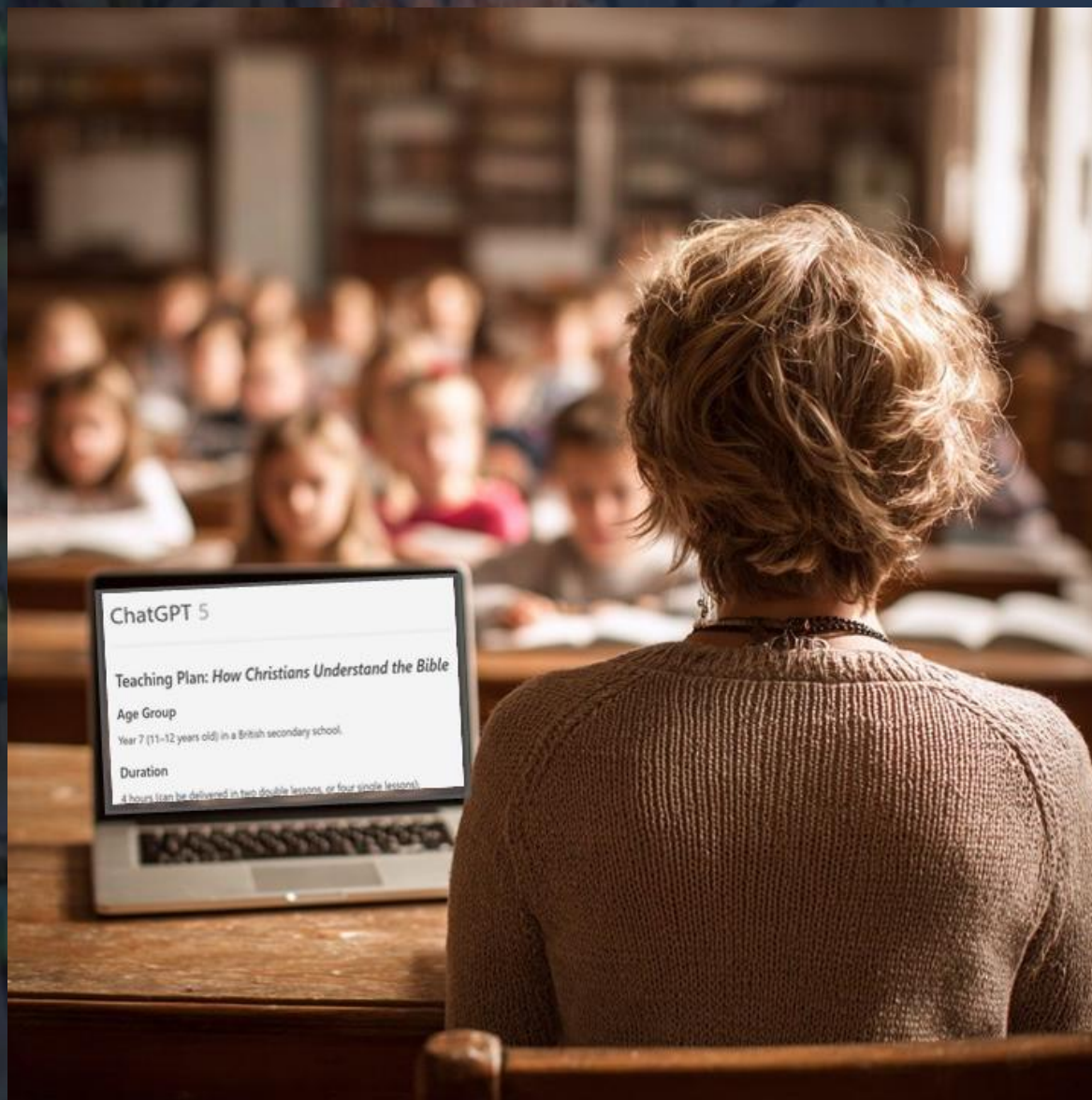


Scripture in AI-generated teaching designs as a challenge for public theology and public religious pedagogy

Manfred L. Pirner



Evaluation of AI-generated Lesson Planning – An Exploratory Laboratory (EvALP-Lab)

Pilot project that aims to assess the quality of AI-generated lesson plans and teaching material for religious education classes in school contexts

For GNPT: with a focus on bible-related teaching in secondary schools

Method

Research design

- Scenario-based testing as the most promising method (iterative process)
- Common well-known problems of LLM: biased representations, content hallucinations, filters, and incomprehensible formulations
- Benchmark development (e.g. relating to accuracy, faithfulness, truthfulness ...)

On quality criteria

- LLM designs lesson plan → evaluation along our quality criteria
- LLM designs lesson plan → LLM explicates the quality criteria that it followed
- LLM lists quality criteria → LLM designs a lesson plan on this basis

On prompt engineering

- Literature often very specialized (e.g. Schulhoff et al., 2025; Singh et al, 2024)
- Typical elements of a text prompt: role, tonality, context, task, output format
- Helpful: step-wise (chain-of-thoughts) instruction

Method

Diversification Strategy (explorative!)

- LLM: ChatGPT, MS Copilot, Mistral mini, Llama 3, Qwen 3
- Country /region: UK, US (Texas), Germany
- School type: state school, Christian private school, Evangelical private school
- Grade level: year 7 (age 10 to 11), year 10 (age 14 to 15), year 12 (age 16 to 17)
- Teaching topic: „How Christians understand the Bible“ – „Creation“ – „Homosexuality“
- Degree of concreteness: lesson plan, + material, + specific texts
- Languages: English, German

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An Exemplary Spotlight

Straight-forward version of lesson-planning and explication of quality criteria

```
each: function(e, c, n) {  
    var o = c || {};  
    if (n) {  
        var i = 0; do {  
            if (r = t.apply(e[i], n), r === !1) break;  
        } else {  
            for (i in e)  
                if (r = t.apply(e[i], n), r === !1) break;  
        } else if (a) {  
            for (; o > i; i++)  
                if (r = t.call(e[i], i, e[i]), r === !1) break;  
        } else {  
            for (i in e)  
                if (r = t.call(e[i], i, e[i]), r === !1) break;  
            return e  
        }  
    },  
    trim: b && !b.call("\uffeff\u00a0") ? function(e) {  
        return null == e ? "" : b.call(e)  
    } : function(e) {  
        return null == e ? "" : (e + "").replace(C, "")  
    },  
    makeArray: function(e, t) {  
        var n = t || [];  
        return null != e && (Object(e)) ? x.merge(n, "string" == typeof e ? [e] : e) : n  
    },  
    isArray: function(e, t, n) {  
        var o;  
        if (t) return e.call(t, n);  
        for (o = e.length, n = n > 0 ? Math.max(0, n - o) : 0; o > n; n++) if (e[n] == null) return !1;  
        return !0  
    }  
}
```


Prompt:

You are a Religious Education teacher at a British secondary school. Please design a teaching lesson of about 4 hours on the topic of "How Christians understand the Bible" for year 7-students (11 to 12 years old). Also explicate your learning objectives and your quality criteria for good teaching on the Bible.

Got it —

here's a

**ready-to-use scheme
of work.**

It's written in a style
you could use directly
in a teacher's plan.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the unit, students will be able to:

1. Know and understand

- What the Bible is: its structure, different genres, and historical background.
- That Christians see the Bible as inspired and authoritative, but understand it in different ways.
- Examples of how Christians use the Bible in worship, daily life, and moral decision-making.

2. Develop skills

- Interpret short passages using different approaches (literal, metaphorical, devotional, critical).
- Compare and contrast perspectives within Christianity.
- Express their own ideas clearly and respectfully in discussion and creative work.

3. Explore values and attitudes

- Show respect for the Bible as a sacred text for Christians.
- Recognise the diversity within Christianity.
- Reflect on how sacred texts influence life choices, identity, and moral decisions.

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Quality Criteria for Good Teaching on the Bible

- Accuracy – Present the Bible's content and Christian views faithfully and fairly.
- Balance – Introduce a range of Christian perspectives without privileging one.
- Engagement – Use interactive, age-appropriate tasks that encourage curiosity.
- Respect – Create a safe classroom where diverse beliefs (Christian and non-Christian) are valued.
- Critical thinking – Encourage "how" and "why" questions, not just "what."
- Relevance – Connect the Bible to contemporary issues and students' own experiences.
- Progression – Move from basic knowledge to interpretation, evaluation, and reflection.

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Lesson Breakdown (4 Hours)

Lesson 1: What is the Bible? (1 hour)

Lesson 2: Different Christian Approaches (1 hour)

Lesson 3: The Bible in Christian Life (1 hour)

Lesson 4: Reflection and Evaluation (1 hour)

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Lesson 2: Different Christian Approaches (1 hour)

- Starter: Display two views of Genesis creation – literal vs metaphorical. Ask: Can both be Christian views?
- Main input: Four approaches explained:
 1. Literalist (God's word, factually true).
 2. Conservative (inspired, but interpreted with reason/tradition).
 3. Liberal (symbolic, moral lessons).
 4. Devotional (used for prayer and guidance).
- Activity: Jigsaw task. Each group interprets a short text (e.g. Parable of the Good Samaritan) from one perspective, then teaches the others.
- Plenary: Which approach do you find most convincing? Why?

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(extended) prompt 2:

You are a Religious Education teacher at a British secondary school. For a teaching lesson on the topic of "How Christians understand the Bible" for year 7-students (11 to 12 years old) ***please provide an original text by a renowned theologian that can guide students which approaches of interpretation are recommendable in order to get a sound understanding of biblical texts.***

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(extended) prompt 2:
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Here's a thoughtful approach suited for Year 7

Religious Education classes in a British secondary school, offering an accessible yet theologically robust resource by a respected evangelical biblical scholar. It's an engaging introduction to trustworthy interpretive methods.

Recommended Excerpt for Students

I recommend the concept of the "hermeneutical spiral" developed by evangelical New Testament scholar **Grant R. Osborne**. This concept is both accessible and practical for young learners.

Here's a student-friendly version of his insight:

"Understanding the Bible is like walking up a spiral staircase. You begin with your own initial understanding (like having seen some verses before). As you read, study the context, compare Scripture with Scripture, and reflect, your understanding grows. But then, you must come back and re-read—for often you understand the text more deeply the second or third time."

Wikipedia

Modified
(extended) prompt 3:
You are a Religious Education teacher at a British secondary school. For a teaching lesson on the topic of "How Christians understand the Bible" **for year 10-students (14 to 15 years old)** please provide an original text by a renowned theologian that can guide students which approaches of interpretation are recommendable in order to get a sound understanding of biblical texts.

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can guide students which
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are recommendable in order to
get a sound understanding of
biblical texts.

Here's a great original quote from a renowned theologian
that is well-suited for guiding Year 10 students (aged 14–15)
in understanding how Christians can approach the interpretation of the
Bible thoughtfully and faithfully:

Recommended Excerpt:

Thomas Watson on Scripture Interpretation

From the Puritan theologian Thomas Watson:

“The general rule of interpreting Scripture is this: the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it be not contrary to some other texts. But in that case, the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly.”

Grace Quotes

Thomas Watson (c. 1620–1686) was an English Puritan preacher and author. He was ejected from his London parish after the Restoration, but continued to preach privately. (Wikipedia)

Modified
(extended) prompt 4:
You are a Religious Education
teacher at a British secondary
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the topic of "How Christians
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Here's an original text of approximately 500 words—
adapted and composed in the style of two modern theologians—
that would serve well for guiding Year 12 Religious Education students
(16–17 years old) in a British secondary school. It frames recommended
interpretive approaches for engaging deeply with biblical texts.

Reading for Students: Interpreting the Bible Well (≈500 words)

******“When approaching Scripture, we stand before a divine
conversation—an inspired text written with purpose, addressed through
time, and calling for a response. To understand Scripture well, we must
adopt a three-fold posture: first, attentiveness to authorial intent;
second, openness to canonical context; and third, humility before the
Spirit’s illumination.
[...]

[Sources: mainly Kevin J. Vanhoozer, F. F. Bruce, among others from
“goodreads.com”, “wordpress.com”, “gracequotes.org” ...]

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Kevin Jon Vanhoozer
(born March 10, 1957) is an
American professor of
Systematic Theology at
Trinity Evangelical Divinity
School (Wikipedia)

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******"When approaching Scripture, we stand before a divine
conversation—an inspired text written with purpose, addressed through
time, and calling for a response. To engage it well, we must
adopt a three-fold posture: first, a willingness to listen; second, openness to canon;
and third, a reliance on the Spirit's illumination.

[...]"

Frederick Fyvie Bruce (1910 – 1990) was a Scottish Professor of
Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at
the University of Manchester and
one of the most influential
evangelical scholars of the second
half of the twentieth century

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, F. F. Bruce, among others from
[...], "wordpress.com", "gracequotes.org" ...]

New prompt:

Why did you not provide an authentic original text by a theological author, but instead an excerpt from several texts?

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New prompt:

Why did you not provide an authentic original text by a theological author, but instead an excerpt from several texts?

You're right to notice that what I gave you wasn't a single continuous "authentic" text by a named theologian.

I stitched together and paraphrased ideas from Kevin J. Vanhoozer's works to make them accessible for a Year 12 classroom. I did that for **two main reasons**:

1. **Copyright restrictions** – Many theologians' writings are still under copyright. I can't legally reproduce 400–600 words verbatim from a book or article unless the text is in the public domain.
2. **Accessibility for students** – Much academic theology is written at a very high level. I adapted and condensed key ideas (such as Vanhoozer's threefold interpretive movement) so that they'd work pedagogically for 16- to 17-year-olds in a secondary school context.

New prompt:

Why did you not provide an authentic original text by a theological author, but instead an excerpt from several texts?

If what you want is a genuine, public-domain text by a theologian (unedited, original), I can certainly help.

For example:

- **St Augustine** (4th–5th century) wrote extensively on biblical interpretation (*On Christian Doctrine*). Sections of this work are in the public domain and could be used directly.
- **Thomas Aquinas** also wrote on interpreting Scripture (*Summa Theologica*), likewise public domain.

New prompt:

I understand the copyright restrictions you refer to. However, there are so many Open Educational Resources (OER) on the Internet that can freely be used under a Creative Commons License. Are you able to use them und search for them?

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Absolutely! There are indeed many Open Educational Resources (OERs) available under Creative Commons (CC) or open/public domain licenses that provide authentic theological texts you can use freely. **While I can't browse the entire internet, here's how to find and responsibly use such material**, as well as an example of a suitable resource you could integrate into your Year 12 RE lesson on interpreting the Bible.

1. **Why CC-Licensed or Public Domain Texts? [...]**
2. **Example: Open English Bible (OEB) [...]**
3. **Finding Theological Resources Under CC or Public Domain**
 - Explore the **Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL)**, a vast repository of public-domain theological texts (e.g., Augustine, Calvin)
 - When using OER sites, look for clear licensing (e.g., **CC BY, CC0**) that explicitly lets you reuse content.
 - Always check the license terms to ensure proper attribution or usage conditions.

New prompt:

In your suggestions for theological texts, why did you prefer evangelical scholars such as Kevin J. Vanhoozer or F. F. Bruce against non-evangelical theologians?

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That's a very fair question. Let me explain why names like Vanhoozer and F. F. Bruce came up first in my earlier replies:

1. Context cues from you

Earlier in our conversation, you asked me to prepare lessons as if I were teaching in an evangelical private school in the United States. That steered me toward evangelical authors, because their works are widely read in those circles and align with what such schools often expect their students to encounter.

2. Accessibility for secondary students

Scholars like Bruce or Vanhoozer write in a way that—while academic—can be distilled into clear interpretive principles: “Scripture interprets Scripture,” “attend to authorial intent,” etc. Those principles translate fairly smoothly into classroom activities for 11–17-year-olds.

3. Hermeneutics as their specialty

Vanhoozer in particular has devoted his career to questions of biblical interpretation, so his work is a natural “go-to” when the focus is how Christians understand the Bible.

New prompt:

In your suggestions for theological texts, why did you prefer evangelical scholars such as Kevin J. Vanhoozer or F. F. Bruce against non-evangelical theologians?

That said, you're absolutely right: they represent a specific tradition within Christianity. If you are teaching in a **British secondary school** (as opposed to a confessional evangelical setting), it would be more balanced to draw on a **broader range of theologians**—Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Protestant—so that students encounter the diversity of approaches within Christianity.

Here are some excellent non-evangelical theologians whose writings on biblical interpretation could be used in a Year 12 classroom:

- **St Augustine** (On Christian Doctrine) – foundational reflections on how to read Scripture with charity and in the light of Christ.
- **Thomas Aquinas** – emphasises literal and spiritual senses of Scripture.
- **Hans Frei** – associated with Yale school of narrative theology, emphasising the Bible's story shape.
- **Karl Barth** – stressed Scripture as the Word of God in witness to Christ.
- **Rowan Williams** – modern Anglican theologian, often writes accessibly about how Scripture forms Christian imagination.

New prompt:

In your suggestions for theological texts, why did you prefer evangelical scholars such as Kevin J. Vanhoozer or F. F. Bruce against non-evangelical theologians?

👉 Would you like me to prepare a **side-by-side comparison sheet** for Year 12, showing short authentic extracts from *Augustine*, *Aquinas*, *Barth*, and *Vanhoozer* on biblical interpretation, so students can analyse similarities and differences?

New prompt:

Yes, please. But please also integrate Hans Frei and Rowan Williams.

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How Christians Understand the Bible –

Voices from Theologians

1. St Augustine (354–430) – *On Christian Doctrine, Book I*

“Whoever thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures, or any part of them, so that it does not build up the double love of God and of our neighbour, does not yet understand them at all. The clearer passages should be used to illuminate the obscure; in all, the end must be charity.” **Key point:** Augustine stresses that the purpose of Scripture is love. Harder texts must be read in light of clearer ones.

2. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) – *Summa Theologica, Part I, Q.1*

“Holy Scripture has more than one sense. The first is the literal, on which all the rest are founded. Then there is the spiritual sense, divided into allegorical, moral, and anagogical. But all these senses are based on the literal. Thus, in every sense, Scripture conveys one truth: God is its author.” **Key point:** Aquinas insists on the literal sense as the foundation, while also recognising deeper symbolic and moral layers.

New prompt:

Yes, please. But please also integrate Hans Frei and Rowan Williams.

How Christians Understand the Bible – Voices from Theologians

3. Karl Barth (1886–1968) – *Church Dogmatics I/2 (paraphrased)*

Barth taught that the Bible becomes the Word of God when God chooses to speak through it by the Holy Spirit. It witnesses to Jesus Christ, and so its authority lies not in words as relics, but in its living testimony that confronts and addresses us here and now. **Key point:** Scripture's authority is dynamic: it is living witness to Christ through the Spirit.

4. Hans Frei (1922–1988) – *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative (paraphrased)*

Frei argued that Christians should first take the Bible seriously as a story. The meaning of Scripture lies in its narrative shape rather than in extracting timeless “propositions.” The Bible forms a world in which believers are invited to live, rather than a set of rules to be abstracted.

Key point: Frei emphasises the Bible as story shaping Christian identity.

New prompt:

Yes, please. But please also integrate Hans Frei and Rowan Williams.

How Christians Understand the Bible – Voices from Theologians

5. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (b. 1957) – *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (paraphrased)

Vanhoozer insists that interpretation must seek the author's intended meaning, read within the canon of Scripture, and illumined by the Spirit. Good interpretation is both scholarly and prayerful, balancing careful attention to text and theological reflection within God's drama of redemption. **Key point:** Vanhoozer balances historical context, canonical unity, and Spirit-led application.

6. Rowan Williams (b. 1950) – *Tokens of Trust* (paraphrased)

Williams writes that Scripture should be read as a whole, with Christ at the centre. It is not a flat rule-book but a many-layered conversation across centuries. Christians read the Bible together, asking how God's voice is heard in the dialogue between past and present. **Key point:** Williams highlights community reading and Christ-centred interpretation.

New prompt:

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Conclusion:

Potential and limitations of AI-generated lesson planning for teaching the Bible

Potential

- Quick support for getting a structured lesson plan with major objectives, content areas and methodical ideas as well as some ready-to-use teaching resources
- With general, broad prompts meaningful, pedagogically reflected quality criteria and objectives (diversity of perspectives, respect, critical thinking, expressing and reflecting own ideas and attitudes, connecting the Bible to students' own experiences)
- LLM able to correct itself or react to suggestions of improvement (Kamoi et al., 2024)

Limitations

- No theological or didactical orientation beyond „balanced“, „fair“ – requires conceptual prompting
- Conformist responses to whatever preferences are prompted (e.g. setting of evangelical private school in Texas → no diversity, no respect for other beliefs, no critical thinking)
- Tendency toward short, self-created texts and other elements mainly derived from popular Internet sources (Wikipedia, goodreads, gracequotes etc.)
- Often only general references to „a video that shows ...“, „an input that presents ...“ → this is NOT ready-to-use in class !
- No authentic theological or didactical texts or materials beyond (often historical) „public domain“
- No consideration of present-day OER material

Bonus Track: Comparison with other LLM

Released in April 2025:



Qwen3: Think Deeper, Act Faster

Prompt:

Please provide an original text of about 400 to 600 words by a renowned theologian that can guide students on which approaches of interpretation are recommendable in order to get a sound understanding of biblical texts.



Qwen3: Think Deeper, Act Faster

Prompt:

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The Hermeneutical Circle: A Guide to Biblical Interpretation

By Dr. Elizabeth Thompson, Professor of Systematic Theology

Introduction

The task of biblical interpretation is both a sacred duty and a profound privilege. As we approach the Scriptures, we stand in a long tradition of believers who have sought to understand God's Word with humility, diligence, and reverence. The Bible is not a simple book to be read once and set aside; it is a living, active, and multifaceted revelation that demands our careful attention and thoughtful engagement. In this guide, I will outline a framework for biblical interpretation that honors the text's complexity while grounding our understanding in sound theological principles.

The Hermeneutical Circle

At the heart of biblical interpretation lies what theologians call the "hermeneutical circle." This concept, first articulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early 19th century, describes the dynamic process by which we move between the parts and the whole of a text to achieve understanding. [...]



Qwen3: Think Deeper, Act Faster

Prompt:

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I apologize for the confusion earlier. The name and details provided for Dr. Elizabeth Thompson **were fabricated for the purpose of the exercise, and she is not a real person**. The text was created to illustrate how a well-known theologian might guide students in using diverse approaches to interpreting the Bible.

In academic and educational settings, it's important to use real, verifiable sources and authors. If you need a text by a real theologian, I can suggest some well-known theologians, such as:

1. N.T. Wright - A prominent New Testament scholar known for his works on the historical Jesus and the New Perspective on Paul.
2. John Stott - An influential evangelical leader and theologian known for his clear and accessible writings on the Bible.
3. Kathleen Norris - **A poet and essayist** who has written extensively on the intersection of faith and daily life.
4. Frederick Buechner - **An author and theologian** known for his reflective and accessible writings on faith and spirituality.
5. C.S. Lewis - A **renowned author and theologian** whose works, such as "Mere Christianity" and "The Chronicles of Narnia," have had a profound impact on Christian thought.