
Opening the Bible to the Congregation

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Although I did not learn about St. Augustine of Hippo or read his *Confessions* until almost a decade later, in many ways my story of being drawn to God through the Scriptures mirrors Augustine's account of the turning point of his life. Prompted by the song of a child singing in a garden, "Pick it up and read, pick it up and read," Augustine, who had been struggling against a life of obedience to God, opened a Bible and read Romans 13:13-14. "Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." His struggle was over. The Word had been clearly spoken to him, and he could no longer either deny it or run from it.

My first personal encounter with Scripture was likewise life changing. Having been raised in a Roman Catholic home and attending church and Catholic school, I was certainly familiar with the Bible, particularly with the stories of Jesus in the Gospels. I remember flip-chart art of familiar gospel scenes standing at the front of my classroom in first and second grade—Jesus of Nazareth surrounded by children and flowers, the waves on the Sea of Galilee billowing in a storm while he stood at the stern of a fishing boat commanding the waves, "Be still!"; a large crowd of men and women receiving a distribution of bread on a hillside. I remember the lector reading psalms at Mass, and the response we spoke: "The word of the Lord, thanks be to God." I remember singing songs that paraphrased the words of Jesus from the Gospel of John, "I am the bread of life," and, "I am the light of the world."

With that background, something happened to me when I was fourteen. Within me grew a strange, gnawing hunger to read for myself these very familiar words and stories. Borrowing a children's Living Bible from one of my friends (there was no Bible in our home), I came home from school one afternoon and read the Gospel of Matthew at one sitting. I am not given to "single-moment" conversion stories. I have never been able to tell the exact date and time in which I was "saved." The only thing I might identify is this experience of my first encounter with Scripture. In that afternoon, and in the days that followed, my eyes and heart were opened, so that I came to know and to love Jesus Christ in a way that I had not before. I came to know a person and a presence who, up to then, had been merely a historical figure or an idea. It was like staying up all

night talking to a friend and coming to know him or her in an intimate way, an intimacy never experienced in our prior, casual day to day contact.

The invitation from the editors of this journal was to speak from a pastoral perspective about opening the Bible to the congregation. As a minister of Word and sacrament, it would seem obvious that opening the Bible to my people is at the heart of my calling. Every Sunday, after the public reading of Scripture, my role is to speak the Word of God to the people gathered together—to proclaim what God is doing or has done, to illumine, and to exhort the faithful to live a life worthy of their calling. The late Howard Hageman, preaching at the installation of a close friend to a new ministry, reminded us of the high calling of the preacher in the ministry of Word and sacrament. His sermon was entitled, "Twenty Minutes to Raise the Dead." To open the Bible to the congregation in preaching is to proclaim life, the resurrected life of Jesus Christ, made manifest in their lives.

As pastor as well as preacher, I also open the Bible to the congregation when I teach a Bible study or share with friends in small groups, when I am at the bedside of a sick or dying person and I recite a familiar and comforting biblical passage, and when the congregation joins to sing a hymn or song of praise taken from Scripture.

To declare that to open the Bible to the congregation is at the heart of Christian ministry is not to say that there are no challenges inherent to this task. Challenges there are, and I believe they are of two kinds: there are internal challenges which have to do with my (or any pastor's) posture toward Scripture, and there are external challenges which have more to do with the disposition and experience of the people whom God has gathered into the church.

Internal and Personal Challenges

Let me begin with the first, the internal challenge. In his book, *Working the Angles*, Eugene Peterson puts it very clearly: "It is an immense irony when the very practice of our work results in abandoning our work. In the course of doing our work we leave our work. But in reading, teaching, and preaching the Scriptures it happens: we cease to listen to the Scriptures and thereby undermine the intent of having Scripture in the first place." The pastor occupied (should I say preoccupied?) with the activity of opening the Bible to the congregation may easily find that his or her heart is not necessarily open to the Bible anymore.

In my own case, I continually fight the temptation to read Scripture professionally—to mine it for information or for something about which to preach or teach. When the Bible becomes an object to be studied or a tool to be used, rather than the doorway into a relationship or the vehicle for a personal presence, something vital is lost. As Peterson has said, in the busy-ness and the

business of opening the Bible to the congregation, pastors themselves often stop listening.

What, then, are some ways that reading the Bible can remain fresh for the pastor? What practices safeguard the Bible's power to be the vehicle for knowing God and talking to God rather than merely talking about God? I have found that some practices from my Roman Catholic roots have been very helpful.

During my first years as a new pastor in upstate New York, I became acquainted with the Ignatian method of reading Scripture. Named after St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, this approach is based on an imaginative interaction between the reader and the Bible story. Readers who project themselves into the biblical stories become a part of them, Ignatius taught. In the parable of the good Samaritan, for example, readers might imagine themselves alternatively in the roles of the priest or Levite who passed by the wounded man on the road, the wounded man left to die, or the Samaritan. The purpose of such exercises is to make the biblical scene come alive as we place ourselves in the stories, so that we experience them in fresh ways. When this method became part of my formal education, I realized that I had been practicing it intuitively as a teenager in my first encounter with Scripture.

Another life-giving approach to Scripture for me as a pastor is the classic Benedictine method of *lectio divina*. In *lectio divina*, one reads Scripture meditatively and prayerfully. In attending to certain words or phrases as they speak to the heart or imagination, one listens for God's voice. Trained in seminary in the modern, historical critical method of interpreting Scripture, I breathed easier when people I respected and trusted endorsed the Benedictine method. It was as though I had finally been allowed to get out of my head and listen intently to Scripture with my heart, my imagination, and my body. I felt that I had recovered my first love of Scripture.

Several years ago, a close friend and colleague was granted a three-month sabbatical from her position as associate pastor in a neighboring Presbyterian church. In the true spirit of sabbatical, Kate was careful not to plan too many activities for those months. One discipline she did adopt, however, was to memorize psalms during her daily walks.

The memorization of biblical texts is probably as old as the Bible itself, and as common as most people's Sunday school experience. Although the practice is not given much weight today, in the discipline of memorization words of Scripture become so much a part of us that they begin to form the way we think, speak, and view the world. I cannot imagine a better place to begin the discipline of memorization than the Book of Psalms.

When as a teenager that encounter with Scripture changed my life, I practiced Bible memorization through "Scripture songs." These Bible verses set to music became part of the background noise in my room. Even when I work in

my study today, I prefer to listen to music in which the language and images of Scripture are given verbatim or in paraphrase. For me, these songs set the right context for work. They are absorbed into my mind at both conscious and subconscious levels, so that at times I find myself singing them all unaware.

External and Communal Challenges

Let me now shift from my personal experiences with the Bible to the external challenges of opening the Bible to my congregation. The people God has called and gathered into the church today bring such a diversity of experiences that the task of opening the Bible to them is indeed challenging.

Our Reformed tradition has always held the sermon in high regard, and I concur with that valuation. The sermon is the only real engagement with Scripture for many (perhaps most) Christians, and for many pastors it offers their sole opportunity to have a "captive audience." Choral readings, congregational singing, and other uses of Scripture in worship also help steep Christians in the Bible. Yet, without underestimating the power of either sermons or worship, I am convinced that some reading and interpretative skills, the appreciation of nuances, and the wrestling with and personal appropriation of the Scriptures are best cultivated in small study and discussion groups. Unfortunately, too few Christians are involved in this sort of Bible study. Clearly, there is a desperate need for lively Bible study, and pastors might well seek ways to ease the fear of intimacy that keeps many parishioners from such groups.

Under the heading of external and communal challenges belong two difficult dilemmas that I have experienced in trying to open the Bible to my congregation's members. Regrettably, I can offer no quick solutions to these dilemmas, but perhaps the very act of describing them will play a small role in understanding and addressing the challenges they represent.

I introduce the first one with the observation that often, on the surface at least, congregations can suffer from an over-familiarity with Scripture. This is especially true among those who have been firmly raised in the Christian tradition. Many have "heard it all before." They know exactly what is being taught, what represents what, and how this passage plugs into a familiar doctrine. Rarely is a biblical story or passage (familiar or not) approached with a genuine readiness to have categories, presuppositions, or prejudices challenged. Along with this tired and flat approach to the Bible often comes the same challenge that I also continue to struggle with personally—a tendency to hold the text at arm's length, to find a safe and sterile understanding "out there," and to look to "learn" rather than be encountered or transformed.

But if many church members have been dulled to the Bible, there is among others an ever-increasing biblical illiteracy. To have the biblically jaded and the biblically illiterate in the same congregation poses both a serious challenge and a

genuine opportunity. Recently, a family with very minimal church background came into our congregation. Friends invited their children to participate in church activities that included our Wednesday evening program. Drawn by friendship and fun, they became part of the community. But the situation became strained when their sixth-grade son resisted attending Christian education classes. He claimed he felt "out of it." While the eight or ten other youth in his group were able to answer questions and enter into discussions, he had little or no frame of reference to work with the material presented. The biblical characters his friends discussed and the stories they recited were largely meaningless to him. Much as I wanted to say, "Stick with it, and in time you will become familiar with all of this," I also knew that this was an uncomfortable situation for a self-conscious adolescent. I wonder how many adults who sit in our pews feel the same way but are afraid to admit that much of what they hear in church is "Greek to them." And how do we include and speak both to those for whom the Bible is a "strange new world" and to those who are convinced that they know its landscape inside out?

There are, of course, no easy answers, and I am often unaware of my efforts to connect with both of these audiences. Nevertheless, I do sense a danger in over-correcting to relieve the boredom of the overly familiar. Our society is obsessed with novelty, with newness, with an everything-you-knew-up-to-now-has-been-wrong attitude. Preaching falls into that trap when we think that the familiar, classic understanding of a text must be scorned or dismissed as wrong. Then the flashy preacher can ride to the rescue with the latest, avant-garde interpretation, a new, nearly opposite reading to everything the people have ever heard. While biblical preaching needs to be fresh and able to turn our world upside down, I also try to remember that part of my task is to make some people remember, recall, repeat, and hold on to the simple and the classic. The weary, overly familiar need to hear God's Word again and anew, while the illiterate need to hear it for the first time. The "prayer for illumination" (a brief prayer prior to the public reading of Scripture), asks that the Holy Spirit may cause Scripture to address both the jaded and the naïve.

From my experience with small group Bible studies, I would say that neither the biblically informed nor uninformed dare to ask hard questions of Scripture, whether theological or factual. For example, in a group recently moving through the Book of Exodus, no one raised a question about how fitting it was for God to harden Pharaoh's heart. Nobody wondered about how Pharaoh's magicians could also turn water to blood—neither about how they could actually accomplish it, nor about where they would find water left to be changed if Moses had already performed the miracle. Is it possible that intentionally or not, pastors have taught their people to turn a blind eye to these difficulties?

Christians familiar with the Bible may no longer even see the questions. Or, perhaps they have given up asking questions because in their experience a quick,

airtight explanation was always given to muffle their curiosity. Newcomers to Scripture may stifle their questions to avoid appearing impertinent or lacking in faith. As a Bible study leader, I try to point out some of the questions and problems raised by the text. My purpose is neither to denigrate Scripture, nor to show its "humanness," nor to display evidence of editing. Instead, I hope this freedom to probe witnesses to my confidence in the Bible. Scripture does not need to be handled with kid gloves. Confidence is not displayed by tidy, unassailable explanations, but by letting questions sit, paradoxes emerge, balances sway, or by saying, "I don't know."

The second difficult dilemma I encounter when opening the Bible with my congregation is that, for most members, it seems the Bible must be an absolutely accurate, rigidly literal document, or else it is simply a collection of powerful, inspirational myths. Many people have told me that, somewhere in their adult Christian education, their Sunday school categories for Scripture were destroyed. For some this was a crisis of faith, but for others it was an intellectual liberation, a shedding of the shackles of a rigid, anti-intellectual upbringing. In either case, the only path presented to maintain some faith and to continue to view the Bible as beneficial was to accept a sort of mythical, classical literature understanding of Scripture. Having rejected a narrow, fundamentalist reading, they became "enlightened," valuing Scripture because of its profound expressions and insights about the human condition. To them the only options seemed to be either old-fashioned Sunday school or Joseph Campbell.

I find it difficult to convey an alternative understanding of the Bible that does not sound like a compromise or middle ground. Scripture does not need to meet modern criteria of truthfulness, but neither can it be reduced to inspirational tales and moralistic stories. I confess that Scripture is unique and truthful, but I am not particularly worried about finding the remains of Noah's ark. Scripture is revealed by God and is life-altering, even if the patriarchs are hazy historical figures. Rather than a vain attempt to explicate a precise *doctrine of Scripture*, I trust that my perspective is implicitly evident in both my preaching and my teaching.

In these personal and pastoral reflections, I have probably raised more questions than I have answered. I suspect that no small part of the difficulty lies in the fact that the external, congregational challenges of opening the Bible are likely to shift over time and vary from context to context. That is why I believe that ultimately, as pastor, the most important thing I can do is continually to engage Scripture and seek ways for it to remain alive for me.

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