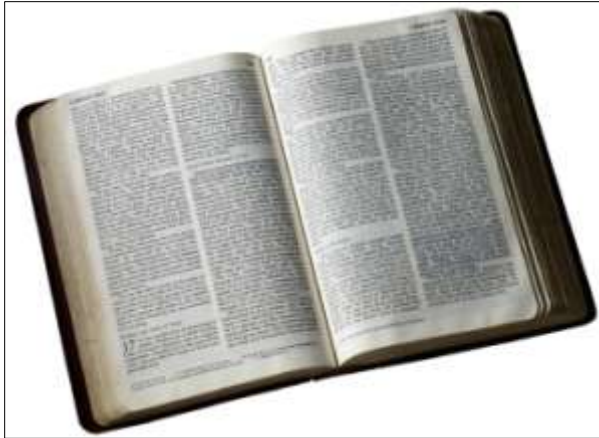


MISSIONAL BIBLE STUDY



By Dr. Lois Barrett

There are many ways to read the Bible. We can read it for its stories. We can apply various methods of literary and historical criticism. We can read it devotionally.

Missional Bible study is a way of reading the Bible that lets the biblical text also read us. It lets the Scripture surprise us and change us. It allows the Bible to align us more closely with God's mission in the world—especially as we know it through Jesus Christ.

Assumptions

When we do missional Bible study, we make several assumptions:

1. The church is God's idea, not ours. The church's life is not its own. The church's purpose is not its own. We enter into this Bible study as members of the church. We tend to think that we have "joined" the church, or have chosen to participate in the church that we do. We often think that the church exists to meet our, and other people's, needs. But we don't vote on the church's purpose. Instead, the church exists on behalf of God by whose love and grace it has been called into existence.
2. Thus, the church has an essential and important role to play in God's mission—to realize the presence, power, and promises of God for the sake of the world. Apart from this, a local congregation has no reason to exist as a church.
3. The Bible is a primary resource for the ongoing life, faith, and worship of God's people; it is a foundational resource for renewal or transformation. The Bible is not a compendium of timeless truths, or a collection of moral principles, or an account of ancient history to be studied by those with special interests. The church's approach to the Bible is eloquently stated in this Anglican prayer:

Eternal God, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant us so 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... (*Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*, p.391)

4. If God caused the Scripture to be written for the church's *learning*, it is assumed that for the church to fulfill its divine purpose it must be open and receptive to new insights, to new instruction about its identity and purpose.
5. The church engages in Bible study to learn what it can learn nowhere else: the nature and purpose of God's activity with God's people to accomplish God's purpose.

6. The Holy Spirit is God's active presence in the midst of God's people who enables the witness of the biblical communities to enlighten the vision of contemporary faith communities.
7. Rather than a task for the solitary and isolated individual, biblical learning for the church takes place most fully within the ongoing life and worship of the congregation.
8. The Bible is not a dead document. It is a living voice waiting to be heard, a voice seeking to give identity and purpose to God's people.
9. The goal of Bible study is to contribute to the expectation and experience of living together in Christian community, to discover what it means for God's people obediently and faithfully to participate in the presence, power, and promises of God.
10. As Mennonites, we "seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the church" (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*). This means that all Scripture should be tested by whether it is consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus. It also means that private interpretations of Scripture always need to be checked out with others in the church. And we need to listen to the Holy Spirit, who will help us understand the Scripture.

Missional Bible study is a way of encountering the biblical text. It helps us not only to understand the Bible, but to let the Bible change us and move us to more participation in God's mission in the world. God reveals the divine presence and direction when we make prayer and scripture a part of our conversation, our decision making, and our behavior. When a group practices missional Bible study, the Holy Spirit opens up the text to us and makes it come alive through new insights about what God might be up to in the church and in the world. This method of Bible study can be used in groups or adapted to individual use.

Prepare for Bible study

Begin with prayer. Lay aside the distractions of the day and be still. Come gently and thankfully into the presence of God, who is already there waiting for you. As much as possible, lay aside for now any assumptions, solutions, and biases you have. Can you say, "There is nothing more important to me than discovering and doing God's will?" Can you be open to God's surprises?

Read the Bible passage

Read the text. If you are in a group, have one member read it aloud. What stood out for you as the text was read? What was surprising? Where did your mind stop to wonder? Was there anything strange in the text? Don't try to resolve everything; just let the questions be there.

Where are we?

Look at the context of the biblical text. If this is a narrative, discovering the context will probably be easy. If this is another genre of literature, like law or a letter or prophecy, there is a narrative behind the text. If you don't have a Bible commentary, don't worry. Just look for clues in the text itself or in what comes right before or after the text you are reading.

- What is the geographical context?

- What is the political context? What is the nature of the powers and systems?
- What is the social context? Who are the people in the text or behind the text?
- Where are people trapped by sin and/or evil?
- What are people doing? How are they feeling?

Then look at your own context. Is there anything in your context that is like the context of the biblical passage? Where are people doing or feeling something similar to the biblical passage?

What is God doing?

Look for action verbs with God (or Jesus or the Holy Spirit) as the subject of the verb. A big part of the job of being Christians is to be "detectives of divinity" and point out to each other and to the world what God is doing.

- In the biblical text, where is God at work?
- What is God's good news?
- What does the text tell you about God's future?
- How is God calling people to change or to enter the reign/kingdom of God?

Then look at your context.

- Where do you see or sense God at work?
- What is God's good news for you and for the church?
- How is God calling you to change?
- How is God challenging you to enter the reign/kingdom of God?

How is God calling and sending the church?

Finally, consider how God is calling and sending God's people to participate in God's mission in the world.

- How are God's people called to participate in what God is doing? What is God asking them to do? How do they respond? What is the result?
- In the biblical text, how are God's people called to be a sign of God's future?
- In your context, how is God calling and sending the church to participate in what God is doing in the world?
- How does this text call the church to discern its missional vocation?
- How does this text call and send the church, in all of its life together, to be a sign of the reign/kingdom of God?
- How can everything you do be more in sync with God's mission in the world?
- When others are watching the church, what do they see that would give them a hint of what God is doing in the world, or what God intends for the future?
- How can this text help the church align all that it does, says, and is with God's future?
- Through this text, what can you learn about how God is not only calling and sending you, but also empowering you, giving you what you need to work with God?

Reread and reflect

Read the biblical text again. Reflect: toward what changes is the text pushing you? How does the text challenge you? How does the text bring you closer to God and to doing God's will?

Dwelling in the Word

When we use this method of Bible study, it is not necessary to use a different biblical text every time. Some church groups have been "dwelling in the Word," that is, using the same text (usually a chapter or less) over a period of many weeks, months, or even years. Contrary to what may be our first instincts, the text does not get old.

People see new things in the text every time they read it. What one person in a group may not see, another sees. New parts of the text come alive. Dwelling in the Word helps us enter the world of the Bible and lets the Word from one age impact us in a different age. As we dwell in the Word, it becomes part of us. In new situations, we remember phrases from the text. As we have church discussions, we share insight from the text. Consider whether there is a text in which you or your servant group might want to dwell for a period of time.