

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

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Editorial

Mary H. Schertz

Ellen F. Davis¹ tells of sitting with a group of scholars of various disciplines charged with the enviable task of daydreaming about what is most important for the grounding of the church in this age. If money and administration were no object, what issue of theological inquiry would be most helpful for the church? To her surprise, this diverse group representing a broad spectrum of Catholics and Protestants came to agreement in less than an hour—no doubt something of a record in academic circles. They concluded that the most pressing need of the contemporary church is to learn afresh to read and teach the Bible confessionally. As in: this ability is something we once had and have lost.

By reading the Bible confessionally these folks did not mean reading it in line with some denominational focus or creed. They were pointing to

the need for the church to learn afresh to acknowledge the Bible as the functional center of its life, so that in all our conversations, deliberations, arguments, and programs, we are continually reoriented to the demands and the promises of the Scriptures. Reading the Bible confessionally means recognizing it as a word that is indispensable if we are to view the world realistically and hopefully. We acknowledge it as a divine word that is uniquely powerful to interpret our experience. But more, we allow ourselves to be moved by it, trusting that it is the one reliable guide to a life that is not, in the last analysis, desperate.²

That paragraph has undoubtedly had a greater impact on my life and work in these last five years than anything any other scholar has written or said. It resonated deeply for me as a biblical scholar in an age when many congregations and believers wonder

about the place of the Bible in their lives and hearts. It set me on a journey to discover ways we—new Christians or blasé post-modern ones, whatever our political proclivities—can together read the Bible as if our lives depended on it. That has been and continues to be the journey of a lifetime for me, and this issue of *Vision* is very much part of the trek. My orientation in choosing

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and encouraging the writers for this issue was this question of who can help us enliven, awaken, and nurture our relationship, individually and congregationally, with the written word of God?

I am blessed and grateful to set these thoughtful reflections before you. The writers include pastors with a wide variety of experience from Manitoba to Virginia. Some are beginning their lives of service, and others are looking back from the perspective of retirement. The writers include teachers and other

academics for whom the Bible and the people who read it are at the center of their passions. They represent a broad horizon of service from Ethiopia to Kansas and from a variety of interests and investments. And since reading the Bible is an art, I am thankful for contributors who help us explore the topic through poetry, drama, and story, in honor of the artful Book that gathers us into one body.

As I have read and worked with these writers and their writing, my heart is full, my spirit winging, and my head hopeful. I believe, and these writers help me believe, that the Bible is fully in relationship with us in our present generation and will be in relationship with God's church for the ages yet to come. Despite our doubts, questions, and frustrations, the living Word of God continues to comfort, challenge, and confront us. The Spirit is given to those who ask.

Notes

¹Ellen F. Davis is professor of Bible and practical theology at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. She was theological lecturer at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN) in 2008.

²Ellen F. Davis, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 9, 10.

Teaching the Bible through preaching

Rudy Baergen

Inundated as we are in this postmodern time with multiple worldviews and information about every topic under the sun, it is ironic that opportunities for teaching the Bible are less frequent than ever before. Gone are our winter Bible schools and Bible conferences. Gone too, in many congregations, are weekly evening Bible studies. And the Sunday morning adult study time

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often attracts only a remnant of elderly faithful. The twenty-minute Sunday morning sermon is often the only recourse left to the pastor for teaching the Bible.

Preachers know well the burden of expectation laid on that paltry twenty minutes. On top of all the other things a sermon must say and do, can it also be an effective vehicle to teach the Bible? I believe it can and must, at two levels. At the first level, careful biblical preaching will include significant teaching of the Bible. Here the teaching will provide listeners with the necessary biblical background to grasp the sermon. Second, at a

deeper level, teaching the Bible in preaching can be overt and intentional, done for its own sake, through and around the edges of the sermon. The interest now becomes looking at the bigger picture of the Bible, its function and ongoing significance, not just conveying the preparatory knowledge needed to take in the morning's sermon.

But first, should the sermon be a vehicle for teaching?

Should a sermon teach?

A common assumption is that the objectives of preaching and teaching are not compatible. Teaching, some say, belongs to

lectures, the dissemination of facts and the investigations of the classroom. Some years ago the prolific New Testament scholar Reginald H. Fuller articulated a commonly held bias. “The pulpit,” he advised, “is not the time and place to teach biblical criticism as such, either in its methods or in its results. In fact, teaching of whatever kind is out of place in the pulpit. This goes equally for those who say they like to preach what they call ‘teaching sermons.’ . . . The place for teaching is in the lay class.”¹ And yet Fuller goes on to note with amazement that for lay people in the classroom, critical insights in Bible learning result in real liberation. Surely life-changing liberation should be one of the primary objectives of preaching, too!

Indeed, too much can be made of the difference between the purpose of teaching the Bible in the church classroom and what we hope to achieve in preaching. Effective Bible teaching in the classroom will inspire and motivate us and do much more than just challenge us intellectually. Likewise, good preaching will not only move us but also stimulate our thinking. Good biblical teaching, whether it happens in the weekday church classroom or from the Sunday morning pulpit, will not settle for an easy dichotomy between the intellectual and the affective, the inspirational and the informative, the ethical and the spiritual. Preaching that has a solid biblical foundation will by its nature include a teaching component.

What makes preaching biblical?

Preachers can teach the Bible through biblical preaching. Not all preaching must be biblical preaching—although few preachers would want to be known for their nonbiblical preaching!² But what makes preaching biblical? Repeated references to the Bible don’t necessarily produce a biblical sermon. As Thomas Long puts it: “Preaching cannot claim to be biblical simply because it gums together a lot of biblical quotes, like peanuts in a Snickers bar.”³ Is a sermon biblical when it uses proof texting to support a position contrary to the spirit of the Bible? How about a sermon that begins and ends with an image or theological thought from a biblical text but only uses it in service of the preacher’s own imagination? Can a sermon be biblical without any reference to a biblical text? Is the parishioner’s commendation of “biblical

preaching” anything more than a seal of approval for theology “done my way”?

How can we describe biblical preaching? I find the following five criteria useful.

Biblical preaching, first and foremost, will put us in conversation with the Bible, and through the Bible, with God. When we move from text to sermon, we may sometimes find easy connecting points with this word from God and ready answers to our questions; we may sometimes be confused and want to know more; we may even take offence at the words placed in God’s mouth—but biblical preaching will always facilitate an encounter between the listener and God.

Biblical preaching will keep scripture central and pervasive throughout the sermon. When the text is peripheral to what the sermon says and does, the preaching may be good or even excellent, but perhaps it should not be classified as biblical preaching. Richard White suggests that scripture should be central in the sermon, not merely in the study. It should be central for the congregation, not merely for the professional person delivering the sermon. It should be used extensively and repeatedly, not merely as a springboard. And it should have its own legitimate setting in time and place, not merely in the abstract.⁴

Biblical preaching pays attention to content and form; it seeks to understand what the biblical text does and then to replicate it in the sermon. Preaching, says Leander Keck, “is truly biblical when (a) the Bible governs the content of the sermon and when (b) the function of the sermon is analogous to that of the text. In other words, preaching is biblical when it imparts a Bible-shaped word in a Bible-like way.”⁵ Revelation 7:9–17, for example, affects us differently than does Romans 5:1–10, and sermons on those texts should follow the lead of what the text does to us. The biblical text should shape the content and the purpose of the sermon.

Biblical preaching will invoke and wrestle with the authority of the scripture. A sermon may appeal to many sources of knowledge and wisdom: to sociological, political and psychological studies; to popular and sophisticated theological constructs; to all manner of ancient and contemporary literary and artistic expression. In the end, however, what makes a sermon biblical is the

pre-eminent place given to scripture. A biblical sermon will exert the claim of scripture on our lives.

Biblical preaching is not limited to any one genre of preaching, but the Bible—not the genre—must guide the sermon for it to be biblical. Biblical preaching has often been propositional and discursive in nature, but there have always been other creative ways of encountering God through the written and spoken word. Other homiletical strategies, as proposed in our time by Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, and David Buttrick, for example, also lend themselves to effective biblical preaching.⁶ Whatever the homiletical strategy, if a sermon is to be classified as biblical preaching, the homiletical form must be subservient to the centrality of scripture.

Teaching through and around the edges of the sermon

Preachers can no longer assume that their congregations are biblically literate, even at the most basic level. Each Sunday morning we face the challenge of determining how much factual and contextual background information our congregation needs in order to appreciate the essence of the sermon. Some teaching is essential if listeners are to understand the proclamation. But instead of seeing biblical teaching as peripheral, as a prelude or by-product to be set aside as quickly as possible, we should cherish this opportunity, limited as it is, to teach the Bible intentionally in the centre and along the margins of the sermon.

Let us err on the side of dwelling too long with the scripture rather than on allowing the mindset of the twenty-first century, dominated by materialism and the entertainment industry, to supplant the Bible's counterculture challenge and vision. Over the course of the years, simply by taking time to provide good biblical background and context, we can introduce our congregations to much basic Bible knowledge. This introduction will be even more effective if our selection of scripture is somewhat systematic.

At a deeper level, beyond offering the basic factual knowledge needed to understand the particular sermon of the Sunday morning, teaching through preaching can do much to develop a congregation's awareness of the bigger picture of the Bible. The following dimensions are among those that warrant special attention:

The formation of the Bible and how the Bible functions. An understanding of the formation and function of the Bible will help our listeners see how God is at work in scripture. The Bible comes to us through a lengthy, complicated, Spirit-guided process, in which human communities play a vital role. God's living word is hammered out in the ambiguities of the human matrix. The Bible is a record of fluid theological reflections on encounters with God, which are in conversation with one another. Our listeners can more fruitfully engage the message of the Bible if they understand that we find within it different voices, sometimes complementing one another, sometimes building one on the other, sometimes gently reinterpreting the other, each with a particular theological persuasion and a particular purpose in mind.

I offer two examples of how teaching and preaching interact on this point. A provocative sermon can be built around the abrupt ending of Mark's Gospel (Mark 16:8), and the later endings added by subsequent scribes. The teaching questions, which give some understanding of the formation of the Gospels, climax in questions about the function of the text: What does it want us to do?

What is the original ending of Mark's Gospel? What might Mark's

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intent be in ending so abruptly? Why did the early church scribes need to supply alternative endings? What does the abrupt ending of the Gospel want the listener/reader to do?⁷ As the preacher draws the listener into participating in Mark's gospel drama, the sermon provides an opportunity for some significant teaching about the formation and function of the Bible.

John's Gospel tells of the disciples gathered behind shuttered doors because of their "fear of the Jews" (20:19). Earlier the Gospel has indicated that this fear was motivated by the Jewish practice of the day of putting out of

the synagogue those who confessed Jesus as the Christ (9:22, 12:42). Historical-critical methods help us to recognize that this practice and fear belong not to the time of crucifixion but to the era in which the Gospel of John was edited. The insight for preaching comes in reflecting on how the fear of the disciples has

been “updated” as the gospel story is told in the different stages of development. Whether the fear is in the context of the crucifixion, somewhere in the process of oral tradition, in the time of the final editing of the Gospel, or in the particular era in which it is heard, disciples are tempted to lock themselves behind shuttered doors. And no matter what the fear, Jesus passes through the closed doors. The Gospel writer gives us permission—in fact, strongly invites us—to “update” the fears that cause us to bar our doors. And even now the risen Christ passes through locked doors to be in our midst.

The Bible is a living word. Awareness of the formation and nature of the Bible can help those who hear our sermons understand its relevance more deeply.

The worldviews of the Bible. The Bible took shape in the context of not one but a variety of worldviews, all of them different from our own. A worldview consists of the framework of ideas and beliefs from which one sees and interprets reality. We can easily miss the intent of scripture in preaching—or worse, do an injustice to the Bible—if we fail to clarify how the worldview of the text differs from ours. God’s activity is described within the confines of a particular worldview. In our haste to move from scripture to sermon, the clarity of the word can be lost in translation if we naively assume that our worldview and the biblical worldview are homogeneous. What new insights come to our listeners in preaching on Luke’s ascension narrative, for example, when we unpack the worldview of the biblical writer? To our advantage, the postmodern listener easily recognizes the multiplicity of worldviews. Teaching about the biblical worldviews and juxtaposing them with our own can add a provocative dimension to our biblical preaching.

The Bible as a whole and its canonical salvation story. Our listeners’ knowledge of the Bible is often fragmented and disconnected. In order to see the big picture of the Bible, listeners need to gain an appreciation for the biblical canon. That will not happen without intentional teaching.

While the Bible contains many voices, they come together to form one story about God’s dream for the world. Can our listeners link the New Testament to the Old in a way that honours a Jewish reading of the Old Testament? Can they wisely connect the

anticipation of the prophet Isaiah to the seer of the Book of Revelation? Beneath the diversity within scripture is a unity of thought and purpose. Preachers in this postmodern time need to look for occasions to teach the canonical message of the Bible.

The canonical perspective gives balance and breadth to a sermon. Luke's account of the Pentecost events after Jesus' resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:1–21) is a regular lectionary text for Pentecost Sunday. But the biblical description of the work of the Spirit is so much bigger than Luke's Pentecost account. How does Luke's perspective fit into the broader picture? How does the broader picture temper or complement Luke's description? How can our listeners benefit from hearing about the unity and diversity of the canon on this topic?

The Bible's claim to authority. Underlying all our teaching, whether in the classroom or from the pulpit, is a question of biblical authority. Why should we care about what the Bible says? That question is the elephant in the sanctuary whenever we use air time to teach the Bible. What does it mean to refer to the Bible as the word of God? Why give authority to our scripture above other holy writings, or for that matter, above contemporary

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wisdom? Preaching today requires that we make the case for the authority of scripture as it contends with a host of other claimants. Assumptions and dogmatic statements will no longer suffice. To undergird preaching in our time, it is essential that we provide some careful and concise teaching on this question.

Conclusion

Teaching the Bible in preaching is part of good biblical preaching. Effective biblical preaching cannot happen apart from teaching. Valuable learning about the Bible also happens if the preacher is intentional about developing the bigger picture through and around the edges of the sermon. When listeners are able to see the big picture of the Bible, they are better able to identify and connect with God's will and way as revealed in scripture.

Among all the things that the sermon must do, one of the most important is the holy task of teaching the Bible.

Notes

¹ Reginald H. Fuller, *The Use of the Bible in Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 70.

² But see Edward Farley, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” in *A Reader on Preaching: Making Connections*, ed. David Day, Jeff Astley, and Leslie J. Francis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 65–74: Farley suggests that the sermon should first and foremost preach the gospel and then maybe the scripture.

³ Thomas G. Long, “The Distance We Have Travelled: Changing Trends in Preaching,” in *A Reader on Preaching*, ed. Day et al., 12.

⁴ Richard C. White, *Biblical Preaching: How to Find and Remove the Barriers* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1988), 11.

⁵ Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978), 106.

⁶ See, for example, Raymond D. Bystrom, *Preaching Biblical Sermons: Three Contemporary Strategies* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Books, 2006).

⁷ See, for example, Brian Blount and Gary Charles, “Happily Ever After: Mark 16:1–8,” *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 256–73.

About the author

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Wrestling with the Bible

A congregational biography

Joetta Handrich Schlabach

As I write this article, Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, is launching our first vacation Bible school in more than ten years. Our forty-nine-year-old congregation has already experienced several demographic waves. After more than a decade with few young children and thus a slim primary Christian education program, we are now blessed with young families and some thirty children under the age of ten. As we have been rebuilding a

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Sunday school program, we've also been working to forge more connections in our neighborhood. It occurred to us that offering a summer children's program, especially with a peace emphasis, would serve our church families as well as our neighborhood.

Watching the plans unfold for this summer's VBS program has brought back memories of Bible schools I attended as a child. One chorus in particular has coursed through my head as I have been reflecting on my current congregation's relationship with

the Bible. As a child I sang: "The B-I-B-L-E—yes, that's the book for me! I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E."

The Bible was *the book* in my family's life. We read from it each morning before breakfast. We each carried our own copy when we went to church during the week—for Sunday school and worship, Sunday evening Bible study, and Wednesday evening prayer meeting. We were expected to spend personal time reading and memorizing scripture. In the summer we attended two weeks of Bible school. And *school* it was: we memorized, quizzed, learned the books of the Bible, traced the missionary journeys of Paul, and recited entire chapters of scripture. And we had fun! The Bible was filled with exciting and intriguing stories.

Today I witness the same enthusiasm among the children of our congregation. Each fall we present a Bible to children entering second grade, marking their ability to read. Last fall we found a new version that had an attractive cover and was designed to highlight various things for young readers. The parents all commented about their children's excitement in receiving their Bibles. One young girl was just beginning a mentoring relationship with another member of the congregation, and when they would get together, they'd discuss what she was discovering in her reading. One young boy approached me after church several weeks after receiving his Bible and began to quiz me on things he had learned: "Who comes first in the Bible," he asked, "Moses or Jesus?"

A more mature version of this enthusiasm for the Bible is found in the handful of people in our congregation who are retired. (Minneapolis has not yet become a Mennonite retirement haven, so we have only three people over seventy, and fewer than ten who are retired.) Three of our retired members are former pastors who served in three different denominations—Baptist, Moravian, and United Methodist. They meet with me each week to discuss the upcoming preaching texts. These men grew up in Christian homes and churches and have lived with the Bible for many years. Although their understanding of the Bible has changed over time, they have retained a deep love of the Bible and an inquisitive attitude that serve us well as we read familiar and obscure passages.

One of these men relates his gratitude for having done his theological training in Scotland under theologians who combined strong scholarly acumen with a warm, personal expression of faith. In them he observed deep theological reflection that went hand in hand with a profound love of Jesus. "What a friend we have in Jesus" has been the subtext of his years of preaching.

Between our children and our sages are people whose relationship with the Bible—and with faith—is more complex. Some of our members grew up in the church (Mennonite and other), left for a time in their early adult years, and returned when they began their family. They recognize the importance of a faith community for raising their children, yet they have some uncertainty about how to pass along to their children the faith tradition, especially an understanding of the Bible. Some carry unresolved questions

about the meaning and claims of scripture. Reacting against the way Christianity is co-opted by popular culture and manipulated by the religious right, some find it easier to articulate what they reject than what they embrace and find life giving.

Not all share these struggles, of course. Some of our members came to faith as adults and don't carry the angst of a tradition or struggle to reconcile their childhood understanding of the Bible with their adult questions. No less serious or thoughtful, their hunger is for learning and familiarity with a sacred text that is relatively new to them. They long to place a foundation under their fledgling faith.

These are accompanied by still others who grew up in evangelical churches and continue to hold a high view of scripture, yet have grown beyond only vertical expressions of faith and are in search of a community committed to a holistic gospel of peace.

Some came to faith as adults and don't struggle to reconcile their childhood understanding of the Bible with their adult questions. Their hunger is for familiarity with a sacred text that is new to them.

They are glad for a setting in which taking the Bible seriously allows room for questions.

They find it refreshing to be among people for whom there is not just *one* right way to understand a passage.

About a quarter of our households have lived through a painful earlier time when our congregation became divided over biblical interpretation as it related to the understanding of same-sex relationships. The internal pain caused by the disagreement and eventual separation of a portion of members grew

even deeper when the regional conference suspended our congregation's voting rights for five years. Although reconciliation with the conference was achieved, the residue of such conflict no doubt continues to subtly influence some members' attitude toward engaging with the Bible around conflictive issues.

This brief summary hardly catches the full range of backgrounds, perspectives, and relationships with the Bible present on any Sunday morning when our congregation gathers for worship. How do we worship and engage with integrity in the midst of such diversity of experience and relationships with the Bible?

The answer, perhaps, is in the refrain we speak each Sunday following our final scripture reading. Several years ago, our

worship committee instituted this responsorial practice taken from more liturgical traditions. At the conclusion of what is usually a Gospel reading, the reader says: “For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God within us, for the Word of God among us,” and the congregation responds: “Thanks be to God.”¹ These words, repeated each week, express reverence for the written/spoken word. They also remind us that scripture is not *the* Word. Scripture points to the true Word, Jesus. This Word also is made known to us in the context of our lived experiences. Jesus is present and becomes known to us as we gather and worship and pray.

Although more of our congregants carry coffee and phones than Bibles to church on Sunday morning, regular attenders know that they will likely hear several scriptures read during worship, passages from the Old and New Testament. They will often recognize scripture allusions in the songs and hymns that are sung and in the prayers that are spoken. The children’s time will usually retell or refer to one of the morning’s scriptures. Thus, worship takes its shape from scripture; it enters into the drama of scripture.

During the ten years I have been at this church (the last three as a pastor), I have seen the Bible come alive in various ways. One of our members has a background in theater. He also was on Bible memory quiz teams in his youth, when he committed hundreds, if not thousands, of verses to memory. When Matthew recites scripture, people sit up and listen. We feel the power of the word. Sometimes, after such a reading, I wonder if there is really need for a sermon. Perhaps we should just meditate in silence on his rendering of a powerful text.

At times we’ve had scripture portrayed before us. A liturgical dancer brought Ezekiel’s dry bones to life before us one Sunday. During a sermon on Isaiah’s images of God as a potter, two young potters stood in front of the congregation pounding and shaping clay. Similarly, during a sermon on the parable of houses built on sand and rock, an architect helped the children of the congregation build a house with blocks in a pile of sand. The house came tumbling down when they added water.

These experiences create images and memory around scripture, much needed in a time of multimedia saturation. But many scriptures require a different form of engagement—more in line with wrestling, prolonged inquiry, deliberation. Our canon is filled

with difficult scriptures that ring harshly in our ears or that confound and embarrass. Some are not appropriate to read in the worship setting. Last Sunday our worship, based on the summer 2010 *Gather 'Round* curriculum, “Stories of God’s People,” celebrated Deborah, the prophet and judge. A full rendering of the story from Judges 4 and 5 would also include Jael. It would acknowledge a twist of events, in which a woman is the victor rather than the one violated in war.

Working with difficult scriptures requires more time and a setting different from Sunday worship. And herein lies our Achilles heel when it comes to deeper engagement with scripture. Most of our congregation gathers just once a week for worship. For some people, whose lives do not otherwise intersect during the week, the deep need for fellowship and connection trumps interest in our adult education classes. Attempts to form midweek study and fellowship groups even once a month are often thwarted by busy schedules, demanding professional lives, and the need to care for children.

Despite these challenges, I am encouraged when people do gather in adult education classes and seriously engage with one

We are teaching the stories of the Bible. We are memorizing scripture. We are modeling a living faith in a loving God. And we are a community in which people of all ages know they are not alone as they engage the living Word throughout life.

another around theological topics. I was delighted when six people, over the course of eight months, arrived at church an hour early on Sundays to engage in Bible study. I was pleased when one parent of young children invited other parents to begin a “Connections” class, following the themes of their children’s Sunday school lessons. The group planned to meet for one quarter, but they have decided to continue meeting.

My hope is that in the long term people can develop a relationship with scripture that is prayerful. I hope that we will not be satisfied to interact with scripture just on an

intellectual, rational basis—which is probably the dominant mode for well-educated folks—but that we will also seek emotional, spiritual engagement. Some persons in the church have found the practice of *lectio divina* helpful, with its invitation to listen not just with the ear and the mind but also with the heart.

But this is a difficult movement for many. Progressive Christians can be rigid in their rationality! I've recently begun to wonder if part of the struggle with scripture for progressive-minded Christians, who generally eschew literalism, isn't actually another form of literalism. Many, if not most, people in our congregation are sufficiently familiar with historical and literary criticism to reject a literal view of the Bible. Yet, when faced with perplexing passages, such as violence in the Old Testament or a particular interpretation of an Old Testament text by Paul, the impatience or cynicism they sometimes express suggests that they do take the text at face value.

As followers of Christ, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue the task of seeking truth. Rather than jump to conclusions about a passage or dismiss it outright, we are invited to engage with it, wrestle with it—and be wrestled by it. Sometimes as we read a difficult passage in its broader context, we find the text engaging in its own criticism. But we mustn't stop there: we can shape new metaphors, create new parables, and tell stories true to our times.

We did not sing “The B-I-B-L-E” in Bible school this summer. We know that this book will not be the *only* book that influences the lives of our children. But we are teaching the stories of the Bible. We are memorizing scripture. We are modeling a living faith in a loving God. And we are committed to being a community in which people of all ages know they are not alone as they grow, have questions, and engage the living Word throughout life.

Note

¹ The Iona Community, *Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001), 18.

About the author

Joetta Handrich Schlabach is pastor of Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. She entered formal ministry after serving with Mennonite Central Committee in Pennsylvania and Central America in the 1980s, editing *Extending the Table: A World Community Cookbook* (1991), and working in program administration in several colleges and universities. She enjoys reading, urban gardening, keeping up with her adult children via Facebook and Skype, and—with her husband, Gerald—taking part in Mennonite-Catholic conversations through Bridgefolk.

Persevering in a priority

Ron Kennel

With confidence I can report that teaching and preaching the Bible was a priority throughout my thirty-five years in full-time pastoral ministry. The roots for this concern go deep.

Roots

Nurtured in the Anabaptist faith tradition and its institutions, I internalized the centrality of the Bible for the church and Christian life.

One of my earliest memories as a child is snuggling beside Mom and Dad on the sofa as they read Bible stories expressively and enthusiastically. I was captivated. My parents were transmitting the values and beliefs in the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith

What I offer here is not a success story or a comprehensive method but something of a case study with reflections. I share it in hopes that it may stimulate and encourage better perspectives on and approaches to preaching the Bible.

tradition shared by their rural Mennonite congregation where the Bible was studied in Sunday school and summer Bible school, preached in worship, and memorized. I once told my Bible school teachers that I wished we had nine months of Bible school and two weeks of regular school.

My inner call to preach and teach the Bible began to emerge in early adolescence. I began to identify with preachers. I took notes during sermons and daydreamed of preaching.

At Hesston (KS) College and Goshen (IN) College and at Associated Mennonite Biblical

Seminary (AMBS; Elkhart, IN), the lights came on for me in classes with Clayton Beyler, Howard Charles, Jake Enz, William Klassen, Millard Lind, and Willard Swartley. In the words of Luke 24, my heart burned within me as they opened the scriptures. I grew in my understanding and appreciation of the Bible, was spiritually nourished and motivated to pass on what I had received.

So I left seminary for the pastorate with a clear sense of being a servant of the word. It's an identity that has remained. Expounding the scriptures was and is life for me.

Methods

But when it comes to writing about how I worked with the Bible in the pastorate, I have more caution, for several reasons. During my two pastorates, I gave little attention to results of my preaching and teaching. I gave little attention to balance in my coverage and methods. I tended to preach and teach more from the New Testament than the Old. With the exception of Advent and Lent in later years, I did not follow the lectionary. In my second pastorate, I offered to use it, but the elders declined and told me to preach to people's needs. In earlier years, I struck out on my own in determining the preaching and teaching menu. In later years, I made proposals to the elders who usually rubber-stamped them. And I had some difficulty in communicating. So what I offer here is not a success story or a comprehensive method but something of a case study with reflections. I share it in hopes that it may stimulate and encourage better perspectives and approaches.

In preaching, my sermons alternated between two main types: expository and topical.

A large number of my expository sermons took the congregation through entire books of the Bible or sections of books (Genesis 1–11; selected psalms, Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, Ephesians, Philippians), selected because of needs I saw in the congregation.

For topical sermons I selected themes based on congregational goals and needs, as well as crises in the larger world. Most of my topical sermons were biblical-theological surveys.

My sermons also included a third type: salvation history sermons. Seventeen times during my second pastorate, on the first Sunday of January I preached a review of the highlights of the entire story of salvation from creation to consummation (including highlights of church history). In sermons on later Sundays in January, I spelled out how stories of my people fit into God's great story, to enhance their sense of identity. I also wanted the congregation to see the Bible's bigger picture and to recognize it as a source of identity and meaning.

The small group Bible studies I led were usually during summer Bible school, on Wednesday evenings, and in Sunday school classes. In my second pastorate, I led a Wednesday evening group for several months each fall in studies in the Old Testament. In

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sixteen years, we covered Genesis 1 through 1 Samuel 18. Sometimes as I led these studies, I saw myself as a trail guide taking God's people on a hike through the scriptures.

I supplemented sermons and Bible studies with dramas, visual aids, and handouts (charts, booklets, diagrams, and outlines of points with citations of biblical references).

Although I used various forms of biblical criticism as tools in my own study, I avoided making these explicit, except where I felt they might be helpful to people in understanding difficult texts. Sometimes I defined Hebrew and Greek words. In doing so, I risked sending an unintended message that the Bible is accessible only to experts. I wanted more than anything to help people gain access to the Bible, regardless of their knowledge and skill. For this reason I avoided technical jargon. I gave little attention to critical questions of historicity and instead focused on understanding the message intended by the biblical authors.

My desire was that the people I served come to view the Bible not as a problem to be solved but as an accessible medium through which to hear God's word. I felt the urgency of exposing people to the Bible on Sunday mornings, because I sensed that it was the only time during the week that many heard or read it. As one young adult once said to me, "You want us to read our Bibles during the week. Well, I don't!" I encouraged folks to notice emotions, dilemmas, and conflicts in biblical stories, and to look for how these might parallel experiences in their own lives. I shared my enthusiasm and passion. I wanted to put an end to dry Bible study. My hope was to help people see the Bible as the living, breathing book I found it to be, and by the power of the Spirit, to hear God's word and grow in Christ.

Responses

Did the Bible live for these people? While I preached and taught I

seldom saw anyone sleeping. I heard positive responses but often in generalities: “A good sermon.” “We really enjoy your teaching.” “This really spoke to me.” Some carefully saved my handouts. Some were willing to take an honest look at difficult texts and wrestle with tensions in them. One brother told me that Leviticus came alive for him when we studied it in Wednesday evening classes. Regular pastoral evaluations indicated that the majority were positive about my work with the Bible.

This generally positive response outweighed the resistances and negative reactions. Unfortunately, memories of the negative tend to loom larger than they ought to.

Not long after I began my first pastorate, I remember my disappointment when only the faithful few showed up for Wednesday evening Bible studies, after I had spent hours preparing. Sometimes I would stand at a window in the sanctuary and look out, hoping to see a few more cars that never drove in.

Some comments revealed that I was not connecting well with everyone. A sister once reminded me, “Ron, you’ve got to remember that we are common people.” One of my friends said, “I don’t care about history and the Greek. I just want a challenge for today.” Another told me that “when you go back to the Gospel of Matthew, I just lose interest.” After I preached on the ascension of Jesus, one person told me, “I got nothing out of your sermon this morning.” Such comments were hard to take. They pointed out my flaws, but I tried to redefine this response positively and see it as an opportunity to grow and improve.

Late in my second pastorate I found some help in Tex Sample’s insights in *Ministry in an Oral Culture*.¹ Sample identifies cultural differences as a significant factor in ministry. He describes a polarity between literate and traditional/oral cultures in the U.S., and he documents ways people of these two cultures think and function differently. Oral people tend to think in terms of relationships and feelings, whereas literate people tend to think in terms of theory and propositions. Oral people understand tacitly; they know without words, whereas literate people understand explicitly with descriptive words. Oral people tend to operate in the concrete and practical and see theory as much ado about nothing, whereas literate people are more introspective and impressed with ideas, logic, and theory. Oral people learn from

stories, proverbs, and relationships, whereas literate people learn from books and discourse. In ethical matters, literate people tend to be tolerant of ambiguities and to think in both-ands, whereas oral people are less tolerant of ambiguities and tend to think in either-ors. Oral people mistrust the experts that literate people respect. Oral people are turned off by big words and unimpressed by the latest ideas coming out of seminary. In Sample's view, both cultures have validity, but people of one culture tend to view those of the other negatively.

Sample's perspectives made sense to me. They illuminated my intercultural setting. Although my roots are in a traditional/oral culture, I am of the literate culture but attempting to minister to those who are more traditional/oral. They had less formal education than I, and most had not attended college. Some had not attended high school.

Sample's insights confirmed for me the power of culture, my own and that of my congregation. It's a principality and power, a primary shaper of ecclesiology, hermeneutics, ethics, and politics.

Sample points to some obvious implications for ministry by literate people in traditional/oral settings: respect and be sensitive to the oral culture and adapt and accommodate; make more use of story; attend to relationships; connect with the concrete; tread

Some principles for ministry by literate people in traditional/oral settings: respect oral culture; make more use of story; attend to relationships; connect with the concrete; tread lightly on the theoretical.

lightly on the theoretical; and by all means, avoid big words. This approach is consistent with the mind of Christ, who gave up a position of power to stand beside—rather than over—people as a fellow human being and a servant (Phil. 2:5–8).

Looking back on my teaching and preaching methods, I take heart that to some degree I was building intercultural bridges without being aware it. But after I read Sample's book, it seemed like I only felt pressure to improve. I found this work difficult. After carefully and prayerfully preparing for what I saw as divine

appointments in preaching and teaching, I wondered how could I improve any more.

As I was closing out my second pastorate, I felt dissatisfied about what seemed to be a lack of success in bridging the

intercultural gap. But far more important to me than comments and reactions was whether people had heard and heeded God's word as a result of my work. Were they transformed? Were they more equipped for every good work, as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16? I have no data. But as I look back over the years and years of sermons and Bible studies, I see a massive effort in which I gave my best.

Persevering

After hearing a bit of my story of working with the Bible in the congregation, a friend asked me recently, "What kept you going?"

My first answer is that it was only by the power of the same Spirit who inspired the scriptures that I kept going. I believe that the Holy Spirit gave me my hunger for the Bible, gifts to teach and preach, energy, and inspiration.

But I also believe that the Holy Spirit works in partnership with me. Fundamental to my part is prayer. I knew people in the congregation were praying for me, but it seemed imperative to keep working on my own relationship with God in prayer, spiritual direction, retreats, and reading the Bible not for study but for hearing God's word to me. In my stronger moments, I would visualize Jesus walking beside me to the pulpit. I have no doubt that God is able to speak without my help, but I prefer to function in such a way that God might work through me rather than in spite of me. I seriously doubt that I am able to do this unless I myself am seeking God.

Second, scripture itself kept me going. As I prepared and taught, I found myself on an adventure with God. To this day, the scripture illuminates and nourishes me. It deepens my identity as one of God's people. As I "eat the scroll," internalizing the written word, I am able to transmit not just from my head but also from my heart and from my whole self.

Third, my trust in God to work as promised in the Bible kept me going. God's word will not return empty but will accomplish the purpose for which God sent it (Isa. 55:10–11; Matt. 13:1–43; Mark 4:1–32; Luke 8:4–15; 1 Cor. 3:5–9). This promise is no excuse for sloppy work. Instead it encouraged me to give my best in teaching and preaching, and to let up to God and others the responsibility for transformation. It directed me to be patient, to

take the long look, and to accept the possibility that I may not see the future harvest from my ministry. It helped me to be less troubled when my teaching met resistance or when only a small group showed up for Bible study. It gave me confidence that the seed and the leaven of the Word grows, often inconspicuously, and that a step of transformation in one person affects the congregation, which is a relational system.

Fourth, my relationship with the congregations I served kept me going. Even though they did not always agree with me, I sensed that they loved me. They prayed for me, came to hear me, and affirmed me. Correspondingly, I loved them. I did my best to be there for them during crises. In my extensive preparations, I communicated to them my high regard for them. If small groups showed up, I tried to serve them as if they had been a large crowd. I sought to stand beside them rather than over them. I revealed

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some of my own struggles. When we would encounter a difficult biblical text, I admitted my uncertainties. One sister told me that by revealing my vulnerability, I gave permission to the congregation to be vulnerable.

Fifth, the larger church kept me going. During both pastorates I was blessed with supportive collegial relationships with other pastors, both Mennonite and other than Mennonite. I took advantage of continuing education opportunities. An important one was the annual AMBS Pastors Week. When

beginning a series on one of the books in the Bible, I would call seminary professors and ask for recommendations about the best commentaries. My inquiries were always well received.

Sixth, a deep sense of call kept me going. The roots of this call run deep. Preaching and teaching the scriptures are soul matters for me. Persevering in this ministry was living out of my identity. Sometimes as I drove home from church after no one made a comment about my sermon, I would hear an inner voice saying, "You said the right things today."

Seventh, my dear wife kept me going. Judy patiently allowed me space and time for extensive preparations. She was my primary support in what I saw as the awesome responsibility of

opening God's word for the congregation from week to week. She listened to my proposals for sermons and gave me constructive counsel. She affirmed me and stood by me when I received feedback. She held me up in prayer. Her love was the face of Jesus.

Scripture nourishes me. As I "eat the scroll," internalizing the written word, I am able to transmit not from my head only but also from my heart and from my whole self.

Although persevering in the priority of teaching and preaching the Bible during my years in the pastorate required my effort, I know that it happened only by the mercy of God. For this I cannot thank God enough. And that's why at this juncture I can still take refuge in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:

"Therefore my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain."

Note

¹Tex Sample, *Ministry in an Oral Culture: Living with Will Rogers, Uncle Remus, and Minnie Pearl* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

About the author

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Scholars serving the congregation

Douglas B. Miller

According to an old joke, the news circulated in a community that someone had moved into town and was planning to attend the local congregation. There was some uncertainty about the letters *PhD* attached to this person's name. When it was discovered that they stood for "Doctor of Philosophy," some were disappointed. At least a *Posthole Digger*, they considered, would have been good for something.

Such jokes mask values and perhaps fears. Scholars may be timid, socially awkward, arrogant, intimidating, or all of the above. Who do such people think they are to remove themselves from the realities of life, study esoteric books for several years, and then tell the rest of us what to believe? In my view, the populist

If indeed graduate theological education has value, how might congregations benefit from the service of those who have such training?

and pragmatic attitudes that motivate such comments are not entirely off-target; in fact, they may be evidence of a congregation's spiritual health which brings people to engage with the Bible.

Yet if heard only disparagingly, such concerns can also be discouraging to those whose gifts motivate them toward academic pursuits. I sometimes ponder whether I would have made it to the seminary and doctoral training I find so beneficial in my vocation if it had not been for the encouragement of a good friend from a different Christian tradition, one where such training is more highly respected than in my own.

If indeed graduate theological education has value, how might congregations benefit from the service of those who have such training?¹ First I will make some general comments about the scholar's role in the congregation's experience with the Bible and its process of interpretation—its *hermeneutics*. I will then suggest some specific ways that scholars might be "good for something."

The community's interpretive process

The process of appropriating scripture in the faith community may be summarized in three components: *community*, *canon*, and *commentary*.² The Bible (canon) has authority as the congregation (community) interprets and enacts it (commentary).³ For present purposes, we want to ask how scholars and scholar-pastors might best contribute to this process.

The more focused question is how a scholar's gifts and training might offer something *distinctive*. That role will differ according to the polity of various Christian traditions. In some traditions, special teaching offices require the gifts and training of a scholar, but in churches that encourage the contribution of each voice to the congregation's life and decision making, it is less clear how the scholar should be involved.

Some people suppose that where the importance of scholarship is promoted, scholars operate as a gateway to knowledge: all things of consequence must come filtered through them. It may be intimidating to cite a biblical text only to have a scholar respond that "in the original Hebrew (or Aramaic or Greek)," the verse clearly means something else. Or when a group is discussing a certain practice or doctrine, a scholar's comment that "Protestants in the believers church tradition have handled the present disagreement in such-and-such a way" may put the discussion on an uneven plane. It may intimidate some people into silence and can also engender resentment from those who disagree but don't know how to appropriately engage the discussion. The gateway concept seems inconsistent with their understanding of church.

Let us consider that among the three elements introduced above, it is at *canon* and *commentary* that scholars trained in biblical and theological studies bring something distinctive to the interpretive process. Scholars may be positioned to help the congregation better comprehend its canon, and those equipped to lead the community's commenting should be valued and respected (Ezra 7:6, 10, 12; Neh. 8:1–8, Matt. 5:21–48).⁴ The *community* element involves *all* members engaging and reflecting, in order to put the text into action. The scholar's input is important here as well, but not in a way that is different from that of others in the congregation.

Regarding the areas of distinctive contribution, the apostle

Paul's concept of assessment is especially germane. In the life of the church, the offerings of all participants should be "tested" to determine their faithfulness, and this testing presumably would include the input of the scholar (1 Cor. 14:26, 29, 32–33; Gal. 1:8; Phil. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:21; 2 Thess. 2:15; compare Acts 17:10–11; 1 John 4:1).⁵

Rather than envisioning a gateway, we might visualize the hermeneutical community as a circle of conversation around the Bible. Such a circle entails interaction in which all participants are both teaching and learning from one another: experiences, insights, reflections, loving arguments, and the gift of scholarship interweave and allow iron to sharpen iron (Acts 15:1–31; Prov. 27:17). In this circle, the scholars' important contributions are

The hermeneutical community is a circle of conversation around the Bible in which all participants teach and learn from one another: experiences, insights, reflections, loving arguments, and the gift of scholarship interweave.

acknowledged and honored as these are tested and found to have merit. At the same time, the scholar can humbly respect the bigger picture of the Holy Spirit's work in the community (John 16:12–15). As Richard Mouw has helpfully pointed out, scholars have much to learn from other believers.⁶

Ways scholars can serve

We turn now to three practical areas in which scholars and scholar-pastors can use their gifts and training to serve the congregation.

Understanding the Bible. Those who are trained in biblical scholarship can help people

in the congregation better understand the diversity of literature represented in the Bible. Good entry points for cultivating such understanding include helping people see the distinction between history and parable and the difference between prose and poetry. Within poetry, for example, there is the variety of psalm types in the book of Psalms and elsewhere. Students of the Bible usually pick up on this distinction quickly and recognize the value of distinguishing between a lament psalm and a praise psalm. The Psalms are an especially good illustration that literature *does* things, and that to avoid misreading we need to be alert to what a given text is trying to do.

Readers also need to recognize the complexity of the Bible as a

community document written by a variety of people who reflect different life realms of the community. The community's law, prophecy, wisdom, apocalyptic literature, and narrative play fundamentally different roles; interestingly, these intersect with the worship life of the community as evidenced in the Psalms. Added to this complexity is the character of the Bible as a transmitted document, shaped and adapted to new situations over a period of centuries.

The canon resists compression or abbreviation. The diversity of focus and differences of detail among the four Gospels, for example, once motivated an effort to merge the four into one document. The result, called the *Diatessaron*, was rejected by the church in favor of the four originals. On the other hand, many scholars believe that the Pentateuch resulted from a compilation of written or oral sources; yet even here not all tensions or varieties of perspective have been removed. The creation account of Genesis 1 complements a very different account in chapters 2 and 3. Scholars can help Bible readers navigate such diversity and appreciate what each element brings to the canon.

The Bible as canon is a tool by which the community evaluates various ideas and plans. Christians confess that their respect for scripture is justified because it is divine communication incarnated in human language. A major complexity with the Bible as canon is the fact that some parts qualitatively supersede other parts, yet without those previous parts being set aside. In these last days, says the writer of Hebrews, God has spoken to us through his Son (Heb. 1:1–2), just as Jesus demonstrated by his pronouncement “You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . .” (Matt. 5:21–22, 27–28, 31–34, 38–39, 43–44). Working with this kind of tension in the Bible is particularly challenging, and as with many challenges it produces new insights into the reality of God's work among us. As the early followers of Jesus struggled to comprehend, God continues to do new things, things that are in continuity with what came before but which also break through previous barriers (Acts 15:10).

Finally, the process by which the congregation reads and appropriates the Bible depends on its principles of interpretation. Those committed to full community involvement will naturally want the process to be as careful and productive as possible.

Challenges include the diversity (found in most congregations) in understandings about inspiration and revelation, and in approaches to language, literature, history, and the social sciences.

Training in Bible study. In our day, reading an ancient document such as the collection we call the Bible, with a view to transforming one's life, is a radical and countercultural act.⁷ One important way that scholars can assist others in the congregation is to help them make the transition from being *ordinary* readers to being *careful* readers. A careful reader, by my definition, is patient, disciplined, teachable, and courageous. The others are ordinary

Reading an ancient document with a view to transforming one's life is a radical and countercultural act. Scholars can assist others in the congregation in making the transition from being ordinary readers to being careful readers.

readers. In my experience the latter rush to the application "payoff" of Bible study and seek proof texts to support what they believe on other grounds. They may also be suspicious of scholars and fail to appreciate complex procedures, such as those required to translate the Bible into their native language.

Not that ordinary readers should be disqualified from participating in the hermeneutical community. One important contribution *any* alert person can make, for example, is to suggest biblical texts that may have some relevance to what the congrega-

tion is engaging at the moment. But the participation of readers will be more constructive and satisfying to them and to others as they grow in their ability to read the Bible well.

The process of training in Bible study will typically introduce a method or methods, and will eventually involve Bible reference tools. Such introduction is often a good entry point for helping people grow in their ability to engage the Bible. Many tools used by scholars are available to other careful readers. At the most basic level, these tools, whether in print or (increasingly) in electronic format, can be used without difficulty by nonscholars. But to learn to use them skillfully and with appropriate perspective takes time. I personally observed one (intelligent and sincere) Bible study leader pick and choose among the possible meanings for a Greek word listed at the back of his Strong's concordance as he explained a biblical text; a guide is necessary to help people appreciate the nature of language and to use the best resources.

One tremendous asset is Bible commentaries, especially those that are not overly brief and those that are part of a respected series. The scholar in the congregation is often in a position to recommend such works and to point out their orientations, strengths, weaknesses, academic level, and idiosyncrasies. A Bible commentary, in fact, is a kind of portable scholar, one that is typically more direct, succinct, and compliant than its real-life counterparts. Alertness to the tradition within which the commentary was written is important, as is awareness of the benefits of consulting several resources for a diversity of perspectives. Ideally all such tools will help members participate more helpfully in the conversation of their local congregation.

Appreciating the big picture. In the history of the Christian church, discerning the “message” of the Bible, how it all fits together, has been addressed using various methods. These approaches include aligning scripture with a confession of faith, discerning a theological center within the canon, tracing a historical development of understanding, identifying polarities and tensions or patterns of promise and fulfillment, constructing a typology, and more. A scholar conversant with these efforts in biblical theology can offer some context, which may help Bible readers assess strengths and weaknesses of those proposals that to them seem obvious, essential, or the *only* viable Christian position. Big picture conversations can sharpen the focus of the pastor’s teaching ministry and the congregation’s Christian education plan. A key point in this exploration is recognition that the Bible asks us to adopt its way of looking at the world and its way of envisioning a new world, and we likely will have to adjust our own worldview glasses as a result.⁸

Beyond the transformation of our minds (Rom. 12:1–2), efforts to understand the “message” of the Bible can remind us of other important dimensions of faith, particularly active discipleship—developing faithful habits both individually and collectively—as well as growing in trusting love and worship of our Creator and Savior. Examining the big picture is important on a periodic basis, both formally and as reminders in sermons, Sunday school, and other venues. It can promote a healthy assessment of the congregation’s values, priorities, and practices, and may result in a greater appreciation for the wonder and richness of the biblical text.

Perhaps the greatest contribution a scholar can make is to embody delight in the scriptures and give evidence of their importance in his or her life (Deut. 6:6–7; John 15:7). Do we take the Bible *joyously-seriously*, whatever our particular articulation of its inspiration?⁹ Persons who incarnate the power of the Bible are its best promoters and give witness to its vital role in congregational life.¹⁰ And many of the best examples of such incarnation are not scholars by training.

The above reflections are an introduction to the potential for scholars to provide important service to the congregation. The better we understand this potential, the more satisfying we will find our participation in the hermeneutical community.

Notes

¹ It would also be instructive to consider the potential benefits with other scholars.

² Perry B. Yoder, “The Pastor as Teacher,” in *The Heart of the Matter: Pastoral Ministry in Anabaptist Perspective*, ed. Erick Sawatzky (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2004), 74–84.

³ Yoder’s three components overlap what has been called the “hermeneutical spiral”: *scripture, tradition, experience, and reflection*. These elements are similar to the four sources (sometimes called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral) John Wesley employed for coming to theological conclusions (individually or corporately). The elements rotate as a cycle; considered over time, it is visualized as a coil or spiral stretching from the past into the future. Yoder’s community, canon, and commentary suggest a similar process but emphasize the corporate dimension and specify that the reflection and tradition elements adjudicate tensions and uncertainties in the canon.

⁴ Yoder, “The Pastor as Teacher,” 80–82.

⁵ Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 103.

⁶ Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 13. Mouw encourages a “hermeneutics of charity,” as scholars assess beliefs and practices of believers that might easily be rejected as valueless.

⁷ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 111.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁹ Kathleen Kern, “What Does It Mean to Take the Bible Seriously?” *Gospel Herald*, January 31, 1995, 7–8.

¹⁰ Robin Maas, “The Pastor as Biblical Interpreter and Teacher,” in *The Pastor as Religious Educator*, ed. Robert L. Browning (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1989), 83–86.

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Rereading the Bible with Jesus in the center

Jennifer Davis Sensenig

I grew up in a Baptist church and learned that what was important in life is (1) a personal relationship with Jesus and (2) reading the Bible and living it out. I pursued these two ends in my child-like ways following the adult models I had in the context of my family, church, school, and neighborhood. Not everyone in these settings pursued these same ends, but I had adequate support for developing as a person of faith.

As an adult, I have often said that these two aims continue to be my basic approach to life. Indeed, I have been blessed with rich support for the Christian life, so that by now I am more aware of the community that makes faithfulness possible than I am pleased with my particular efforts day to day. Through the practice of pastoral ministry—which I’ve engaged in response to God’s

From within the community I find that knowing Jesus, listening to Jesus, and following Jesus are interwoven with habits of engaging scripture and trusting in the Spirit who interprets it as we gather.

call through the church—I have discovered that these two aims are inseparable. From within the community I find that knowing Jesus, listening to Jesus, and following Jesus are interwoven with habits of engaging scripture and trusting in the Spirit who interprets it as we gather ’round God’s word.

In fact, my relationship with Jesus was saved by reading the Bible.

As an adolescent, two (nonscriptural) reading experiences in which I came to appreciate intertextuality whetted my appetite for literary studies. The first was Madeleine L’Engle’s time

trilogy, which my sixth-grade teacher read aloud in our public school classroom. The second experience was a high school English assignment on William Blake’s “Tiger, tiger.” Though I could not have articulated it at the time, I recognized that my relationship with Jesus and engagement with scripture privileged

me as a hearer/reader of these texts. All I could say then was, “I get it!” but viscerally I sensed that it got me. I had a passion, which I could not yet name. As a college student my interest in literary studies made me turn to scripture in a new way. I decided I needed to learn how to read the Bible all over again, and I wanted to do so in a community that valued both study and worship. I found such a community at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana).

Seminary education expanded the field for my continued formation as a disciple of Jesus, and it fanned the flame of my desire for reading the Bible (and all texts, literary and otherwise) in light of Jesus. I identified strongly with my mentors, professors who emphasized a narrative, literary approach to the Bible. This matched the narrative ethics, story-shaped worship planning, and “history from below” that was taught in other departments. Many courses in biblical languages, exegesis, and hermeneutics later, I was off and running, equipped with skills for interpretation and frankly pleased with myself and the ever-expanding patterns and connections to be made within the canon of scripture. I was called to pastor a small church, preached a few hundred sermons, and gained much more experience with reading biblical texts and identifying points of entry for those seeking God.

A reading pastor

I’m in my twelfth year as a pastor, serving a third congregation. It’s a stage where I discover that “hey, I’ve preached this text before, several times. That sermon from 2000 isn’t half bad. I could tighten up the opening section, make a connection to current worship themes, and update the illustration.” The temptation to repackage an old sermon in order to get on with the administrative and pastoral care duties, which are currently rolled into the “Servant of the Word” job description, is strong. *I could do this without reading the Bible.* Likewise, I could teach my third- and fourth-grade Sunday school class without reading the Bible, because frankly I’ve heard this one before. And you, dear reader, could plan worship for Pentecost without reading the Bible. And the mission committees of our congregations could organize local hospitality and advocacy for immigrant neighbors without reading the Bible. But let’s not do that.

A hymn text by John Newton seems to be the song of a church that knows that relationship with Jesus and reading the Bible are necessarily linked. It is the song of a church that in her suffering meets Christ and finds health, joy, abundance, and freedom in the place the world would least expect it: the Bible.

*Precious Bible, what a treasure
Does the word of God afford!
All I want for life or pleasure,
Food and med'cine, shield and sword!
Let the world account me poor,
Having, this I need no more.¹*

During an adult Sunday school class one of our members admitted that for him, right now, the resurrection of Jesus doesn't mean much. He sincerely wants to follow the way of Jesus in life, but he's stuck on the miracle of resurrection. With this concern, he went on to ask whether our church community relies on Jesus or whether we rely on our own skills in running an organization. Just as he is wondering what place the living, reigning Jesus has in the church, I am wondering what place the living, reigning Jesus has as we read scripture. The two queries are linked, of course, because on a gut level I think we would all agree that without the living, reigning Jesus, the scriptures are muted, if not silenced, and the church is laid to rest. Likewise, if we pursue our preaching, teaching, healing, serving, witnessing, peacemaking ministries without reading the Bible, we should expect to find our (dead) end.

In a congregational setting, I'm inclined to ask: Do we believe that Jesus equips us for reading scripture? What difference does it make that Christians are reading the Bible? In the Christian academy I might put it this way: Do we trust the canonical portraits of Jesus to help us discern how God is speaking through the whole of scripture today? If the answer is yes, then the story of Jesus—his beginning, his message, his relationships, his ministry, his conflicts, his death, his resurrection, his reign—will be our primary lens with which to read all of scripture. If yes, then our scripture reading will be both confessional and constitutive.

Now biblical scholars, whether Old or New Testament is in view, may chafe at the idea of rereading the Bible with Jesus in the

center, fearing that the guild has labored long and hard to wrestle at least some small percentage of Bible readers into caring (really!) about these ancient texts in their original contexts, and delaying “application” to our times until appropriate historical analogies can be made. In this thankless task, academic scripture readers have also discouraged us from slapping “Jesus is the answer” onto the difficulties of reading scripture in our day. I am indebted to these scholars in innumerable ways, but lately I’ve been wondering: What if Jesus *is* the answer? What if Jesus is the one who is speaking? What if Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, crucified, raised, and reigning over all of life? What if Jesus is in the center of the canonical conversation?

Biblical scholars may chafe at the idea of rereading the Bible with Jesus in the center. But lately I’ve been wondering: What if Jesus *is* the answer? What if Jesus is the one who is speaking?

I know that slapping Jesus of Nazareth onto an eighth-century BCE prophesy in order to make it fit our theology is not in order, but could Christian readers at least acknowledge that Jesus is knocking on the door of these prophetic texts? If we as readers do not use Jesus instrumentally, but simply answer his persistent knock, I think we’ll find

that our Lord, as stranger and guest in a thousand “foreign” texts, is waiting to share a meal with us. For me this is a new threshold in both reading the Bible and in my relationship with Jesus. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to her and eat with her, and she with me” (Rev. 3:20).

My understanding of the Gospels has been enriched by clarifying the different themes and emphases among the four portraits. Did the Jesus who told the parable of sheep and goats also wash the disciples’ feet? Narratively speaking, no. Canonically speaking, yes.

On the one hand, we are tempted not to read the Bible at all. On the other hand, some of us are tempted rather to lose ourselves in the artistry of biblical texts. One of the pleasures of a literary approach to scripture is making thematic intertextual connections across the canon. However, in my rereading of the Bible I’m increasingly focused on Jesus as the living Word, whose Spirit is the interpreter of our text and our times. The inspired

word is beautiful, and that beauty helps us see Jesus in and through the text. I've been referring to this practice as rereading the Bible with Jesus in the center. In a straightforward way, this is simply a matter of taking seriously the resurrection-era Bible reading practices inaugurated by Jesus himself in Luke 24. "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."²

I have found that ordinary readers of the Bible are quite pleased with this approach and feel themselves equipped for reading challenging passages when they are encouraged to make connections with the story and person they know best—Jesus.

Missional reading

Missional church theology emphasizes that Christians need to develop practices that require that Jesus remain part of the conversation in our congregational decision making. One of the strengths in missional church theology is framing reflection on ministry through the lens of scripture. Being missional apparently depends on being willing to reread the Bible, to listen individually and corporately to God's word, to be fed and healed and sent.

One concern I have is that the scripture reading habits we see in the biblical canon have become unfashionable in our day. A couple of examples follow. In Acts 2 we find a sermon excerpt by Peter in which he says that David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah (2:31.) Historically, we have no record that King David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah. We have no convincing historical evidence that King David even wrote Psalm 16, which Peter subsequently quotes twice in this sermon. (Here the quotation is: "He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.") According to the spiritual, "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of the Jesus and say he died for all." But if not everybody can preach like Peter, can some of us? Can we read the Old Testament expecting to hear the Word of God, Jesus himself (as answer or as question)? *Does* Psalm 16 speak of the resurrection of the Messiah?

In the book of the Hebrews, the unknown author writes unabashedly as if Jesus himself is speaking. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he also ap-

pointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (Heb 1:1–2). As a result, the Old Testament quotations in this book are attributed, in some instances, to Jesus! The name of the Son is not used until 2:9, and with such an extended prelude we might anticipate the five letters in English to burn right through the onion skin when we reach this verse. But the truly astonishing feature is that the Jesus whom we see (2:9) then speaks to God about us (2:12–13). Furthermore, this becomes a Trinitarian conversation, with the Holy Spirit speaking in 3:7.

(Re)reading

Early in my Christian journey I got the idea that the big-league Christians pray the Psalms. And so, aspiring to greatness, as a teenager and as a young adult I tried to read the Psalms. I memorized a few of them. I prayed. But I didn’t like the Psalms.

I liked the idea of ancient prayers that sustained believers from generation to generation. But my reading of the Psalms was dry and boring. Really, can the Psalms compare to Exodus or the Gospel of John or 2 Corinthians?

As a twenty-year-old I became acquainted with Anabaptist-Mennonite folks who were committed to a life of service in Jesus’ name, and eventually I found my home in the Mennonite church. The earliest church order among Anabaptist Christians in the sixteenth century has as its first point of order the counsel to meet regularly, three or four times each week. Point two is: “When the brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it. The others should be still and listen, so that there are not two or three carrying on a private conversation, bothering the others. The Psalter shall be read daily at home.”³

Reading the Bible is neither easy nor widely practiced in our congregations today. Yet, the dynamic episodes of church history and the flourishing of Christian mission are always rooted in serious engagement with God’s word to us in scripture. Even if potential martyrdom were off the table, I don’t know if I would have made it in the early days of Anabaptism, because it’s taken me years to get to the point of reading the Psalms daily. The assumption among these Swiss Anabaptists was that if you were reading the Psalms daily at home, you’d make a better listener and

teacher when you studied the scriptures with others. If you read the Psalms at home, you'd be better prepared for the meal—the bread and cup. And if you read the Psalms at home, you'd be better prepared to witness for the Lord.

Jesus in the center

Along the way in Christian ministry, I began to approach the Psalms differently. I began to read them with Jesus in the center. What I mean first is that I began to read them with the life and death, resurrection and reign of Jesus in mind.

There is a strong precedent for this way of reading the Psalms. The writers of the New Testament knew the Psalms well. And early Christians interpreted Jesus in light of these Hebrew prayers.

Reading the Bible is not widely practiced in our congregations today. Yet the dynamic episodes of church history and the flourishing of Christian mission are always rooted in serious engagement with God's word.

So for example, the opening verse of Psalm 110 is quoted more than a dozen times in the New Testament. "The LORD [YHWH] says to my lord [the king], 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" The confession of all the New Testament witnesses is that Jesus is the Lord, ascended to the right hand of God. Jesus is now the triumphant king reigning over all enemies, even death.

Second, what I mean by rereading the Psalms with Jesus in the center is that Jesus knew the Psalms. They were the prayer book of his people. Jesus quoted the Psalms. When he washed the disciples' feet, Jesus said in grief—"The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me" (John 13:18). And the Gospel of Mark tells us that as he and his disciples left their Last Supper together, they sang the psalm. As he died on the cross, his communion with God was expressed with the language of the Psalms.

So I began to reread the Psalms asking: When might Jesus have prayed this psalm? With whom or for whom did Jesus pray this psalm? And with Jesus Christ in the center of my reading of the Psalms, I'm learning to pray the Psalms with and for others—those who are newly saved, desperately poor, fearful, thankful, anxious, angry. Jesus showed us the life of God. He identified with people whose circumstances were different from his own. He was for others. What might he have prayed for those fisher disciples sent to carry

this revolutionary message to all nations? Which prayer was on his lips for the Galilean women followers who would announce his resurrection? What might he have prayed for the hungry crowds after the miracle of enough bread, enough fish for all? What was Jesus' lament when the widow at Nain was mourning the death of her only son? It has made all the difference for me to pray the Psalms with Jesus in the center.

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will teach you

It does not get easier to read the Bible, but it becomes more essential, more like the only way to recognize Jesus. I am constantly starting over, with new trial balloons—the latest will be a Bible study at a public library. I am always evaluating. My latest questions were sparked by Bob Eckblad: “How can one best facilitate a non-moralistic/legalistic reading of the Scriptures that still mobilizes readers to thoughtful action? How can the underlying theology of the readers best be challenged if perverse notions of God tend to unconsciously guide the readings?”⁴ I am wondering about the economics of reading the Bible—the education of professional readers, the investments in stipends, books, child care, and participant resources. As I ponder these questions, I rest in the assurance that “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

Notes

¹ *Olney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779); for the entire text, see <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/p/t/prebibwt.htm>.

² Luke 24:27. See also Luke 24:44. John 5:39–40 and 2 Cor. 3:16 also allude to reading in Christ or with Christ.

³ J. Craig Haas, *Readings from Mennonite Writings, New and Old* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1992), January 24.

⁴ Quoted by Gerald West in “Artful Facilitation and Creating a Safe Interpretive Site: An Analysis of Aspects of a Bible Study,” in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. Hans de Wit et al. (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 213.

About the author

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The burning bush or the plastic mulberry?

Jack Dueck

An aboriginal chief, hearing a Mennonite explain Anabaptist-Mennonite beliefs, responded with “If these are your beliefs, where are your stories?” The Mennonite held up his Bible. The chief said: “Those are just word etchings on paper. How do these words become your living story? Early in our encounter with the English whites, we noticed how they were people with words, words on paper. Treaties, with their many words, were never the real story enacted on the Canadian prairies between my people and the colonials.”

One young Mennonite explained how church services reminded him of the nursery rhyme “Here we go round the mulberry bush”: “This is the way we go to church, go to church, go to

church; this is the way we go to church, every Sunday morning.” When asked about sermons in church, many label them boring, predictable words.

In paint-by-number sermons, the Bible words are boxed into a Cliff Notes package. Faith becomes mere assent to word definitions, reversing incarnation as the Word becomes words.

Words don’t really have a meaning; it’s the good news happening that gives energy and experiential meaning to the text. Have Jesus and the Gospel good news been preempted by safe word definitions? The result is paint-by-number sermons, a mind-numbing litany of clichés, the Bible words boxed into a Cliff Notes package. Faith then becomes mere

assent to word definitions, reversing incarnation as the Word becomes words.

The late David Ewert, who taught us New Testament Greek and respect for the text, remarked in a Mennonite Brethren Bible College class: “You’ll find that in a church service, people listen to the first few sentences of a sermon, and if they hear the usual safe words, they wander away in their own thoughts.”

When asked how his people enliven the sacred oral texts, the aboriginal chief replied: “We make the sacred stories into now, a present happening through singing, dancing, feasting, storytelling and enacting peace rituals and prayer to the Great Spirit. Sometimes it takes days to evoke the living stories among us.”

One Mennonite church invited a biblical scholar to give a talk followed by a sermon on the Psalms. He had completed an acclaimed dissertation on the Psalms. The presentation rendered structure, context, word usage, variations in translations; for the sermon he read a paper-lecture on some psalms. Sound material, and praised by the several academics attending. Asked about it during the week, few remembered anything about the sermon. During the service a psalm had been treated to a throw-away reading in utter disregard for the vibrant poetry, and no psalms were sung—though there are some fine renditions in hymn books. No felt experience was rendered of the many composers who have found the Psalms irresistibly inspiring. One parishioner said, “It was as if we were solemnly sitting around a cadaver and hearing it dissected.” So are the Psalms and the good news story just the sum of their parts?

This encounter with the Psalms accentuated my darkening suspicion that words had no meaning anymore, just definitions; even the Word had become only a word text. An insistent desperation attends the year: With the text deadened, no song, no groaning, no prayers or Bible readings lead out of the endless desert dotted with dry shrubs. No burning bush illumines my repetitive assent to the Anabaptist-Mennonite confession of faith, the inspiration of the scriptures, the words of the good news. Is this what it means to experience the postmodern? Faith deconstructed? Nothing happens late or soon; words no longer mean. Like a depressed person weeping before a counsellor, “I cannot love anymore,” I cannot find word-meaning anymore, only dead definitions. Joining T. S. Eliot’s character, I also realize that “these fragments”—words—“have I shored against my ruins.”

How fortunate—I think—were those living in an age of faith, encountering God now, in happening within and around them. Moses encounters a burning bush and stops in curiosity. No one else sees the bush burning, but he sees the flames and hears a voice. Pagan astrologers see the star and prepare gifts. Illiterate

shepherds, stunned in fright, hear angels singing in outlandish proclamation—and they must go and see. Herod understands all too well the incarnation story the wise tell him, and he marshals his military in response. The Salvadoran thugs understood the happening of Archbishop Oscar Romero’s good news story of Jesus living among the poor—*now*. The thugs abhor the meaning and then murder the archbishop at the communion table, giving the power of Jesus to the powerless.

With meaning tarnished, I live and even do god-talk from out of inner hollowness. Little did I suspect that I was already anointed for a pilgrimage to Bethlehem where a story knew me better than I had known it.

Gold

I had contracted to deliver two Christian motivational talks in Pennsylvania. Returning from Philadelphia and traveling into Bucks County for a talk at a Christian school, the fuel warning light flashes empty. A weathered sign promises a town, and the S-curve snakes into a tiny burg with some clapboard houses, a post office and tar shingle-sided general store. In garish contrast, like a foreign stage set, lowered into the town, stands a gas station, all aluminum and glass, and under a constellation of incandescent stars. The station provides not only fuels for combustion but shelves of life-shortening goods: tobacco, sugared caffeine, and “edibles” laced with additives.

Gliding to the pumps, I’m shocked to discover I’ve left my wallet in Philadelphia. To the young man behind plate glass I mumble my predicament and ask for two gallons of gas on credit. My words seem to startle him awake, and then he stiffens apprehensively: *Is this a con or a camouflaged hold-up?* When he carefully slides his arm below the counter, I fear he is pressing an alarm, alerting the police. Hurriedly I respond: “It’s OK. I’ll try elsewhere.”

Surely the bank, or someone in the bank, will advance me a dollar. The bank lobby is reverentially quiet: Christmas lights in soft glow, a crèche in the corner. Where cathedrals used to be at the center of the village and religious life, the modern age organizes its towns around banks. In respectful reverence, you wait until the money priests beckon, then you humbly present your

offering. It is scrutinized, and when approved, you leave reverently, humble.

A teller asks, "How may I help you?" I explain my predicament and suddenly all money counters freeze into tableau. It is as if I had committed flatulence in church. The teller expresses shock and then thin-lipped disdain. *How dare he! This is a bank!* "You will need to speak to the manager."

The manager, nervously arranging his notepad, says, "What seems to be the problem?" I make my confession and petition for a dollar for gas. The manager finds my confession unreliable: "Sir, this is a bank. You can't just walk in here and request a few dollars without credentials. How do we know you are who you say you are?"

To the lyrics of "I saw Mommy kiss Santa Claus" I walk through the lobby, past the nativity scene. Salvation Army bells jangle on the sidewalk.

Perhaps a farmer nearby will have a few gallons to spare. But on the outskirts of town on a pockmarked gravel lot stands a shack, and before it are two rusty gas pumps. *Abandoned?* But there's a wisp of smoke curling out of a wire-supported stovepipe. Entering the hovel I find an old woman wrapped in a mackinaw and bent to a smouldering coal fire.

She smiles in greeting. "Hello, traveler. You don't seem happy this Advent season." I explain that I'm out of gas and am scheduled to give a talk at a Christian school in a few hours but have forgotten my wallet in Philadelphia. "Good," she says. "You've got the need, and I've got the gas. Pull up to the pump." In response to my "I need only a gallon or two," she triples her offering. Noting her address, I promise to send her the money. She waves me off with "God bless."

At the rural Christian school I proceed with the god-talk, Christian clichés rolling off the tongue from religious word memory. Next day I decide to make a detour to pay the gas lady in person. She greets me: "Did your Christian talk go well?" I shrug my reply, but when I unfold some bills to pay for the gas, she flares in response: "Son, absolutely not." I protest: "But you sold me six gallons of gas!" "No, no, I did not. I gave them to you."

"But what made you decide to give gas to me—a stranger—and triple what I asked for? What if I had just been a conman?" Softly she answers, "No matter. No gift is ever fully lost. Even the

conman may at some juncture in his life really remember. My late husband used to say, 'Honey, during Advent and in all living, we join the wise giving gifts.' If you pay me, then our meeting and the gift become meaningless, a mere commercial transaction."

We sit at her fire. She offers me coffee from a battered pot on the stove. It tastes like a blend of tar and vermouth. Gently she observes, "Son, you seem somewhat downcast and sad. Yet you give Christian talks." Suddenly it seems safe and right to confess to my spiritual numbness and the dead Bible stories. I've become so tired, even numbed, by the inevitable recurring Advent songs, the candles, and the succession of homilies over four weeks reiterating the veracity of the historical events.

"No gift is ever fully lost. My late husband used to say, 'Honey, during Advent and in all living, we join the wise giving gifts.' If you pay me, then our meeting and the gift become meaningless."

"May I suggest that you may have locked the story into a chronology in the past? The Advent story is not contained by and in a church calendar, nor validated by our assent to a historical happening. You see, even the

wise, having been illuminated by a star in the heavens, needed to bow low to get through the Bethlehem stable door. Once in, they knelt in the manure-laced straw and gave a gift of gold to a baby. *And rejoiced exceedingly!*

"Son, all true gifts are gold, untarnishable. The Creator, who never deals in pig iron or tin, has given us only untarnishable gifts of gold: life itself, love, joy in serving others, the mass, nature. Bethlehem is now. Advent is a happening with us."

She embraces me as she says, "Perhaps you're on a path to Bethlehem. God bless."

Driving out, I look back and am jolted to see her backlit, incandescent as from a burning bush behind her.

Frankincense

I was to meet a client in a shopping mall food court. Malls always seem to lower one's IQ: cacophony of clashing sounds, glare of lightbulbs, cries of stressed babies, fitful neon promotions, and no angels descending under this garish iridescence. Is this how the world ends, not under an Advent star-studded sky but in fluorescent orgy and warring food odors?

Nearby an elderly gentleman in suit, top hat, and cane is confronted by two religious propagandists: “Here’s a list of things God wants you to know.”

Slipping to a nearby bench I pretend to read a newspaper as the story unfolds nearby. “But these are things God wants you to know.” Amid the racket, his mild response is inaudible. They insist: “But do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” “Yes, surely.” “By what proof?” “Schubert, the Psalms, Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, my rose garden, people who love me and I them, and especially the Advent of Jesus. Now all is ours in Christ. The devil owns nothing; the Spirit pervades everything.”

They leave him—*just another unbeliever*.

We sit over coffee in the food court and converse. He comments: “Wherever there’s creativity, there the Spirit is also. How sad that they seek my assent to some prose words. And if I gave assent to the words, they’d declare me saved.”

In the middle of a shopping mall food court, the Spirit’s perfume envelopes me in the fragrance of another world.

Myrrh

Returning to Ontario I receive a message that my oldest sister—who mothered me through the deaths of two mothers—has end stage pancreatic cancer. Then—out of the blue—a person puts an airline ticket into my hand: “I feel that you should visit your sister before her funeral.” “How much?” I ask. “Come on, Dueck, it’s an Advent gift—don’t ruin it!”

She says, “Once Jesus has come into your life, so many actions become obvious. You think different. Life becomes a pleasure, living right inside the many stories of how Jesus treated people.”

A taxi deposits me at the hospice which the taxi driver describes as “diss vunderfoll plece.” Some years ago a wealthy Calgary woman donated and endowed an elegant mansion on a large lot for use as a hospice.

The hospice mission is to give meaning and peace to the terminally beset: rather than using myrrh to embalm the dead, this place offers those in their final days of physical life the loving embrace of myrrh’s incense.

A brief tour opens to spacious hallways, quiet private rooms all windowed to trees and sky, a stained-glass chapel for visits and

meditation. When Susie first arrived, a kindly matron sat by her side to hear of her children, grandchildren, and pleasures in life—and to ask her questions: “What is your favorite soup?” Within hours Susie was served her favourite—tomato soup—prepared for her from scratch in the hospice kitchen.

When she thanks me for coming, I tell her it was also to hand-carry a thank-you for mothering me in terrible times and being a confiding and consoling sister all these years. Paging the Mennonite cookbook, memories crowd in, of food in community and of songs at table. Soon we’re singing duets to the accompaniment of its recipes!

At fifteen Susie took on the task of replacing a mother of eight. I tell her that I remember clothes freshly ironed for school, with flowers for the teacher “so you give her something too.” Often losing her own appetite in fear the children would not enjoy her cooking, she woke every morning asking Jesus to help her to “plan my day. He never failed me, giving me health, energy, and love for you all.” Arriving at school herself, she would first dash into the school garage and commit the siblings to Jesus’ care for the day. In all the years, especially in acutely difficult Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church-related experiences, she always expected Jesus: “Now Jesus, please help me live in and through this.”

When asked, do you consult Jesus on everything? she says, “No, once Jesus has come into your life, so many actions become obvious. You think different. Life becomes a pleasure, living right inside the many stories of how Jesus treated people. If one joins his story, he never disappoints.” Asked how her church observes Advent, she replies: “Aren’t we always experiencing Advent, receiving Jesus into our daily living?”

When a classmate and new school friend began stealing lunch items from Susan’s youngest, she doubled the special treats in his lunch. “But why?” her son retorts. “He must be hungry. So give it to him as a gift.”

In backyard conversation with a neighbour, Susan discovers a mother in grief over losing a son to cancer. This leads to coffee at each other’s houses. Susie shares her pain over a grandson dying with leukemia; the neighbor laments losing a son. They share pastries out of their traditions: Susan’s Mennonite and the Muslim

neighbor's eastern recipes. Asked, what do you visit about? Susie remarks: "Among sharing about family, ideas about cooking and fabric patterns, we hear each other about our grief and burdens. Then we pray together, each in our own way." "M&M," I say: "Muslim and Mennonite." She laughs and adds: "We both have faith, expecting God to join us."

She asks, "How are you doing? I've listened to some of your story sermon tapes. Are you still doing that?" I'm thinking: *Pancreatic cancer, last days in a hospice, least appropriate time to talk about*

"Perhaps you've worked too hard telling the good news. But you know that God, Jesus, and even the Bible will take care of themselves. Just know this: the Bible stories believe in you; and they'll find you."

my situation. She prods: "You're still my baby brother." Unwilling—and the tears flow—I tell her the Bible has gone dead for me, all just words. After some conversation, she smiles and says: "Perhaps you've worked too hard telling the good news. But you know that God, Jesus, and even the Bible will take care of themselves. Just know this: the Bible stories believe in you; and they'll find you again."

When her oldest daughter asks if she has any worries or concerns as she approaches dying, she replies: "Of course not. Jesus always came when I expected him. Now he's expecting me." In her very last hour, her breath shallowing, her children's voices waft her into the world of her long-expected Jesus, singing "What a friend we have in Jesus."

Gold, frankincense, myrrh—O death, where is thy sting?
Grave, what victory?

About the author

Jack Dueck grew up in Coaldale, Alberta, and studied music and theology at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He received an MA in literature from University of Washington, followed by a PhD in literature from the University of Notre Dame. He was a professor at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, and now resides in Waterloo, Ontario, and is a writer and storyteller.

How comedy changed my view of the Bible

Ted Swartz

So when did comedy and biblical study start to come together? To me the Bible was, for much of my life, a daunting book: confusing and inspiring, sacred and inaccessible. I knew it should be on my list of books I'd want to have if I were stranded on a desert island, but it seemed distant and irrelevant too much of the time.

I was in my second year at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, 1991. My wife, Sue, and I had moved with our boys to Harrisonburg, Virginia, supported by our congregation in Pennsylvania—Plains

Dramas that start with the human story and attempt to insert a God moment often miss the mark, comically and artistically. Turning the equation around, taking the God story and inserting the human, makes all the difference.

Mennonite—to become a pastor—and I was struggling. I had fallen in love with theater while taking classes with Barbra Graber at Eastern Mennonite University and Tom Arthur at James Madison University, discovered a brilliant comedy acting partner in Lee Eshleman, and was wondering about a call that seemed to be shifting away from a traditional pastorate to . . . what?

I had gone to the dean of the seminary, George Brunk III, and asked if I could take acting and performance classes at JMU, and would he give me seminary credit for it?

When I look back, it seems an audacious request, but George in his wisdom allowed that to happen. I think he knew I was going to have trouble finishing seminary otherwise, especially with Hebrew and systematic theology looming.

Dorothy Jean Weaver teaches New Testament at EMS; our textbook is Jack Dean Kingsbury's *Matthew as Story*. I remember distinctly Dorothy Jean suggesting that we read the text assigned as a play with plot, characters, good guys, bad guys, conflict, and confrontation. She has caught my attention.

Our text is Matthew 16.

The disciples had forgotten to bring any bread when they crossed the lake. Jesus then warned them, "Watch out! Guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." The disciples talked this over and said to each other, "He must be saying this because we didn't bring along any bread."

Jesus knew what they were thinking and said: "You surely don't have much faith! Why are you talking about not having any bread? Don't you understand? Have you forgotten about the five thousand people and all those baskets of leftovers from just five loaves of bread? And what about the four thousand people and all those baskets of leftovers from only seven loaves of bread? Don't you know by now that I am not talking to you about bread? Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!"

Finally the disciples understood that Jesus wasn't talking about the yeast used to make bread but about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

What I found very funny was the image of a confused group of disciples huddled together at one end of the boat—(never mind the nautical impracticalities)—with Jesus at the other, waiting, perched serenely on the gunwale. He's thrown out yet another pithy, enigmatic saying—Why does he keep doing that?!

I imagine the disciples thinking: "So . . . So, beware of the yeast of the Pharisees . . . Yeast . . . what about it? . . . You make bread with yeast, right . . . Right, but not *just* yeast . . . What, beware of the baking powder of the Pharisees? . . . No, no . . . He's used the culinary motif before . . . It's the ingredients that are important, that's why the yeast . . . No, no I think it's just the bread . . . The bread? . . . Did you bring bread? No, I thought you were going to bring the bread . . . Not me . . . We just left twelve baskets on the shore and YOU didn't bring any bread! . . . So what are we going with? . . . The bread . . . We're going with the bread . . . OK . . . You tell him."

And then they turn to Jesus and say—"It's because we didn't bring any, bread isn't it?"

And then I see Jesus holding his head in his hands and muttering “Oh, God”—in the truest sense—“these buffoons are the foundation of a new kingdom?”

It was out of that image that I wrote a monologue that was expanded in 1994–95 with Lee Eshleman into *Fish-Eyes; Stories You Thought You Knew, Through the Eyes of the First Disciples*. We were pretty sure our audience would be the church—our target was folks who needed a fresh look at a story they had perhaps become too familiar with. As we toured the show and four others based on biblical story, we found more and more people didn’t have a familiarity with the story, and it was the humor, the comedy, that drew them in.

Many of the dramas written for churches over the last thirty or forty years struggle (in my opinion) to make an impact, because they start with the human story and attempt to insert a God

When an audience watches characters struggle to discern just what is happening to them, there is a sympathetic response—and when the characters discover a truth, the audience discovers with them.

moment. It’s a traditional approach to church drama, and it often misses the mark, comically or artistically or both. Simply turning the equation around, taking the God story and inserting the human, makes all the difference for me. The secret for me is to take a story/event that is held sacred. When I insert the profane, the foolish, the humanity, oddly enough it usually doesn’t diminish the sacredness; it enhances it.

It’s because we have an intrinsic understanding of the human story: we laugh because we are surprised or we recognize ourselves in the foibles and misunderstandings of the characters on stage. The comedy in a biblical story, then, comes when we see ourselves in Mary, nine months pregnant and grumpy with swollen ankles—“If you want the marriage to work, it’s gonna be three things—‘Yes, Mary.’ ‘Right away Mary.’ ‘Anything you say, Mary!’—Say it!” Or Jonah throwing his resignation on God’s desk, saying, “I want to know why. I want to know why I had to be thrown overboard, gobbled up, and then thrown up on the beach, so I could run around Ninevah dripping with whale vomit.”

A scene, many times, starts with a visual image: A grumpy Paul struggling to pack for a trip. He can’t find his favorite shirt.

Abram doing a spit-take, when the angel tells him as a sign of the new covenant, the foreskin is to taken . . . off.¹ Jeremiah holding his ragged shorts, the ones God told him to wear but not ever wash—and then hide them in a crack in a rock. Peter and Andrew not quite hearing what Jesus is telling them from the shoreline . . . Cashew nuts on the other side?! Andrew explaining to Peter the last supper needs to have a seating arrangement, over Peter’s insistence that “when you sit in a line, there’s no one to talk to across from you.”

And from that visual image, or a fragment of a line, the scene is built. It is crucial for me to follow the comedic vein as far as it goes, resisting the impulse to become didactic. When you succumb to the temptation to make sure people get the point, the humor gods will kill your sketch. They are not amused.

It would be silly for me to think everyone who watches a play I’ve written or performed is pleased or can find the humor. While I don’t subscribe to the attitude that theater needs to irritate, annoy, or offend everyone at some level, I do feel it needs to push its audience.

A friend explained to Lee and me years ago that the humor in *Fish-Eyes* was foremost self-deprecating humor. Peter and Andrew are often the last ones in the room to “get it.” The audience is smarter; they warm to the characters. When an audience watches characters stumble and struggle to discern just what is happening to them, there is a sympathetic response—and when the characters discover a truth, when there is an Aha! moment on stage, the audience discovers with them.

I have been asked many times about reactions to the shows I and my co-writers have written around biblical story. That question presupposes that we have met with resistance. While we have on occasion found that resistance, most responses have been positive. With a more conservative Christian audience, people are often more biblically literate, and they catch details and nuance that others might miss. They feel smart and perhaps as a result are more open to this nontraditional approach to biblical interpretation. In a less conservative or more secular setting, people appreciate the artful approach to the humor.

I think a sharp sense of humor is a great sign of an imaginative mind, a seeking mind, a mind that reaches to mystery. Comedy

celebrates life, involves chance discoveries and accidental encounters, and grapples with the unpredictable, even as it ultimately offers the hope of renewal. It is the human story—and the biblical story—told from the bottom up.

A recent letter from Barbra Graber included a list of quotations about humor. Two favorites: “Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense dancing” (William James); and “The art of the clown is more profound than we think: it is neither tragic nor comic. It is a comic mirror of tragedy and the tragic mirror of comedy” (Andre Soares).

Many etymologists, those who study the origins of words, agree that the word *humor* has the same root as humility and humanity, all derived from the word *humus*, meaning “of the earth.” Humor is part of what keeps us then connected to the earth, to creation; it’s what keeps us rooted. I love the idea that humor and comedy have their formation in the soil, the dirt, the loam (I love the word *loam*). They have the ability to bring the mighty down to earth, to humble us all, yet they can build the human story and consequently the biblical story from the earth—from the bottom up.

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When I approach a biblical text in order to write a sketch (please, not a skit), or a play, I almost always come to the text at something close to face value. If it’s a creation story, I’m not usually in the business of

debating the theology of a young earth theory vs. a theory of evolution. I’m not interested, at that moment, in whether the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is to be taken literally. The exegesis, if you will, is in the imaginative spaces between the words. In many ways, my writings follow the tradition of the Hebrew midrash; they are stories that comment on the scriptures. My favorite definition of midrash is “white fire”—the space amid the “black fire” of words on the page.

Because of a background in writing and performing comedy, my first instinct in writing a piece is to find the comedy: what’s funny? So my relationship to the Bible has changed dramatically.

(That's not a pun, is it?) Because humor is part of what makes us human, it is always lurking below the surface of every human interaction, every situation in life. So then the story of God's journey with humanity has to have humor in it. We only need to open our imaginations to the possibilities.

This journey has changed my relationship with the Bible forever. The Bible feels both less sacred and more sacred to me now. Less sacred, because the fallible humanity of us all is comedically woven throughout, so the Bible is no longer an inaccessible icon to be held apart from us mere mortals. More sacred, because the comedy I see there connects me to a people of history and a people of faith. Because they were human, they stumbled and fell, misunderstood, and perhaps even passed gas at inappropriate times.

Note

¹ A spit-take is a comedic technique in which someone spits a beverage out of his or her mouth when he or she reacts to a statement.

About the author

Ted Swartz is a writer and actor living in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The author or co-author of nearly twenty unique plays, Ted graduated from Eastern Mennonite University in 1989 and Eastern Mennonite Seminary in 1992. From there he began a ministry that took him, not to a pulpit in a congregation, but to stages in front of more than a quarter-million people across the U.S. and into Canada, Kenya, Japan, and beyond. Along with writing and acting, his loves include his wife, three sons, two daughters-in-law, and baseball.

Teaching the death and resurrection of Jesus to children

Carrie Martens

What do we believe about how Jesus died? What do we understand about how Christ's death relates to our daily lives? When asking ourselves these questions, we often neglect to examine underlying presuppositions about God and Jesus that we developed as children, and to consider how those assumptions influence our adult understandings of the atonement.

A child's concept of the divine is formed early in life through interactions with family and environment. Our early understand-

If the church is concerned with how adults understand the atoning work of Jesus, then we must be equally concerned—if not more concerned—with how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are taught to and understood by children.

ings form the basis for future learning and are often remarkably resilient. If the church is concerned with how adults understand the atoning work of Jesus, then we must be equally concerned—if not more concerned—with how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are taught to and understood by children.

Popular theologies of the atonement, such as *Christus victor* and Anselm's satisfaction theory (which includes the language of substitution and sacrifice), have dominated the theological landscape for centuries. Many contemporary theologians have pointed to problems in these formulations. Yet these

theories remain prominent in Christian children's materials. As we consider the impact these theories have on adult experience, we must also ask ourselves how these theories might shape a child's understanding of God and relationship to the divine.

In the discussion that follows we will consider the *Christus victor* model as well as Anselm's satisfaction theory as they relate to the faith formation of children. Then we will consider J. Denny Weaver's narrative *Christus victor* as an alternative model for teaching children about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Each

of these theories will be examined in light of the spiritual needs, cultural context, and overall development of children. I will not deal with their merit in terms of biblical interpretation.¹

Christ the victor

The Christus victor model deals primarily with the cosmic battle between good and evil and was the prevailing view among theologians in the early church. This model sees Jesus as a casualty of the war between God and Satan, and his death appears to indicate the victory of evil over good. But God raised Jesus from the dead, turning defeat into victory and freeing humanity from the power of sin and death. This model has also been presented in altered forms, such as the ransom model, in which Christ's death is payment to Satan in exchange for sinners' freedom, or as a battle in which God practices deception, hiding Jesus' divinity in order to trap the devil.²

When children who love Spiderman and other superheroes are trained in the Christus victor model, they may connect Jesus to an ideology of winning at all costs. This explanatory framework may contribute to a justification of battles involving coercion, retribution, and violence. It may also teach children that human life can be used as payment, and that God does not regard us as beings of immeasurable worth. In churches that "welcome" children simply as a means to bringing in adult members, or in order to project an image of vitality, a ransom view of atonement may, unfortunately, mirror a child's experience of being treated as a commodity.

Christ's death as satisfaction

Anselm's satisfaction theory of the atonement focuses on the sin of humanity which has offended God and brought injustice into the world. In order for harmony to be restored, a debt must be paid to expiate sinners' guilt. Thus Jesus' death both atoned for the sin of individuals and satisfied God's need for justice. This model can also be viewed as analogous to a system of penal justice in which violation of the law demands the imposition of a penalty. In this view, then, Jesus receives punishment on behalf of sinful humanity;³ in consequence, he is both a sacrifice made to God to restore justice and a substitute who takes the punishment sinful humans deserve. This theory of atonement has not only been affirmed by

Protestants; it has become the dominant view in the Western world.⁴

While there is certainly a place for teaching children to recognize their sin, an emphasis on sin has negative effects. I have seen a young child, having heard that Jesus died because of our sins, cry inconsolably—convinced he had killed Jesus. And children in North America are in an awkward position. They are implicated in a consumer culture that oppresses and exploits (which warrants confession), while they also suffer because that same culture fuels perpetual dissatisfaction.⁵ Our children grow up with the understanding that they fall short of God's intended purpose in things they do; in addition, they feel that they simply are not good enough for anyone, including God. Alongside their feelings of guilt and inadequacy is the image of an angry God who punishes us by killing his only son, making things right in the world through violence.

When children who love Spiderman and other superheroes are trained in the Christus victor model, they may connect Jesus to an ideology of winning at all costs.

Narrative Christus victor

Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective gives support for several views of the atonement, including Christ as victor and Christ as substitute, as well as the moral influence theory (which I have not been able to touch on here).⁶ I am grateful that this confession recognizes the multiplicity of images present in the biblical text. We do our congregations a disservice when we advocate only one image of the atonement when the Bible includes a richness of imagery that invites each of us into the text in different ways at various times in our lives.

Images of Christ as victor over death, as sacrifice, as substitute, and as a representation of love are all present in the biblical text. This being said, not all images are helpful for children. One version of the Christ-the-victor view, which Denny Weaver characterizes as “narrative Christus victor” seems to me to hold out good possibilities as an alternative way to introduce children to the atoning work of Christ.

In the narrative Christus victor model, Jesus' death is not required by God; rather, it is required by the evil powers at work

in the world. Jesus' mission was to bring the reign of God into the world, and that mission brought Jesus into direct opposition to the evil powers.⁷ In Jesus' submission to the cross he makes visible a kingdom that does not rely on violence. The victory of Christ does not come in his death. It comes in his resurrection, which demonstrates God's ability to overcome the violence of the evil powers.⁸ Further, God is not the agent of the crucifixion, as is the case in satisfaction theory. In contrast to the older *Christus victor* model, God does not barter with, provide payment to, or attempt to deceive the devil.

As sinners, our role in the atonement is not simply to confess personal sin but also to acknowledge that we participate in countering the reign of God in the world. Rather than focusing on the necessity of Jesus' death for our individual sins, in this model we are invited to see that all the people in the stories of the crucifixion were really on one side, and that Jesus died trying to help them move to the other side. It was not the good disciples versus the bad Romans. All people are trapped in sin. And even though he was killed, Jesus offers forgiveness, loving us so much that he wants us to be a part of God's kingdom with him.

Children do need to learn to recognize and name personal sin, so that they too can experience the release from guilt that comes from forgiveness. That said, I think we have been overly concerned in the recent past with convicting young children of the things they have done wrong, while inviting adults to focus on their roles in a sinful world. It would be more helpful to present sin in a more corporate manner for children and allow for an understanding of individual sin to emerge as the self develops.

School-age children have a strong sense of and need for justice and fairness. They understand that the world is not a fair place and sometimes people get hurt or are treated badly. They also understand that those who have all of the "toys" may not want to give them up, and that sometimes those with more toys fight back when they are expected to share. We teach children that Jesus came to make things right and to show people how to bring about the kingdom of God through their loving actions. I believe that children are capable of understanding that Jesus was killed by those who were angered by his teachings. God is not a God who needs to be satisfied because he has been dishonoured. Rather

God is a God of love who desires that all humanity be in relationship with the divine and live as those who know the values of the kingdom. Though we stand with the evil that put Christ to death, we are invited by God to change sides and to stand with Christ, free from the powers that have enslaved us, free to live transformed lives in the reign of God.⁹

A final strength of the narrative Christus victor model is its emphasis on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as "the culminating revelation of the reign of God in history."¹⁰ When we consider only Christ's death, we are separated from any ethical implications for Christian living. Those ethics are precisely what Jesus died to make visible. We cannot consider Christ's atoning work apart from the broader biblical narrative in which God is at work in the world throughout history. In the story of the people of Israel we see their continuing attempts to understand who they are as God's people and how God's reign comes into being.¹¹ And in the narrative of Jesus' ministry we see most clearly what the kingdom of God is supposed to look like and how we are to follow Christ in life.¹²

In some churches we have been relieved of responsibility for dealing with Jesus' death as a part of this narrative simply because

Though we stand with the evil that put Christ to death, we are invited by God to change sides and to stand with Christ, free from the powers that have enslaved us, free to live transformed lives in the reign of God.

there is no Sunday school class on Good Friday. On Palm Sunday Jesus rides into Jerusalem, and on Easter he walks about, a risen Lord. But if we want our children to know Jesus, we have to also allow them to understand that Jesus really died, and we need to honour the love for Jesus we have nurtured in them by being honest about how he died. Our children need to learn about Jesus' commitment to nonviolence, which is a powerful counternarrative to the myth of redemptive violence that is a common theme

in today's culture. If we simply footnote for children on Easter Sunday that Jesus died for our sins—in some way apart from the Gospel narratives given to us—then we distort their understanding of the kingdom of God.

The narrative Christus victor model is not the one theory of atonement that we must embrace, but it is a strong foundation to

which further understandings and images can be added as children develop cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually into adulthood. I cannot find in the narrative Christus victor view concepts that would need to be unlearned as children grow in faith.

Children who have developed a strong image of Christ's mission in life, his nonviolent opposition to the powers, the work of God in history, and the loving and just nature of God may be able to better understand their own personal sin in relation to Christ's call to follow. And they may in fact choose to accept that call, knowing that the invitation comes from the God who loves them and who has been at work in them all along.

Notes

¹ This is not to say that biblical grounding is not important; indeed, it is the only place we can begin in formulating our theology of the atonement. However, the scope of this article simply does not allow for in-depth discussion on the biblical foundations for each theory.

² J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 14–15.

³ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁴ John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 50.

⁵ Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 259.

⁶ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 36. The confession affirms Christus victor, moral influence, and substitutionary theories of atonement, though not specifically the satisfaction theory presented by Anselm.

⁷ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹² *Ibid.*, 80.

About the author

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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

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

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 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.

According to Anabaptist conviction, the Bible is most fruitfully read in community through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If we can trust that God is at work in our reading, 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

Our initial forays in reading the Bible with youth are opportunities to strengthen our trust in the Spirit’s presence and to practice holy persistence as we develop new skills and learn new practices.

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.

Men and women of the Bible as spiritual companions

Gareth Brandt

The Bible is full of stories about people, real people with bodies and minds, and with an array of experiences, relationships, and emotions. How odd, then, that we so often turn to the Bible as little more than an instruction manual for communal and personal life. What would happen if we expanded our reliance on the Bible to include seeing the people in its pages as companions in our life with God?

In a cursory survey of our college library I found few resources to assist us in this quest —apart from historical novels based on

Christian spiritual formation takes place primarily in the context of relationships: we grow in faith in community. What would happen if we saw the people in the pages of the Bible as companions in our life with God?

biblical characters, and a few old “dictionaries” of biblical persons. And almost nothing has been written on the subject in the last fifty years!¹

The Bible is a major source in the work of Christian spiritual formation. Such formation takes place primarily in the context of relationships: we grow in faith in community. In a culture characterized by alienation and fragmentation, we more than ever need companions to walk with us in our lives as Jesus followers. No doubt the brothers and sisters we share life with in our churches are

most significant for our formation, but the men and women of the Bible can also accompany us on the journey of following Jesus.

But how can these biblical believers become our spiritual companions? In order for that to happen, we’ll need to shift our perspective in two ways. First, we must see the Bible as a story of real people, a collection of human narratives rather than a series of divine propositions. Second, we must embrace the women and men of the Bible as fellow travelers on the journey rather than as models of morality or objects of study.

The Bible as a collection of stories about people

The Bible is a dynamic, living story of faith, not a static propositional statement of faith. From Genesis to Revelation the story unfolds. It is the story of the interaction between people and their Creator. Many people are part of this drama, from Abraham and Sarah and their growing family, to Ruth and Boaz, to kings and prophets, to Jesus and his disciples and followers. Even the people listed in genealogies and those who remain nameless are part of the story. These people can become our companions. Hebrews 11 invites us to an awareness of the cloud of witnesses cheering us on from the stands (Heb. 12:1), who can also become our running partners in the race of life.

The climax of the salvation drama is a person, Jesus Christ, who brings together the divine and the human. Truth is a person, not a doctrine or statement. Jesus says, "I am . . . the truth." God's primary and ultimate revelation of what divinity is like is not a book but a person. The four Gospels tell the story of this person, but the entire Bible includes the stories of the people who were the precursors to and the followers of Jesus.

The Bible is a story of people and their relationships with God. "The Bible is not concerned with right morality, right piety or right doctrine. Rather it is concerned with *right relationships* between God and God's people, between all the sisters and brothers in this community, and between God's people and the created world."² An ordinary book we can study and dissect, analyze and criticize, but when we approach the Bible we must remember that it is a living book. Its authors and characters are in conversation with us.

Maybe it would help if we gave up thinking of the Bible as a completed book and thought of it instead as an unfolding script in which we have been invited to play a continuing role, following the lead of the main actors whose names and lines are recorded in it.

People in the Bible as spiritual companions

When we see the Bible as story, we begin to embrace its characters as companions who are like us rather than as models we should emulate or learn lessons from. If I read the stories of people in the Bible propositionally, in order to extract lessons from them

on how to live, I may end up feeling like a failure, or perceiving them as failures. Too often preachers have tried to extract three propositional truths from a story, when a better idea might be to see how we can gain a friend through encountering the text—someone who has already been down the road we are now traveling. In the midst of a difficult experience, I'd rather have an experienced friend walk with me than any number of people handing out advice to me. I want the companionship of someone I can identify with.

Too often preachers have tried to extract propositional truths from a story, when a better idea might be to see how we can gain a friend through encountering the text—someone who has already been down the road we are now traveling.

One rejoinder might be that this approach will merely reinforce our bad habits and make us feel good, but it will not lead to transformation. I would counter that spiritual change rarely happens because we receive moral instruction on what we should do or should not do. Consider the example of Jesus, who most of the time taught by telling stories that people could enter into. His listeners did not necessarily feel good as a result; the stories didn't reinforce their bad habits. Instead his hearers were invited to identify with the characters and events of his stories, and thus they were challenged to see themselves differently. They gained a new perspective, and unless they were self-righteous and stuck in their ways and just got angry, they were transformed. Something similar can happen to us when we identify with the stories of people in the Bible. "As we put ourselves into the situations of these men and women of God—not idealized out of all resemblance to truth, but in the real-life situation as the Bible presents them—we find something happening to us."³ The God who met them meets us.

A case study: Joseph

In the research and group work leading to the writing of *Under Construction: Reframing Men's Spirituality*,⁴ I asked men, who's your favorite Bible man? Almost as many men in the Bible were mentioned as there were men responding! I concluded that no one man in the Bible can provide a complete model of male spirituality; different men identify with different men in the Bible.

Who's your favourite man in the Bible? I might answer by naming the man I most admire or most want to be like, but maybe instead I should name the man I identify with most closely. That man could be my spiritual friend. The men I asked didn't give a lot of votes to David and Moses and the apostle Paul. Those they mentioned repeatedly included Jacob, because he struggled, and Thomas, because he had doubts. Neither struggles nor doubts make the front page news—not like David committing adultery or Moses committing murder—but struggles and doubts are the stuff of ordinary human life. I would guess more women might identify with Ruth, and her rather ordinary life, than with Esther, who won a beauty contest and became queen.

I chose the Joseph narrative as the outline for my book on men's spirituality. Why did I choose Joseph as a spiritual companion for men who read the book? The initial impetus was a dream I had had about Joseph, but Joseph was a good choice for a number of other reasons. I could identify with Joseph's internal struggles of pride, temptation, and revenge. I have also experienced woundedness, alienation, reconciliation, and vocational success, as he did. He is someone with whom I and other "ordinary" men might be able to identify.

My use of the Joseph character and story was more allegorical than exegetical, although my themes were in line with the exegesis of the entire narrative. Old Testament narratives must be interpreted as narratives, not illustrations of propositional points. All of Genesis 37–50 is one story, so one should really consider the entire narrative as one unit. But for our purposes here, a smaller, more manageable unit from the larger narrative can illustrate the two ways of reading a story discussed above.

Genesis 39:2–23 tells the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It is a powerful story, and not only because Joseph as a young man resists his boss's wife's sexual advances. That obvious exterior story has given rise to any number of moralizing sermons about the three R's of purity: resist, respond, run (or whatever other clever alliterative scheme the preacher can muster). If instead we consider the primary theme of the entire narrative—Yahweh's protection of Joseph in order to save Joseph's family—we might see a deeper message, one we can identify with as real human beings who face similar struggles and temptations. I too am tempted. I

too struggle and vacillate in temptation: will I be true to myself and God, maintaining my integrity, or will I yield to the momentary pleasure that boosts my ego in the present moment?

The former way of looking at the story may produce a clear message about proper moral behaviour, but the latter elicits our deeper reflection on spirituality and identity. Seeing people in the

Like Joseph in his encounter with Potiphar's wife, I too struggle and vacillate in temptation: will I be true to myself and God, maintaining my integrity, or will I yield to the momentary pleasure that boosts my ego in the present moment?

Bible as companions rather than models leads in the long run to deeper transformation. The former approach is more like the parent who runs through a list of do's and don'ts for the teenager leaving the house; the latter is more like a call to remember who you are. Our identification with people in biblical stories helps form an intrinsic morality, coming from within rather than being imposed from without.

In the former approach, negative stories provide models of what not to do, and from positive stories we derive models of what to do. But when we see people in the Bible as

companions on the journey, the most important thing is not identifying a moral of the story tacked on at the end; the most important thing is the story itself. What do friends do for us? We usually reject or ignore the advice of "friends" who tell us just what we should do. Real friends walk with us and help us discern our path by sharing out of their own experiences. When we see the journey of a friend, we see our own course more clearly. The stories of people in the Bible can function similarly. Women and men of the Bible become our friends, and then in their stories we see our own more clearly and begin to be transformed by the grand story of the gospel.

Conclusion

The effects of embracing men and women of the Bible as spiritual companions are numerous. These effects could include our recovery of the lost art of biographical preaching, and finding new ways to conduct group Bible studies. We could also uncover the great potential in this approach for pastoral counselling, spiritual direction, and for our personal spiritual disciplines. Seeing the

women and men of the Bible as a cloud of witnesses is not a new idea but one to which we do well to give renewed emphasis and apply our creativity in these times when people crave companions on the way.

Notes

¹ One of the only recent books of this type that I found was Virginia Stem Owens, *Daughters of Eve: Seeing Ourselves in Women of the Bible* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2007).

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2001), 150.

³ William Sanford LaSor, *Great Personalities of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1959), 4.

⁴ Gareth Brandt, *Under Construction: Reframing Men's Spirituality* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2009).

About the author

Gareth Brandt is professor of practical theology at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, British Columbia, and author of *Under Construction: Reframing Men's Spirituality* (Herald Press, 2009).

The text has something to tell us! Bible teaching in the Meserete Kristos Church, Ethiopia

an interview with Kelbessa Muleta Demena, by Mary H. Schertz

What's a typical Bible study in Ethiopia? Where does it take place?

I'll speak specifically about the Meserete Kristos Church. Our Bible studies take place in church members' houses. I would like to be very specific, speaking especially of what happens in the capital city and in the towns. The rural area Bible study is different from cities and towns.

Your home is in Addis Ababa?

Yes. When I'm referring to Bible study, I'm talking about small group Bible study and mostly this comes from our small group experience and home-to-home underground experience.

So this is something you did when the communists were in power?

Exactly.

And you have continued the pattern, even though other options would be available now?

Yes, we have freedom, relatively, to meet in a church building. The building is a very simple meeting place for Sunday worship. But we are still trying to organize all members into a home-to-home Bible study program and then a prayer program as well.

Are prayer and Bible study part of the same meeting or are they separate?

We used to have the prayer meeting and Bible study separately to devote ourselves to long prayer and in Bible study to just focus on Bible study and a short prayer. But nowadays things are changing and people get busy, especially in cities, and it's hard to find a specific time for prayer and Bible study separately, so now we are trying to have it together, part of the time for prayer and part for Bible study, usually for about two hours altogether, maybe one hour for prayer, and one hour for Bible study.

Which do you do first, or does it change?

Usually prayer is first. When people come, usually the person who comes first just starts praying, and we do not necessarily wait till everybody comes.

So that means people come quietly and reverently. There's not lots of small talk before you start?

Right. Usually we start with prayer. Then after prayer we greet each other and chat a little bit and then Bible study. Then we stay together for some extra time of fellowship. The time between prayer and Bible study is very short, just an exchange of greeting, because we want to keep our focus. We want to keep ourselves prayerful.

I find it very interesting that you come in with a certain kind of reverence then, or quiet expectation.

Oh, exactly. We have high expectations for Bible study. Our Bible study is a time to have fellowship with each other, and also it's a time to have fellowship with God. We have high reverence for God's presence. We bring whatever our burden, our challenge, our questions, our difficulties, our struggles to God during our prayer session. Prayer is opening ourselves to God, inviting God and inviting the Holy Spirit's guidance to listen to what God is speaking to us. So we have a high expectation.

How is the leader of the Bible study chosen? By the pastor?

Each Bible study group recruits potential Bible study leaders from their own group, looking at each member's activity, contribution, understanding, interaction, and insight. The leader is the one who intentionally recruits other leaders by observing their gifts and by observing their commitments. Their commitment is an important thing.

How big are the Bible studies generally? How many people?

Usually between twelve and fifteen.

They're the people in a certain neighborhood?

Exactly. Their location matters.

Do people walk to the meetings?

Usually, yes, because it's arranged according to the area.

Do you meet evenings in people's homes?

Usually, yes.

Do you move from home to home or do you stay in one person's home for most of the meetings?

One group usually stays in one home.

And what about the children?

Unless they're very small, they stay at home, because we have extended family.

So babysitting is not an issue.

Not an issue.

Do you have a curriculum for your Bible studies? What is it like?

It includes several basic teachings of the Bible. Sometimes we study a book, such as Galatians, and sometimes we focus on a theme like prayer or purity, something like that.

How does the leader get ready?

We have a special group for the leaders, where all leaders from the whole church come together. If it's a big church, we have two or three. They come together and study together, and then there's Bible study for the leaders and Bible study for the members.

How often do the leaders meet?

Once a week.

So if you're leading a Bible study in Ethiopia in the towns or the capital, then you're committing yourself to two meetings a week, a leaders' Bible study and then with the group.

Yes.

That's a big commitment.

You are right. (Chuckles)

And what do the leaders do when they get together? Do they go through the lesson?

Yes, they study together. And we have a different kind of approach. We have inductive Bible study. It involves study questions for a specific passage. For example, if it is a book study, they study a book together and try to prepare study questions. We have a special group who devotes themselves to create those

Bible study materials. That is usually the role of the education committee. We have different committees that do different things. We have an education committee, a prayer committee, etc. Those teams or groups devote themselves to organizing whatever is their area. So the educational committee is preparing teaching materials, and if an inductive Bible study is planned, they encourage all members to read for themselves, to learn something from the text and share with each other, rather than lecturing.

So people prepare before they come?

They study and read ahead and then they come together. We respond to those study questions for our text. We are trying to learn what exactly that passage says to us.

How many questions for a session?

If we're planning to study the Sermon on the Mount, we divide those three chapters into paragraphs. For example, the Beatitudes we take as one lesson, and we prepare maybe ten questions. A few questions focus on the context and the content of the story, and some questions focus on the interpretation, and some questions focus on application. So mostly we are doing those three things, whether we are studying the Gospels, or Epistles, or Old Testament books.

Are some studies controversial? Do you have disagreements?

Yes, sometimes.

Can you give me an example? Relationship to the state—would that be controversial? Would you have some differences in how you read Romans 13?

It was controversial, because the text encourages us to view rulers as God's agents or God's servants. For some it was really hard to view the communists as God's agents because so many people were killed and we had really bad experiences as a conscientious objector congregation. It is really hard to accept, and to say, "Yes, they're doing God's will; yes, they have the sword which is given—they get all this power from God to kill some people." I mean, it was hard to understand those things.

Well, just because God ordained government doesn't mean that government is always being obedient to God, does it?

Exactly. However, despite this controversy we learned something. Yes, what they are doing is bad, but it's OK to find ways to say no to what government is doing. But it's not OK to hate the government officials, even when they are doing wrong. Some people lost their family members and it's easy to be angry. It's not theory. It was something we were dealing with every day, so it was really hard. *You cannot avoid it. Whereas we in this country can avoid things pretty easily. Do you ever disagree about what the Holy Spirit is saying through a particular text, or what God is saying?*

I don't think we disagree if we see God is speaking. Sometimes we struggle to understand what the text really says, and we need to work to understand more.

I just wondered if there were times when you had to make a decision about what the Holy Spirit is saying. How do those things become resolved if there is any difference of opinion about what the Spirit is saying?

If the person says that he or she gets a message from the Holy Spirit on a certain issue, and if that message contradicts what is written, then that is one way of evaluating or discerning whether that message is from God. We believe the Holy Spirit does not contradict the written word and that is how we discern. And of course, there are things which are not directly written and which are hard to discern, and we bring that to our group, and we discuss and pray together and we support each other to have more discernment. Of course individuals finally need to decide on certain issues for themselves, but still we support each other as a group.

So the written word and the community both assist in the discernment?

Exactly. Both are part of the discernment process.

Do you think the church was more faithful during the communist time?

The church was faithful then, and it is faithful now—but there is more confusion and there are challenges in terms of teaching related to freedom. Some of the controversy has been related to teaching about the health and wealth issues, the prosperity gospel, and it became part of the Bible study discussion. It was very important to address those teachings and to give basic lectures. It was not something leaders could just watch and say “Let's just let

everybody discuss it.” This teaching requires some authority, some deeper theological understanding.

And some guidance?

Exactly.

Has attendance increased or fallen off since the communists are no longer in power?

Well—it’s amazing that the church grew faster during the communist presence than now.

It grew faster under the communists than it has since the communists?

Exactly. The church meetings were just small groups gathering underground. It was hard even for the believers to know how much we were growing. Leaders knew, but it was not something everybody knew, partly because we needed to protect ourselves from the communists. It was better not to have information. Then the church grew very, very fast. The church is still growing but not as fast.

Do the participants in the Bible study have interaction between the Sunday meetings and the Bible study meetings? People are friends and they’re in and out of each others’ houses and they know what the problems are for the most part?

Oh, yes. We are community oriented, so the church is almost like family.

So the Bible study isn’t the only place people socialize?

No, it’s more than that.

You mentioned that you have a curriculum. Does somebody sit back ever and say, OK, over five years we’ve studied six Old Testament books and one New Testament book, and we need to study more New Testament books. Is there somebody who takes that sort of long view?

Yes. Especially if we do basic teaching with a book study, that kind of teaching is centralized.

For the whole country?

For the whole region, and sometimes even for the whole country. We divided the country into different regions, and we have special key leaders in each region, and we have teaching programs or training programs in each region twice a year. So we have a

curriculum, and the key leaders in each region have their own sessions before teaching in small groups in their own churches.

So it's pretty organized and intentional? Are there requirements for leaders?

Of course. If they are teachers, they are required to take all courses, whether the study is regional or central. It's important that they can communicate well, if they're going to teach.

The leaders are evaluated on content?

Exactly.

And also on teaching ability? And their spiritual life?

And their spiritual life. And testimony from others, whether they are living what they believe, etc.

Is there anything you'd like to say, Kelbessa, that I haven't asked about?

I don't know whether we talked about the role of the Holy Spirit in Bible study.

What do you want to say about that?

We have a conviction the Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to understand the text and to live the text and to share the text, and that is very, very important. It's not something we can do by ourselves. We really understand that scripture is—no matter how much we try to learn—something beyond us. It's something that belongs to God, so we invite God's presence, to really get the point. In the Emmaus story from Luke 24, when Jesus spoke to the disciples, they were sensing something deeper and their hearts were burning.

Yes. *"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?"*

Yes, that is how we see it. The role of the Holy Spirit is not only giving us understanding, but also making the word alive. For example, when we are reading that healing can take place, physical healing, we strongly believe that whatever works there in the Bible also works today. Some of the miracles that happened in the book of Acts are also happening in our ministry. And that is certainly the role of the Holy Spirit. We see the blind get sight. That was what really frustrated the communists. They tried to

discourage the teaching, and they tried to counter it, but something was taking place.

And they didn't know what to do about it . . .

They were sending their spies and they were really testing what was happening. And it was true! And you know, it's hard to argue against it. The best way is just to shut up.

And let the acts speak for themselves.

Yes, that is exactly what I mean when I speak of the role of the Holy Spirit. It's not something we produce. God is working actively with God's word. God's word is not Paul's word or Peter's word or somebody else's. If it's Peter's word, Peter has died. Paul is not here. But something is happening, which means Christ is alive.

So present experience proves the text, over and over and over.

Exactly. And it gives us hope and it gives us courage to give ourselves despite what is taking place. Persecution is taking place, even in different regions, even now. But believers are still committing themselves to follow Christ despite the hardships. I think that is naturally impossible.

We are not capable of that as human beings.

Exactly. Yes. If this word is not God's word, why should I give myself, why endanger myself by committing myself to God? But I see God's grace and God's encouragement, God's power to commit myself. The more I commit myself, the more I see God working and people getting freedom from their bondage. In my context people live under demonic force and that is a serious thing. They fear demons. They fear Satan and they fear spiritual force. The spiritual force in my context is not our imagination.

It's real and present.

It's not something we create psychologically.

You don't make your demons. They're already there.

When new believers start reading, just reading the Bible, sometimes demons reveal themselves. But people get free from that, and they find peace. They find peace within themselves and they find consolation among their family. Their lives change. So over and over and over we see how this text is alive, how God is

working through these things. That is what I mean when I talk about the role of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is not something we just read just for information. It gives us transformation. This is the word which gives us formation in our Christian life to live as disciples of Christ. That's why, in our seminary class "Teaching the Bible in the Congregation," I try to verbalize my opinion when it seems to me that the Bible is not taken seriously. This is what I'm observing. My observation might be wrong, but . . .

Oh, it's not entirely wrong, for sure.

You know, farmers in Ethiopia are reading the Bible. They're not highly educated. Some of them have only completed grade three, grade four; that is the only formal education they have. They can barely read this Bible, but they are excited and they are sharing with others, and their sharing changes the community's life. They're sharing the consolation among the tribes who kill each other. And their sharing changes the family relationships, the husband and wife, the children. Some of them get freedom from addiction.

In your country you are reading the Bible in the context of God's activity among you as a community. That's the context and that's what affects how you read the Bible and what you understand of it.

Yes.

And that is the work of the Spirit.

I get frustrated when the Bible is viewed only as a subject of my research, something I work on to test whether it is correct. And when I become silent about the texts, and when the texts almost become silent, I just say, "No! No! The text has something to tell us!" That's my deep cry.

About the interviewee

Kelbessa Muleta Demena graduated from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, in May 2010, and plans to return to Ethiopia in November 2010 to pastor and teach there. He is married and has two children. Read the full text of this interview or listen to it by following the link at www.MennoVision.org.

Resources on teaching the Bible in the congregation

Jewel Gingerich Longenecker

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

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.

“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

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.

“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.”

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 psychol-

"The value of the critical method is that it . . . preserves the right of the text to be different from what we want. . . . If we are interested in being transformed, and not simply confirmed in what we already know, the critical approach is indispensable."

ogy. 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

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* (Scottsdale, 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.

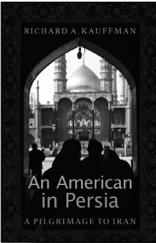
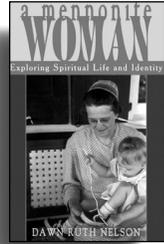
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

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.

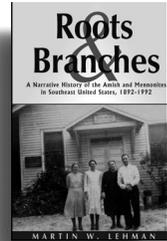
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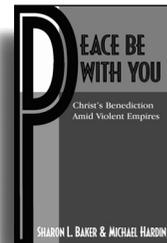
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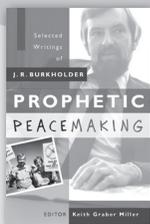
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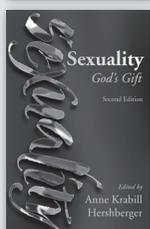
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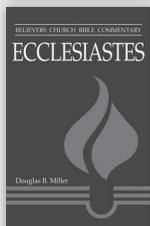
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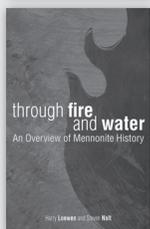
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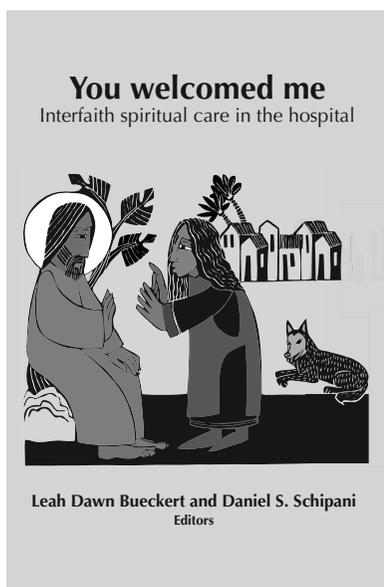
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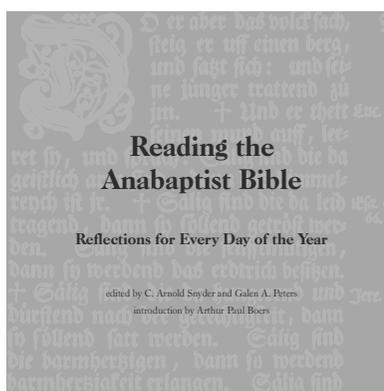
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