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The Bible Without Books

by Peter Ball

As the majority of the population become increasingly alienated from the language and world view of Scripture, many local churches also recognise that, in a culture where people rarely read anything at all, there is a need for ways of engaging with the Bible which do not rely on traditional printed media. Here, Peter Ball describes the “African” method of engaging with the Bible, in which the only skills required are an ability to listen and to share insights in a group situation.

Why this particular method of group work with the Bible should be called “The African Method” nobody knows. May be it does in fact come from Africa, or may be it simply echoes an African village way of teaching and learning through telling and listening to stories. I first met it in America, when I was working with people accompanying new enquirers on the early stages of their Christian faith journey. It seemed particularly appropriate there, and I have found that it resonates well with people in the British Isles – both new Christians and those who are well established in their belief – to bring together the gospel and their own life in a challenging and creative way.

Basic Components

There is no one set way of the African Method. Approaches

may vary in detail. What is constant is using a Bible passage simply as it stands. It consists of reading a passage aloud to a group several times, with silences between the readings, and inviting the members to enter each time more deeply into dialogue with the Word. There is no need for people to read the text. They are asked to listen carefully and reflect. The approach I learnt suggests using one of the Sunday readings and follows this pattern:

- Open the session with prayer to gather the members together and to help them to focus.
- Ask them to listen for a word or phrase that stands out or speaks to them. Read the passage aloud, slowly and deliberately.
- One minute of silence.

- Invite everyone simply to say aloud the word or the phrase that stood out for them. *This is not the time for reactions or discussion.*
- Read the passage again, telling the group that, after the passage has been read, you will give them five minutes to spend with the passage (three if they are new to the method).
- Five (or three) minutes of silence.
- Then invite people to say aloud what they hear in their heart, what the passage touches in their life.
- Divide into very small groups, not more than four or five (twos and threes are better) to speak of what they have got from the passage. It is important here to use the word “I” *and to own personal experience and insight, rather than say what others believe. Note again that this is not a time for discussing or preaching or solving problems for other people.*
- Read the passage again.
- Ask people to consider what, in the light of the meeting so far, they believe God wants from them this week. *Specific answers are important, rather than responses like “God wants me to be good for ever and ever”!*
- Again in small groups, share these answers.
- Gather everyone together for a closing act of worship, with perhaps a final reading of the passage and open prayer, silence or singing.

Several points need emphasising. This is a way to help people grow in faith. It is different from a lot of Bible Study work in that it engages not only the mind and the intellect, but also the memory, emotions and, above all, the will. You don't have to be able to read. Listening is the basic skill – both listening to the Bible and letting it resound in your mind and heart, and also listening to what other people have to say about their insights and con-

victions. That is why their is an emphasis on not preaching or solving problems. Careful listening shows the value you give to what others are hearing.

Groups

Working together in the group is important. This is both an individual and a community exercise. There is an expectation that the Holy Spirit does and will work in and through the life of the Church gathered to listen to the Word.

Space should always be given to everyone in the group, with full permission either to speak or to stay quiet. It is always possible and acceptable to say “pass”. You will notice that the method is designed to ease people gently from a simple naming of a word or phrase they have heard into the more demanding responses that the gospel makes of them.

Story

The African method should be seen as one arrow among many in the quiver of scriptural engagement. It has real value in the nurture of new believers as well as established church people. There are occasions when it can take the place of the sermon in public worship.¹ Its roots go back deep into the early days of the Church before the New Testament was written down, when all instruction was by word of mouth and looked for the willing response of the listeners in commitment to the way of Jesus Christ. The great story of God's love and the stories of Jesus have not lost their power to change lives today. Someone who was highly skilled in the use of story was the American priest James Dunning. He opens a chapter on “Conversing with Scripture” with a quotation from Bernard Lee which underlies this power:

The Word of God is not primarily a voice speaking from an ancient text about a past time. True, the sacred text is a voice uttered once upon a time, but it is also a voice that has been turned loose from its original speaker and its original time. When the Word is heard

again – and really heard – it levies a claim upon immediate lived experience. Whatever levies a new claim now on behalf of a better tomorrow puts today at risk. Did it not do that, it would not be God's Word but only a voice from the past. The question is how to be with the words of the Scriptures to give them the best chance to become the Word in conversation with us.²

Notes

¹ An example of how this can be developed is found in *Seeds of the Word* by Peter Price (DLT)

² *Echoing God's Word* by James B Dunning (North American Forum on the Catechumenate, 1993)