

# the center letter

*Cultivating Missional Communities*

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## **In Good Company: Becoming Faithful Readers and Doers of Scripture**

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*Scripture is not just one among several "classics," not just one source of moral wisdom competing in a marketplace of ideas, experiences, and feelings. Scripture is the wellspring of life, the fundamental source for the identity of the church....Right reading of the New Testament occurs only where the word is embodied. We learn what the text means only if we submit ourselves to its power in such a way that we are changed by it...Until we see God's power at work among us we do not know what we are reading. Thus, the most crucial hermeneutical task is the formation of communities seeking to live under the word.<sup>1</sup>*

The authority, interpretation, and use of the Bible has been the subject of much discussion and great debate over the centuries. Yet seldom has the debate involved the concrete life, worship, and witness of the church. The focus of these discussions has tended to be neither upon what the Bible tells us about God, nor about how it is to be used in understanding and shaping the mission of the church. Rather the primary questions have been about the accuracy of biblical reports and whether these ancient writings have any relevance for modern life. In addition, while most of the theological literature and official church documents note that it is through the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit that the Bible is to be interpreted, detailed discussion of how this comes about and what it means for the faith and practice of the church is rare. While the scholars have exchanged papers and written books, knowledge of the message of the Bible and experience of its reality-shaping power have declined within the church.

As missional communities seek to discover what it means for God's people to participate in God's reconciling and transforming activity in the world, the cultivation of communities of faithful readers and doers of Scripture is central to the authentic discernment of vision and direction, the development of energy and motivation, and the stimulation of broad and active participation.

At the beginning of a new year, it is helpful to remind readers of the purpose of *The Center Letter*. This monthly newsletter is intended to be a resource for those church leaders who are guiding their churches out of the grasp of Christendom and toward a new future as more faithful and effective missional communities. Not a quick read, *The Center Letter* is for questioning and thinking church leaders. It does not provide easy answers to complex issues but rather tries to reveal the complexity of the issues facing the church at this moment in history. It does not offer quick-fix solutions to operational problems but rather attempts to address systemic foundational and presuppositional issues which churches must confront if they are to become intentional missional communities in this new post-Christendom era. It attempts to do so by utilizing the rich biblical-theological heritage as well as thoughtful analysis and critique of the contemporary context.

This particular series of *The Center Letter* hopes to stimulate reflection and discussion about what is involved as missional churches seek to become communities of faithful and wise hearers, readers and doers of Scripture. This will also be the theme for the Center's 2009 Convocation in Chicago, IL on July 16-18 (see [www.missionalchurch.org](http://www.missionalchurch.org) for more details).

**Written for the Church's Learning.** The church is not left without reminders of the important role of the Bible. For example, the Anglican collect for Bible study envisions a dynamic approach: "Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."<sup>2</sup> While Christians may find personal inspiration, guidance, and comfort within the Bible, this collect declares that this is not its intended purpose. Its purpose is the edification of the faithful for their witness in the world. If God caused the Bible to be written for the church's *learning*, it is to be assumed that in order for the church to discern and participate in God's redemptive activity, it must continually be open and receptive to new insights, to "instruction" concerning its identity and purpose.

As the community of those who through faith and baptism have become disciples of Jesus Christ, the church is invited and compelled to turn to the "Holy Scriptures" with gratitude

and expectation. There is something the church needs to learn and the only place it can find the subject matter for that learning is in the Bible. In a variety of ways within multiple settings, the missional church is to be actively engaged in studying the Bible—hearing, reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting—because this collection of writings gives testimony to the activity of God with God's people to accomplish God's purpose. Thus, the Bible has authority and relevance not because it is a compendium of timeless truths, a collection of moral principles, or an account of ancient history, but because it is "the source of our knowledge of God, of our vision of God's purpose, of our encounter with the Messiah, of our call to vocation as God's people, of our hope for creation's healing."<sup>3</sup>

**Criteria for Interpretation.** Locating the freedom and authority for the interpretation of Scripture within Christian communities does not mean that anything goes. The biblical theologian Richard Hays, drawing upon the Apostle Paul's interpretative practice, suggests three criteria or constraints for the faithful, wise, and imaginative reading of Scripture.

1. The faithfulness of Israel's God to fulfill God's covenantal promises: The freedom of the Christian interpretation of Scripture must maintain continuity with Israel's story.
2. The witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ: A legitimate reading of Scripture acknowledges the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as the climatic revelation of God's character and purpose.
3. The transformation into God's likeness: True interpretation of Scripture shapes Christian communities which manifest the love of God as shown forth in Jesus Christ.

Paul invested his life in the formation of communities that would embody in their life and ministry the gospel of the crucified and risen Messiah. In their attitudes, habits, and practices, these communities provide the best constraint on deviant interpretation and the best hope for cultivating wise and courageous readers. "Of course it is possible to trust that such communities will be simultaneously imaginative and faithful only if one trusts, as Paul did, in the power of the Spirit to disclose truth and give life."<sup>4</sup>

**Reading in Communion: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"** (Acts 15:28). The distinctiveness of Christianity is not that Christians believe in God, affirm correct doctrines, live good lives, or engage in good works. What is distinctive is the forming of a particular people who listen to particular stories, discern a particular reality, and live their lives by particular words. The message of the Bible is that through the history of the people of Israel, the story of Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of the Spirit, God calls into being a new people: "Just as the Spirit moved across the waters at Creation (Gen. 1), so the Spirit descended at Pentecost (Acts 2) and created a new community where before there were only strangers."<sup>5</sup> It is to this people that God is unconditionally devoted and with whom and through whom God acts in Word and Spirit for the salvation of the world.

As the Bible emerged from communities who experienced the mysterious but decisive movement of God within their midst, so is the Bible to be heard and read within living communities of disciples. And just as the Spirit brings about faith not through inner experience but through the bodily word of the Bible, so the Spirit is actively present within the bodily worship, proclamation, prayer, relationships, and decisions of missional communities. "Christian communities provide the contexts whereby we learn—as the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit—to interpret, and to have our lives interpreted by, the scriptural texts such that we are formed and transformed in the moral judgment necessary for us to live faithfully before God."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Scripture-Shaped Community," *Interpretation*, January 1990, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 236

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Dialog*, Vol. 31, no. 3, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (Yale University Press, 1989), p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen E. Fowl & L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 306.

<sup>8</sup> Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cowley Publications, 1991), p. 9.

**Embodying the Word.** The Bible does not just describe an historical reality, but through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit continues to evoke and constitute a new people, a people who embody or en-flesh the living Word of God. Such communities are not consumers: using the Bible for self-defined needs or interests; or tourists: exploring distant and exotic, yet ultimately, irrelevant territory. As hearers, readers, and doers of the Word, they will embody within their life and practice the transforming love of God as shown forth in the ministry, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus the authority, interpretation, and use of the Bible, while learning from experts and concerned with personal experience, finally rests with the "performance of the text": the obedient discipleship of Christian communities of faith.

**Practical Implications.** This vision of Spirit-led interpretative communities will not fit easily or naturally with the current self-understanding of most churches. Yet, if the hearing and doing of the Word of God is dependent upon the life and practice of Christian communities, "the most crucial hermeneutical task is the formation of communities seeking to live under the Word."<sup>7</sup> What will such Bible-shaped missional communities look like?

1. Hearing and reading the Bible will involve not only a search for understanding, but an expectation of obedience and commitment: knowledge and discipleship will go together.
2. Listening to and embodying the Bible will become an integrated and integral part of the whole life of the entire church: worship, education, fellowship, service, witness.
3. Attention will be given to the cultivation of the habits, attitudes, and skills for faithful and wise interpretation.
4. Communal engagement with the Bible will be focused and intentional, relating to missional and discipleship issues. (As a collection of writings, reading the Bible straight through from Genesis to Revelation makes no more sense than reading all the books in a library beginning at the front door.<sup>8</sup>)
5. The otherness and strangeness—"scandal and foolishness"—of the Bible will be allowed to confront and transform current presuppositions, understandings, and commitments.
6. The study and interpretation of the Bible will be guided not by questions of private meaning, but by: "How is the Bible shaping a new reality among us?" and "What is this text saying to the church attempting to be faithful today?"
7. The church will critique and reshape its common life and ministry on the basis of its hearing of the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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