreting Scripture.

3. Describe your current approach to understanding and interpreting people.
4. How have you seen your study of Scripture specifically lead to a changed life—your own or another's?