

Reading the Bible with youth

Rachel Miller Jacobs

Robert Tannehill, in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, argues that the purpose and effect of a Gospel is “molding the character of a community for the long haul.”¹ But couldn’t it be that molding character for the long haul is the purpose and effect not only of a Gospel but of the entire Bible? And that the arena for this transformation is not only the Christian community but also the individual Christian?

The discerning reader will have already figured out that my answer to both of these questions is a resounding yes. I believe that the most important reason to read the Bible, marinate in it, play with it, fight with it, worship through it, in the company of

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people of all ages, is to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

I mention the notion of transformation as a way of framing the conversation about teaching the Bible to youth—or more accurately, about giving ourselves to the transforming power of the Bible in the company of youth. If the point of Bible reading is to grow up in Christ, then what we do with teenagers is not some specialized, peripheral task. Junior and senior highers are perfectly capable of

entering into life-giving and life-changing engagement with the scriptures, using the same variety of reading practices one would use with adults.

In fact, they *need* these practices: as youth mature in intellect and spirit, approaches to the Bible that worked well when they were in grade school seem thin. Unless we offer them viable alternatives, they are likely to assume the Bible is just for little kids, and the result would be a loss to their individual growth in

faith as well as to their communities, which could benefit enormously from their insights and interpretive vigor.

Giving ourselves to the shaping power of the Bible in the company of others, and especially of teenagers, involves several different layers: our character formation as teachers, our joint attention to the text, and our willingness to allow the text to read us.

Attending to the character of the teacher

Because of the intensity and transparency of adolescents, certain attitudes and practices that are important for all congregational Bible teachers are especially crucial when working with youth.

Teachers need to be engaged with the Bible themselves.

Youth are geniuses at spotting and dismissing lukewarmness. So we need to be engaged meaningfully with the Bible ourselves, convinced that the Bible is worth reading, and clear that reading it together is life-giving. Not that we won't have doubts. I've never yet participated in a Bible reading process without feeling, at some point, that the whole enterprise was heading toward certain disaster. I've slowly learned that these moments of panic are not signals to run away but invitations to prayer, reminders to cast myself on the mercy of the Holy Spirit.

Part of what's so exciting about reading the Bible with youth is also what is so frightening about it: I have to let go. I find I'm more able to do so when my Bible reading "well" is full and when I refrain from casting judgment on how things are going. To fill up my well, I meet regularly with a small group for prayer and Bible reading. This way I don't need to get something out of my study with youth and can be free to attend generously and patiently to what's going on in the group.

To remind myself that the Spirit is at work in our communal reading, whether I see it or not, I use pauses in the conversation to internally lift my eyes and shrug my shoulders in an "I'm not sure what you're up to, God, but I'll go with it" gesture. Even if things tank, my reading partners often learn as much from my coming back and saying, "That didn't work very well," or "I jumped in too soon because I was having trouble believing that God was really at work," than from a perfectly planned and executed lesson.

Teachers need to articulate why reading the Bible matters.

Youth (and adults) often complain that the Bible is esoteric, weird, and irrelevant. There are certainly good reasons to come to that conclusion. Yet I'm increasingly convinced that the Bible's oddness is one of its great strengths, especially for those in an Anabaptist tradition which understands the church as a contrast community. When we read the Bible in all its foreignness, we are

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reminded over and over that it was not written just for us or to legitimize our particular cultural setting. The One to whom the Bible points isn't our personal butler and therapist, and the mission and vision of this One is cosmic in its scope.

Schooled by our culture and context to think of the biblical world as smaller than the secular world, and convinced that our task is to make the Bible "relevant" to the world, we are instead invited to discover that the reign of God is the fundamental reality and that our task is to make ourselves and our world

relevant to it. This takes some doing, as Eugene Peterson points out. "Our imaginations have to be revamped to take in this large, immense world of God's revelation in contrast to the small, cramped world of human 'figuring out.'"² Reading the Bible in community is one of the best ways I know to give ourselves to God's remodeling plan for our individual and corporate consciousness.

Teachers need to be lifelong learners. Instead of waiting until we're experts, we model and practice reading the Bible as an ongoing project, storing each new piece of information in our Bible reading toolbox with confidence that it will come in handy again.

Being transparent about the questions we have and the resources we're using helps youth understand that reading the Bible isn't magic—it's a set of skills that can be learned. So as we teach, it's crucial to point out footnotes, help people learn how to read concordances and Bible dictionaries, weigh together the value of what we're discovering, and pose questions we may want to look into further.

My most frequent responses to questions or comments from my Bible reading partners are, “What do *you* think that means?” and “What difference does it make if we understand it that way?” I also note out loud what I’m learning or wondering and what I’d like to check out more thoroughly. When I come back to the group the next time, I tell them what I’ve discovered through additional reading and reflection, and I invite their help in evaluating its usefulness.

Teachers need strategies to help a group weigh various readings. According to Anabaptist conviction, the Bible is most

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fruitfully read in community through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If this is so, if we can trust that God is at work in our reading process, our main task is to keep from shutting things down prematurely.

Sometimes in leading Bible study I need to make space for downright odd ideas or interpretations. Over time that has bothered me less and less, but I do have several ground rules. First, I insist that people point to something *in the text we’re studying* that leads them to the conclusion they’re advancing. This levels the playing field for those with different amounts of biblical literacy, keeps

the group’s conversation focused, and reins in the know-it-all whose broad but shallow Bible knowledge intimidates others. Second, I ask the group to come up with at least three ways of interpreting a text—even if some of our interpretations are stupid or unconvincing. This practice jolts us out of the rut of assuming our instinctive reading is the right one. Not only that, but having more than one interpretation on the table makes it impossible for us to ignore what we’re really doing: discerning together how God might be speaking to us through this text.

Paying careful attention to the text

In order to actually read a text, we have to actually read it. I mention this only because it’s a step we often skip—or move through far too quickly. Slowing down our reading, noticing both what’s there and what isn’t, makes room for God to speak. Our

attentiveness also helps us commit to the text and recognize its authority, which guides our use of commentaries and supplementary resources. Once we have noted what piques our interest, it's easier to know what to read and what to skip, or who might be a good person to have a further conversation with.

Native speakers of English, whether or not they've grown up in the church, are likely to read a text too fast to notice much of anything interesting in it. I've found the following strategies helpful in slowing down my own and others' reading:

1. Import the text into a word-processing program, using a computer and online resources. Good places to find biblical texts include www.biblegateway.com and <http://bible.oremus.org>. After you have pasted the text into your word-processing program, clear away all the formatting.

2. Break the text into clauses by hitting the hard return after each clause. Breaking a text into clauses defamiliarizes it and opens up room on the page for comments, questions, and doodles.

3. Become a scribe. You can also break the text into clauses as you're copying it by hand. Writing out texts engages more senses than computer work does and thus deepens our learning. It's more fun with a variety of papers and writing implements to choose from. Color is good, too.

4. Read the text out loud. Reading aloud connects with those who learn best by hearing and those who don't read well (or at all). It also slows everyone down and literally puts you on the same page.

5. Use a pencil. Mark up your copy of the text, noticing repeated words, writing questions or comments in the margins, highlighting whatever catches your attention. Not all of this information is important. But it gives everyone something to contribute to the conversation and demonstrates that we don't pull interpretations out of thin air.

6. Give titles to different sections. Pretend you're filming a movie of the text, then ask yourself where you'd want to change the angle of the shot or move in for a close-up. Mark those transitions and ask yourself why you decided to break the text where you did. Give each section a title.

It's not necessary to do each of these things every time you study a text. But when I study I always break the text into clauses

and give it to my reading partners in that form, read the text out loud, and make time for pencil work.

Allowing the text to read us

Sometimes all we want from Bible study is the pleasure of basking in the text in each other's company. But moving things into the public sphere is often both good pedagogy and good formation. Two ways of extending Bible study beyond ourselves by their very nature encourage us to let the text read us.

The first is engaging youth in Bible study in preparation for planning and leading activities or programs in the congregation—worship planning and leading, or vacation Bible school dramas or activities, for example. In planning for others, we have to think beyond ourselves and our preferences, and we have to have listened carefully enough to the text to have something to share with others about it. I usually start the study at least six weeks before our deadline. That gives us lots of Sunday school time for Bible study, as well as plenty of time for thinking about worship, building projects (model of the ark of the covenant, anyone?), choosing music, rehearsing dramas, or working on a sermon.

Such opportunities for youth to plan and lead come around only now and then in congregational life, so I've also invited adolescents to be my study partners when I'm preparing for a sermon. All these experiences deepen their thinking about and participation in congregational life. It's also true that if young people have had a hand in something, the rest of the congregation gets more engaged. Adults are paying close attention to hear what the youth are thinking and experiencing, the youth are either leading or listening for their comments and insights, and the younger children are eagerly anticipating when they'll be old enough to do that, too.

Another engaging practice is to study a text with another group. A group of youth from another congregation or denomination, from somewhere else in the world or from the local juvenile justice center, is likely to read biblical texts differently than we do. Two practical matters in this kind of Bible study need extra attention: finding a partner group, and taking notes so the fruit of our study can be shared. For help making contact with groups around the world and for more information about this kind of

project (including writing reading reports), see www.bible4all.org. Check the “protocol” tab for an overview of the process. The main thing is to start this kind of planning long in advance, because it takes time to set up. You and your partner group will need to agree on a text to study, a timeline for doing so, and ways of trading reading reports. Even when this process doesn’t go smoothly—a likely event in an intercultural exchange—there’s lots to learn, and it’s exciting to partner with another part of the body of Christ and discover firsthand that neither foot nor hand can say to the other, “I don’t need you” (1 Cor. 12).

I recently read a text with a new bunch of young people, folks who hadn’t done this kind of work before. The experience clarified for me what I’d forgotten in the years of studying with one particular youth group: people really do learn to do this better over time.

As with anything else, beginnings are bumpy. We know enough not to expect to play like Yo-Yo Ma the first time we pick up a

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cello, and we shouldn’t be surprised if our first attempts at reading the Bible with adolescents are frustrating or don’t seem to go much of anywhere. Our initial forays are experiments, opportunities to strengthen our trust in the Spirit’s presence and to practice holy persistence as we develop new skills and learn new practices.

Starting with narratives is a must: stories are initially easier and more rewarding to read. As we gain skill, there’s no reason any part of the Bible need be ignored, though admittedly some parts of Leviticus and the genealogies are pretty heavy slogging. The main thing is to stick with this process so that our labors can bear fruit for ourselves as teachers, for the young people we study with, and for the congregations that hold us all.

Especially over time, I have found Bible study with junior and senior highers to be some of the most consistently exciting, energizing, and interesting work I do. Adolescents are often more eager than adults to enter into partnerships with “teachers” and with each other, and less quick to assume that they either know

all there is to know about the Bible or that they have little to contribute to the conversation. Watching them grow in biblical literacy, theological discernment, and the ability to work together is ridiculously fun.

Sometimes their intensity and transparency drive me crazy: in Bible study, as in the rest of their lives, teenagers don't usually bother hiding their boredom, pleasure, and pushback. When I think about it, though, I'm not sure what more I could ask for. What I need to grow in faith are companions who insist that I deepen my commitments and articulate my practices, and adolescents naturally excel in exactly these areas.

Notes

¹ Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 24.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 67.

About the author

Rachel Miller Jacobs, Goshen, Indiana, got fired up about the Bible about twelve years ago when two things happened: she realized that the Bible is a book (as an English major, she knew what to do with books), and her youngest son declared his conviction that Jesus was actually a woman (he was five years old at the time, so this observation opened up possibilities for engaging in biblical interpretation with children). She has since spent many happy years reading the Bible in a wide variety of settings with a whole range of people of all ages. A former pastor, she is a spiritual director and the worship resources coordinator for *Leader* magazine.