Resources on teaching the Bible in the congregation

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"Bible teaching is the medium of neglect in the contemporary church," wrote Jim Wilhoit and Leland Ryken in 1988. "Seminaries have required courses in homiletics, and nearly every month brings the publication of a new book on preaching. But where are the books and courses on teaching the Bible? . . . Effective teaching heads the agenda of the church's unfinished tasks."[1]

In the two decades since Wilhoit and Ryken made this observation, a number of resources have emerged under the general rubric of teaching the Bible in the congregation. Books and articles focused on pedagogy published in recent years have opened our eyes to adult learning theory, brain research, and how to teach for multiple intelligences. Barbara Bruce's *7 Ways of Teaching the Bible to Adults*, John Bracke and Karen Tye's *Teaching the Bible in the Church*, and Carol Bechtel's "Teaching the 'Strange New World' of the Bible," are recent examples.[2] Similarly, books focused generally on reading the Bible have helped clarify and reinvigorate discussions of basic hermeneutic principles among pastors and teachers. *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, by N. T. Wright; *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen Davis and Richard B. Hays; *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, by Eugene Peterson; and *Holy Bible, Human Bible: Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask*, by Gordon Oliver, illustrate this growing field.[3] Also in this vein and of particular interest to Anabaptists are *How to Understand the Bible*, by David Ewert, and *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*, by Stuart Murray.[4]

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Although these developments have been helpful, at least one significant gap remains. As Wilhoit and Ryken noted in 1988, the

church continues to need resources aimed at helping pastors pass on to people in the pew some of the technical tools of interpretation taught in seminaries. In seminary, pastors-to-be wrestle with the biblical text in great depth. They learn tools of critical analysis, such as how to assess how the Bible came to be, the nature of the communities and societies where biblical books first appeared, the authors' backgrounds and perspectives, the many literary genres represented in the Bible, issues of translation surrounding specific words, the geographic significance of towns and cities, and the cultural connotations of particular behaviors and phrases.

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In contrast, lay members typically have few of these analytical tools at their disposal. "The Protestant tradition has been quicker to assert the right and responsibility of Bible study in both the home and the church than it has been to equip the laity for this task," say Wilhoit and Ryken. "Many pastors have been trained to study the Bible from an academic perspective. In seminary they studied biblical languages and devoted considerable energy to learning the technical tools of biblical interpretation. Consequently, many pastors do not know how someone lacking biblical languages and technical exegetical skills can be trained to interpret the Bible well."[5]

Christine Eaton Blair echoed this concern in her 2001 book, *The Art of Teaching the Bible: A Practical Guide for Adults*. "For most of this century, the majority of ministers and Christian educators have received training in the use of historical-critical tools. For the most part, however, the laity in our congregations have not been taught even the simplest of these tools. . . . This lack of lay training has undermined the foundational tenet of the Protestant Reformation, which insists on the right and duty of every Christian to read and interpret the Bible."[6]

Lacking guidance in how to translate the technical tools taught in the seminary Bible classroom into something usable to the laity, pastors typically shy away from teaching them. They may sense the validity of these tools and use them themselves, but are unsure that what they learned in seminary has value in congrega-

tional teaching settings. "In my experience, teachers worry that using historical-critical tools will, at best, bore their adult students, and at worst, shake their faith," says Blair.[7]

In reality, however, there is evidence that at least some churchgoers *want* to understand the "who, what, where, when and why" of biblical texts. One Mennonite pastor recently commented, "Those who were in the [adult Bible study] class a year ago expressed deep frustration that they had never heard how the Bible came together and how it represents so many literary forms." As Blair says, "Teaching adults how to use these tools empowers adults by opening them to a mature study of the Bible. It demonstrates that they are respected as learners who are capable of learning these methods of study and of understanding the complex questions raised when they are used."[8] In *Transforming Bible Study,* Walter Wink states, "The value of the critical method is that it . . . preserves the right of the text to be different from what we want, even to be offensive. If we are interested in being transformed, and not simply confirmed in what we already know, the critical approach is indispensable."[9]

By and large, adults in the church are missing out on this necessary component of Bible study, even as new and renewed ways of engaging the Bible are emerging.[10] In addition, relatively few teaching resources are available to address the divide between seminary Bible classrooms and congregational Bible study. However, a few publications that offer practical guidance in bridging this gap are highlighted below.

Blair, in *The Art of Teaching the Bible: A Practical Guide for Adults,* offers a "Five R's model" for congregational Bible teaching that empowers participants to use appropriate scholarly tools in a stimulating, supportive environment. These five R's are remembering, revisiting, reflecting critically, reinterpreting, and responding.

For example, *revisiting* the text begins with one or more readings of a Bible passage, followed by silence. The teacher then supplies several questions aimed at helping participants uncover "the story behind and content in the text."[11] Participants are invited to consult atlases, Bible dictionaries, concordances, commentaries, and one another, in an effort to gain background information about the text. They work individually or in groups, often generating additional questions to explore. This step may be

carried out over several class sessions, with the goal "to revisit the text a number of times, going deeper each time, and in the process learning some simple tools of Bible study used by scholars and pastors."[12]

The genius of Blair's book lies in her ability to draw from both adult learning theory and her background in biblical studies in a way that truly honors both arenas. This, in combination with a chapter on hermeneutics early in the book, makes the book a truly helpful resource.

Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction, edited by Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray,[13] draws on the wisdom of nearly a hundred college, university, and seminary Bible teachers, providing 273 exercises aimed at motivating students to grapple with the Bible while making use of scholarly tools. The contributors bring a keen awareness of the pedagogical issues that surround teaching the Bible. Their years of helping students move from a precritical approach to scripture to an appreciation for and appropriation of scholarly tools provide invaluable insight into teaching Bible to people from a wide range of theological backgrounds.

One might question whether the aims of higher education are sufficiently similar to the aims of adult Christian education to merit a pastor's use of this book. Certainly not everything in the book is usable in the congregational setting. Some strategies are clearly designed for upper level courses and others for courses where faith is not assumed. Some exercises assume a level of scholarly background that most pastors do not have. Nevertheless, many of the entries have much to offer pastors and other teachers in church settings.

A supplemental volume, also by Roncace and Gray, *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts*, is arranged by art form (music, film, art, literature, other media) and contains many practical exercises for working with the biblical text through these various forms.[14]

Effective Bible Teaching, by Wilhoit and Ryken, offers a unique blend of the traditional fundamentalist position on inerrancy with an unapologetic reading of the Bible as literature. Pastors who teach in settings where members approach the Bible in a fundamentalist vein should be heartened by this demonstration that

scholarly tools for investigating literature can be usefully employed to open up scriptures. At the same time, pastors across the theological spectrum can benefit from the authors' experience and ideas for teaching the Bible through the lens of literary studies.

Pastors and teachers can learn to teach well, the authors state, if they avail themselves of the opportunity to learn several basic practices of good Bible teaching as outlined in the book. Chief among the effective teaching practices is helping students approach the Bible as literature. Five of the book's fourteen chapters are devoted to teaching the Bible's various literary genres.

A 2009 reprint of Walter Wink's classic *Transforming Bible Study* offers a three-part approach to group Bible study that combines biblical scholarship with the insights of Jungian psychology. First, says Wink, teachers need to lead participants in honoring the "foreignness" of the text by guiding them into the use of critical tools. A key part of teaching these tools lies in knowing how to ask good questions, says Wink. "What kinds of questions are important to ask? The critical questions are provided by the critical problems which the text presents: How do several versions of a saying differ, and why? What are the customs that are presupposed in the narrative? How might the statement have been modified by the church in order to apply it to later crises and conflicts?" Through these and many other examples Wink shows teachers how they can formulate good questions to help participants discover contextual clues in and behind the text.[15]

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Second, participants need to "imaginatively slip into the skins of the characters of the story, or probe our understanding for apprehension of the meaning of the symbols, images, or metaphors employed."[16]

Third, Wink insists on the importance of application exercises that draw on the right side of the brain. Although it is tempting for teachers to skip this part because of possible resistance on the part of participants, it is a crucial aspect of the transformation process, says Wink.

Although Wink's observations regarding the importance of the right brain are no longer novel, his three-part approach to Bible teaching continues to offer a refreshing alternative to prevailing methods even in 2010. However, his approach is not for the faint of heart. It depends to a great degree on substantial preparation, well-designed questions, and the leader's willingness to enter personally into the process of transformation.

Resources such as these by Wink, Blair, Roncace and Gray, and Wilhoit and Ryken offer substantial practical guidance for pastors and other teachers who want to pass on essential tools of Bible study to people in the pew. Church members who wish to exercise their right and duty to read and interpret scripture responsibly will be grateful to pastors and teachers who avail themselves of these resources. At the same time, pastors and others who have developed expertise in doing this important work could do the church a great service by offering their wisdom, recommendations, technique, and reflections in the form of additional publications.

Notes

[1] Jim Wilhoit and Leland Ryken, *Effective Bible Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 11.

[2] Barbara Bruce, *7 Ways of Teaching the Bible to Adults: Using Our Multiple Intelligences to Build Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000); John M. Bracke and Karen B. Tye, *Teaching the Bible in the Church* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2003); Carol Bechtel, "Teaching the 'Strange New World' " of the Bible," *Interpretation* 56, no. 4 (2002): 368–77.

[3] N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Gordon Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible: Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask*(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

[4] David Ewert, *How to Understand the Bible* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000); Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000).

[5] Wilhoit and Ryken, *Effective Bible Teaching,* 38.

[6] Christine Eaton Blair, *The Art of Teaching the Bible: A Practical Guide for Adults* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001).

[7] Ibid., 91.

[8] Ibid., 56.

[9] Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 39.

[10] Clearly, scholarly criticism is not the only important or even the most important approach to good Bible study. Many other ways of studying the Bible deepen under-

standing and aid spiritual growth. The re-emergence in recent years of ancient practices such as *lectio divina* and Ignatian spiritual exercises, as well as renewed interest in biblical storytelling, intercultural Bible reading, liturgy, and the arts in Bible study are important examples. New Testament scholar Dale B. Martin's recent call for seminaries to expand their approach (*Pedagogy and the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2008]) includes a variety of premodern methods. Martin is right; modernist scholarly methods are not sufficient. Nevertheless, as Martin and others acknowledge, critical methods remain necessary.

[11] Blair, *The Art of Teaching the Bible*, 56.

[12] Ibid., 56.

[13] Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, eds., *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). The present issue of *Vision* is also a resource for practical strategies; in addition, visit the *Vision* Web site (www.MennoVision.org) for Jennifer Davis Sensenig's helpful ideas about the when, what, who—and "Who, me?"—of teaching the Bible in the congregation.

[14] Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, eds., *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

[15] Wink, *Transforming Bible Study*, 94.

[16] Ibid., 39.

About the author

Jewel Gingerich Longenecker is associate dean for leadership education at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, and a doctoral student in leadership studies at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. She is eager to learn of more "how-to" resources that help pastors pass on to lay members some of the technical tools of biblical scholarship. Readers are invited to submit recommendations at www.ambs.edu/bibleteaching.