

Reading the Bible confessionally

A reflection on Luke 5:1–11

Mary H. Schertz

Narrative

*I have been trying to figure out what this thing is
that I have been doing these last few years:*

*Reading the Bible confessionally;
reading the Bible as if our lives depended on it;
reading the Bible contemplatively;
reading the Bible with expectancy and hope.
I still do not know exactly what to call it.*

*It began out of a kind of holy discontent—
or several such holy discontents.*

*One was just a general sense
that somewhere beneath our well-nourished exterior
our successful, busy lives,
our abundance of achievements and successes,
there are some ways in which we are starving.
Many of us seem hungry,
almost desperately hungry for something more.*

*Another such unease was a sense that although as Anabaptists
we have a rhetoric of a biblical spirituality,
a rhetoric of a strong,
lively hermeneutical community,
we are in grave danger of losing the practices
that support this vision of discerning around Scripture.*

*A third disquiet was a sense
that although we're not ready to let go of the Bible,
we are at something of a loss
to know what to do with it.*

*Boredom with Bible study, indifference,
over-familiarity, biblical illiteracy,
the Bible used as a club,
the offensiveness of the Bible—
the problems around congregational Bible study
can be overwhelming,
and we don't know where to start.*

*As it happened,
the crescendo of those holy discontents
coincided with the initiation
of the Engaging Pastors project
at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS),
and it seemed time to experiment.*

*Jewel Gingerich Longenecker was open to my proposals;
Barbara Nelson Gingerich was open to accompanying me.*

*That fall, we began a journey with Luke's quest stories,
and a group of fifteen local women pastors.*

*We tried to create a gracious space
where the pastors felt nurtured and attended to—
a beautiful setting,
wonderful food.*

*When we met, we gathered with a prayer
and then read the text of the day,
with different pastors taking the parts
of different characters in the stories.*

*We spent the first hour just talking about the text.
I did very little covert leadership,
maybe sticking an oar in the water once in a while.
The discussions were thoughtful and vigorous.*

Then we took a break for tea and scones: very important!

*The second part of the afternoon,
we divided into two smaller groups
and we asked the question of what this text had to do
with our experience of ministry.*

*These conversations were more personal,
sometimes there were silences.*

*We confessed our successes and our failures in ministry.
Often there was laughter,
and sometimes tears.
We opened ourselves to letting the text read us.*

*Finally, in the last half hour of the afternoon,
we came together in worship.
We sang hymns that related to the text,
we heard the text read again,
we prayed with the text,
and we blessed each other with the text.*

*So each afternoon moved from reading the text,
to letting the text read us,
to adoration and devotion focused by the text.*

*I knew that something powerful was happening that year.
I was being called to rebirth and regeneration.*

*It was the day we were studying the women in Luke 24
who go to the tomb to do
their duty toward Jesus's broken body
and meet there instead two dazzlers who scold them
about looking for the living among the dead.*

*As we were preparing to read the text together,
I was teasing the group because every month
the pastors would readily volunteer
for any part except Jesus.*

*"Well," I said, "at least we don't need a Jesus today,
he's not in this story."*

*Precisely at that moment,
a most awful sense of grief hit me.
I missed Jesus, I felt bereft.*

*Oh, of course he was still present
in that churchy way he'd always been.*

*But he wasn't present in the concrete,
part of the group way
we had come to know him.*

*We went on, my jumble of emotions
was too new and too raw to mention at the time.*

But afterward and since, I have pondered these things.

*What the quest stories Bible studies did for me,
continue to do for me is, simply put,
help me know Jesus.*

*I have reclaimed, with some bemusement,
the language of personal relationship
with Jesus Christ.
Because that is what it is.
I found Jesus.*

*This is so simple, and it has taken me such a long time, but . . .
if we want to know Jesus better,
we have to be where he is.*

That's true of any relationship.

We get to know one another by hanging out together.

Where is Jesus?

Lots of places, but there are some we know for sure.

We know he is where two or three are gathered in his name.

*We know he is with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger,
the naked, the sick, and those in prison.*

We also know that he is in the pages of the Bible.

Convictions

As I reflected on the quest story experience, I started to assemble some convictions.¹ I ran across Ellen Davis’s description of reading the Bible confessionally.² I became increasingly convinced that it would be worth our effort to explore the possibility that our modern hungers might be

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satisfied by something as simple and sane as Bible study. If so, how do we get started? How do we keep going? Where does this all end?

As I was pondering those questions, Cheryl Bridges Johns came to AMBS’s campus and introduced us to the word “orthopathy.” Orthodoxy is right thinking, she said. Catholics are good at that. Orthopraxy is right acting, she went on, and Mennonites are good at that. But Pentecostals, she reflected, are good at

orthopathy—or right feeling, orienting our passions to the passions of God. Orthopathy, she contended, is necessary to hold orthodoxy and orthopraxy together—and you really need Pentecostals, she said. She was right.

Reading the Bible confessionally involves all three. We test our theology; we test our thinking with the Bible—orthodoxy. We test our ethics; we test our actions with the Bible—orthopraxy. But reading the Bible confessionally not only means coming to the Word to help us think and act biblically. I became convinced that reading the Bible confessionally also means coming to the Word to reorient our feelings and our passions to the feelings and passions of God. That seemed to be a missing piece in my experience of teaching the Bible in the church.

Another conviction emerged more directly out of the Engaging Pastors project: confessional Bible reading calls all readers to come to the text with expectancy and hope, whatever our demographic. It calls all of us to come to the text with open hearts, hearts prepared for transformation, hearts ready to meet and be with Jesus.

1 This essay is adapted from a plenary address I gave at AMBS’s Pastor’s Week (now Pastors and Leaders) in 2010.

2 See Davis’s essay, “Teaching the Bible confessionally in the church,” reprinted in this issue, 77–85.

What has developed from these experiments and these convictions is three simple and basic movements: reading the text, bringing our experience to the text or letting the text read us, and worshiping with the text.

Beginning—first we must read it

It sounds simplistic and is, of course, something of a truism to say that if we want to study the Bible in a way that gives life, first we must read it. However, there are significant barriers to just reading the Bible.

We're too busy. Life-giving Bible study takes time. Just about anything that is life-giving takes time. Still, we have the same number of minutes in a day that our great grandmothers and great grandfathers had. We have all the time we need.

We already know the Bible too well—or we think we do. Part of the job is to *defamiliarize* ourselves. We need to find ways to come to the old stories new; we need to find ways to let them be strange again. These narratives were told and written in a culture that is different from the one in which we live. They were told and written in strange (to us) languages and with strange cultural and historical references. Part of our task is to let them be Other and respect them as Other.

Conversely, we don't know the Bible well enough. We simply can no longer rely on the kind of intimacy with the biblical text that previous generations had. Particular knowledge is often lacking and even more often a sense of the sweep of the whole is lacking.

These barriers to reading the text are all significant. I am not minimizing any of them. Nor can I tell you how to get around them. Partly that is because no *one* answer exists. Every situation is different, and many ways of working at it are possible.

Somehow, we must begin with reading the Bible together. What we are about is opening up the text, not closing it down. For me, part of reading confessionally, reading with the wounded heart from the perspective of life itself, is listening carefully to any idea anyone has about a text. Anything can be said. Not everything has equal worth, but we can trust ourselves as a group to sort that out. I marvel sometimes how collective wisdom so frequently emerges only out of our collective awkwardness.

Going deeper—letting the text read us

If the first layer of this life-giving spiritual discipline is the commitment to reading the Bible, the second movement is similarly rigorous and de-

manding of the wounded heart. Letting the Bible read us is not an “application” tacked onto the end of a Bible study lesson.

Confessional Bible study calls us to risk vulnerability and read with other people in our communities and from our own contexts. Here we are not only continuing to read the text but also opening ourselves and our

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lives to the text. We are not only noticing how the anointing woman operates within the text of Luke 7:36–50, but we are inviting the anointing woman to be a part of our journey, asking her to accompany us along part of our way. What part of us is she? How do we know her? Where does she belong to us? What part of our heart does she occupy? Where do we resist her? Where do we shut her out?

Why? Are we afraid of her? As we read her story with other wounded hearts who are also following Jesus and want to know him better, we begin to see how she lives on to become a part of who we are and to walk with us along the way.

Letting the text read us is recognizing that this story is alive, even as we are. It is letting the life of this story intertwine with the story of our lives. That intertwining requires and invites honesty. A student in one of my recent courses noted that we have little room in our lives for confession. Perhaps here is one of those hard-sought opportunities for telling the truth of our lives. When we tell the truth of our lives, we can see that the realm of God includes gracious space for all. Perry Yoder, a colleague of ours at AMBS for many years, used to say that God is the one before whom we need neither explain ourselves nor make excuses. In the context of going deeper in the text, we may still need to explain ourselves—since we are not God—but we surely need not make excuses. These texts can and will hold gently our true selves.

We also bring to these texts our own real neighborhoods, local and global. We read the texts in light of the real issues we are facing in our lives and in our world. But we also then “read” our own real neighborhoods and our own real worlds in light of these texts. The suffering in Haiti needs to be part of the wounded heart we bring to these readings and conversations. The suffering of my neighbors making the rounds of the food pantries needs to be part of the wounded heart I bring to these texts. What is God saying to us through these texts for who and where we

are today, in this moment? This whole process of reading confessionally is Spirit-dependent but never more so than in this moment of letting the texts read us.


Hospitality is key, but it is a mixed up kind of hospitality, a hospitality that is familiar to any careful reader of the New Testament. It is a hospitality in which we are both hosts and guests.

This particular hospitality, this mutual hospitality, is profoundly missional. Where is the Spirit asking us to wait or rest in some way? To relinquish something? To take Sabbath in some way? Where is the Spirit asking us to move or to act in some way? To take something or someone up? To begin or initiate something? Where are we in the mission of God this day, led by this text?

The path back to God—adoration and Sabbath

The final act of contemplative Bible study is worship. Worship permeates this process. In prayer we prepare our wounded hearts to read the text. The struggle, together with siblings in Christ, to let the text read us is in itself an act of prayer.

But here, in the end, we reunite in mindful, heart-full worship. It is here that integration most likely happens. It is here that we may well move



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toward wholeness. It is here that we can begin to accept healing. It is here that we are then released back into our ordinary lives to witness. As we come before God with these people and this text and adore Christ, we experience the Sabbath that renews, restores, and releases.

This brief Sabbath as the last act of contemplative Bible study can be a place of rest. After the hard work of reading and letting the text read us, we have time to rest in beauty, in sound, in silence. This Sabbath also restores us. We

meet our holy and compassionate God, the one who knit us together in the womb and is forever holding us, now and through eternity. Adoring Christ with the text releases us; it allows us to take our leave of this time and of each other. We go as witnesses of these acts of the Spirit. We go out to live into this text and the truth of it. We go out together, each of us held in the arms of God.

Push out into the deep

*Does contemplative Bible study take courage?
Does it demand trust?*

*Yes. But others have gone this way before us.
Jesus was not exactly a stranger to Simon Peter
that chilly morning by Gennesaret.*

*After all, he had spent time in Simon's house,
and he had healed his mother-in-law.*

So, on the whole, Simon was glad enough to be of service.

*The night's fishing had been ridiculously poor,
and on the whole he didn't mind
turning his empty boat
into a pulpit for Jesus.*

*It was pleasant out there on the lake,
hard to keep awake as the sun began heating up the day,
and there were those worries he couldn't quite beat down
about how he was going to pay the crew
if tonight's run didn't turn out
considerably better than last night's.*

*But he was listening with at least one ear,
the master wasn't half bad as a preacher,
he'd give him that.*

Ah, Jesus was winding up.

Peter smiled.

*Time to take the good preacher into shore,
inspect the work of the crew,
and head home to catch some zees
before starting all over again this evening.*

*Well, you can see why Jesus's command,
"Head back out into the deep water,
let down the nets,"
didn't go down all that well.*

For one thing, Jesus was not a fisherman.

*Nobody but nobody knew those waters and those fish
better than Peter.*

For another thing, Jesus was fresh from a good night's sleep.

Easy for him to say—push out into the deep.

For a third thing, Jesus wasn't the one

*who was going to have to clean up those nets again
and pay the crew overtime.*

For a fourth thing—hadn't Jesus's mother

ever taught him to say "please"?

But something happened—

or enough happened

—between Peter's voiced and unvoiced squawks

about Jesus's outrageous demand

and his halfhearted consent:

"Still, because you say so . . ."

Was it a look in Jesus's eye?

A gleam of amusement that promised some adventure?

Had Peter come to the point where he wasn't quite willing

to let anything this man said go past untested,

even if it sounded crazy?

We don't know; the text does not tell us.

But whatever it was in Jesus's eyes,

or Peter's heart

that led him to throw good sense to the winds

and set that boat back out to the deep that morning,

well, you know what happened,

everything Peter had dreamed of, and more,

through the dead hours of the night

out there on the water.

It was, in fact, more than Simon Peter could cope with.

Who was this teacher? And who was he, Simon?

"Go away, I am a sinner."

*But then, into that awful and honest silence,
the gentle words, the only words that really mattered:
“Do not be afraid.”*

*The hard and futile work of the dark night,
Peter’s willingness to host an itinerant preacher,
and abundance of grace that overwhelmed him,
the assurance that pulled him
beyond his fear to release everything.*

*Our hard and futile work of the dark night,
our willingness to host the itinerant preacher,
an abundance of grace that overwhelms us
the assurance that pulls us beyond our fear.*

Push out into the deep. . . . Do not be afraid. . . . Release!

About the author

Mary H. Schertz is professor emerita of New Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She holds a BA from Goshen College, an MDiv from Goshen Biblical Seminary, and a PhD from Vanderbilt University School of Religion. While director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies, Mary helped launch *Vision* in 2000. Currently she is finishing a commentary on Luke for the Believers Church Bible Commentary series.