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# ENGAGING THE SCRIPTURES: THE CHALLENGE TO RECOVER BIBLICAL LITERACY

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The Bible claims that God's Word is powerful. The Lord declared to Jeremiah: 'Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?' (Jer. 23.29, TNIV). The Lord assures Isaiah that the word he speaks 'will not fail to do what I plan for it; it will do everything I send it to do.' (Is. 55.11, GNB). Jesus teaches us that the word of God, when heard and retained by the human heart, is like a seed that produces a bountiful harvest of lives transformed (Luke 8.15; cf Mk. 4.20; Mt. 13.23). The apostle Paul tells us that 'faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ' (Rom 10.17, TNIV). According to the writer to the Hebrews 'the word of God is alive and active' (Heb. 4.12).

Many Christians in the younger churches of the southern hemisphere speak in similar terms today. A blind proof reader of braille Scriptures in Tanzania tells us that she feels the power of God's word travelling from her fingers to her heart. On my first visit to Zimbabwe three years after it gained its independence, the Anglican bishop of Harare told me: 'In Africa we have a crocodile appetite for Bibles!' Listen also to the testimony of Baburam Chhetri, who pastors a small church in the Himalayan country of Nepal: 'I have been in difficult situations where I felt hopeless and betrayed by my friends. But during those times I reached for my Bible and felt that God was speaking directly to me, saying, "I am with you. I will never leave you." The Bible is life to me.'<sup>1</sup>

The contemporary situation in most western countries is different. It contrasts markedly with both the Bible's self-portrait and the experience of Christians in the younger churches. Just over one quarter (27%) of English churchgoers read the Bible weekly outside of church attendance.<sup>2</sup> In the United States the situation is more positive with 37% of the population being frequent readers, that is, those who read the Bible at least once a week. However, some surveys indicate that the vast majority of these frequent readers only read it during the one hour they attend church on

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<sup>1</sup> *UBS World Report* 422, June 2008, p 57

<sup>2</sup> *Pulling out of Nosedive: A Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing – What the 2005 English Church Census Reveals*, 2006.

Sunday morning. In addition, a recent poll indicates that 35% of American Christians who profess to be born-again do not read the Bible at all.<sup>3</sup>

The Word of God, which for the writer to the Hebrews and today's Christians in the younger churches of the South is 'alive and active,' appears to be comatose and silent in the churches of the Western world. What has gone wrong? How might western Christians rediscover the power and the attractiveness of God's Word? In this paper I will attempt to offer an answer to these questions by exploring the nature of Scripture engagement and the conditions under which this interaction between us and the sacred text may become a life-transforming encounter with Almighty God.

I will begin by briefly presenting four scenarios which are by no means untypical in western churches. All four will illustrate ways in which the current crisis expresses itself in concrete situations.

### *Scenario 1*

Marge is 30 years of age and has been a Christian for two years. For the first eighteen months she faithfully read and meditated on her Bible every day. Doing so greatly helped her spiritual growth. But now the Bible is not as alive as it was and Marge's reading has become much less regular. Her workload at the office has recently increased and become more exacting. As a result she finds it difficult to concentrate when she opens her Bible. She now feels that she is getting so little from her Bible reading that she is tempted to give up reading the Bible in any systematic fashion and to opt instead for popular devotional books during her quiet time.

### *Scenario 2*

My second scenario concerns John and Jean, a Christian married couple in their mid-thirties. They host in their home a weekly Bible study group which is organised by their church. About ten people attend. Leadership of the study circulates from week to week among the more experienced members. Recently Jean and John have become concerned that discussion in the group about the Bible text is so impersonal. The others seem to be more concerned about finding what the passage means in the abstract than about what impact it might make on their lives. Hardly ever does a member of the group feel able to testify how the Bible has come alive and helped them during the previous week. John and Jean suspect that their house-group has become a talking shop, but are unsure what to do to make the discussion more experience-focused and more life-applied.

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<sup>3</sup> News Assist Service Rhodes

*Scenario 3*

Scenario 3 concerns Bob, a 24 year-old university graduate. He attends a large church well known for its Bible expository ministry. Bob deeply appreciates the pastor's verse-by-verse preaching through Scripture passages. But he is uncomfortable that the pastor spends so much time describing the text's cultural background and explaining the meaning of its theological terms. He is disappointed there is so little time spent on applying the message of the biblical text to personal experience and to the lifestyle dilemmas Christians are facing in their everyday lives. At times Bob wonders whether he should seek another church.

*Scenario 4*

The fourth scenario focuses on another married couple. Steve and Mary are both in their early fifties. They attended Bob's church for years, but three years ago found it difficult to get accustomed to the cerebral preaching of the new pastor. They tried, but after eighteen months decided together that they needed something different. So they joined a smaller church situated a few miles away. They felt strongly attracted by its celebratory style of worship. The long periods of praise and frequent testimonies mean that most Sundays they are able to achieve a sense of involvement in the worship. But deep down they are uneasy. There is no public reading of the Bible during the service apart from the few verses the pastor quotes at the beginning of his message. They are, of course, relieved they no longer have to face the mentally demanding ordeal of listening to 40 minute sermons couched in abstract theological jargon. On the other hand, they are slowly becoming uneasy that the Bible-teaching component in the services is so minimal. But, having moved church so recently, they hesitate to do so again. And yet a nagging doubt persists.

In these scenarios the engagement with Scripture becomes problematical in four different contexts. In an *individual* context, Marge is unable to sustain an exciting engagement with the biblical text during her daily quiet time. For John and Jean the problems occur in a *group* context - their home Bible study. Steve and Mary are concerned that their church appears to ignore Paul's command to 'give time and effort to the public reading of the Scriptures' (1 Timothy 4.13, GNB). In their case, Scripture engagement is excluded from the more formal context of *church liturgy*. Bob, along with Steve and Mary, finds that Scripture engagement has become problematical also in a church context, more specifically, in the *pulpit*. For Bob the pastor's preaching is too academic; for Steve and Mary the preaching is minimally Bible-based.

Although these four contexts are imaginary, nevertheless, all can be replicated in much of western church life today. They illustrate why the negative statistics quoted earlier about Bible use.

These four contexts of Scripture engagement illustrated by the scenarios may be re-classified into two categories – the informal and the formal. The informal covers personal and small group interaction with the biblical text, while the formal category includes the public reading of the Bible and the public proclamation of its message. For the purpose of this paper I intend to unite the two informal practices calling them *radical Scripture engagement*. I use the adjective *radical* in the light of its etymology which is in the Latin term *radix*, meaning ‘roots.’ I think the adjective *radical* is appropriate since both personal and group interaction with biblical texts occurs at the ‘grassroots’ of the churches.

Having united these two informal practices, I now wish to retain the distinction between the two formal customs, and will refer to the public recital of Scripture as *liturgical Scripture engagement*<sup>4</sup> and to preaching from Scripture as *rhetorical Scripture engagement*<sup>5</sup>. My motive in retaining the distinction is that the dynamic of congregational hearing may operate differently in each case. The reference in 1 Timothy 4.13 to the public reading of Scripture is made in a way that implies it to be a standard feature of early church worship and, therefore, liturgical. Phil Towner, Director of the Nida Institute at the American Bible Society, suggests that the importance of such liturgical reading is that it ‘would remind the congregation of their identity in Christ and in covenant relation with God’<sup>6</sup>. In other words, hearing Scripture publicly recited when we worship together as Christians, is an affirmation by us that God’s Story is our story and that we are the pilgrim people of God. On the other hand, preaching – which, along with teaching, is distinguished in 1 Timothy 4.13 from public Scripture reading – is an act not of recitation, but of proclamation. According to the German biblical scholar, Lothar Coenen, the goal of this proclamation is ‘not simply the imparting of information or a formal allegiance, but a faith which involves self-surrender and trust (cf 1 Cor. 15:11).’ Coenen points out that the Greek verb to preach

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘liturgy’, which reflects the Greek *leiturgia* (lit. ‘work of the people’), refers to the rituals of public corporate worship (*A Handbook of Christian Theology: Essential information for every Christian*, M. Halverson and A. Cohen, eds., Fontana, London and Glasgow 1958).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Rhetoric’ is the art of persuasive public speaking (*Compact Oxford Dictionary, Third Edition*, C. Soanes and S. Hawker, eds., Oxford, Oxford UK, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Public Reading of Scripture in 1 Tim 4:13 and in the Biblical Tradition,’ an unpublished UBS paper.

(*kēryssō*) is one of several verbs of telling and communication used by the New Testament to describe the proclamatory activity of the early church.<sup>7</sup> Preaching plays a key role in stimulating hearers to engage with Scripture because it explains the meaning of a biblical passage and demonstrates its relevance for today. Normally congregations accord, implicitly if not explicitly, their preachers the right to expound Scripture authoritatively, and generally preachers do so within the perspective of the interpretive tradition to which they and their congregation belong. However, preaching as described in the New Testament is more than expository, it is also persuasive. Paul tells us that those called to fulfil the ministry of reconciliation are Christ's ambassadors through whom God makes his appeal to humanity. As ambassador Paul communicates this appeal with these words: 'We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.' (2 Cor. 5.20, TNIV). It is because the basic meaning of 'rhetoric' is 'the art of persuasive speaking'<sup>8</sup> that I have chosen this adjective to describe the type of Scripture engagement that good preaching aims to effect. Strictly speaking, the dictionary definition of rhetoric is 'the art of persuasive and effective speaking' which, in fact, neatly summarises Paul's understanding of Christian preaching. 'When I came to you,' he reminds the Corinthians, 'I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. .... My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power' (1 Cor. 2.1-5, TNIV). According to Paul, for preaching to be effective, more than rhetoric is required. It must be accompanied by 'a demonstration of the Spirit's power' or, as the GNB translates, 'convincing proof of the power of God's Spirit.' It is important to recognise that this convincing activity of the Holy Spirit is also essential in making effective liturgical and radical Scripture engagement. All that will follow in this paper concerning the human role in Scripture engagement, assumes that ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who makes the engagement powerful and effective.

Having affirmed the apostolic reminder that the ultimate effectiveness of Scripture engagement is beyond human management and control, I now wish to narrow the focus by looking in greater detail at what I am calling *radical* Scripture engagement. I do this for two reasons. First,

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<sup>7</sup> The other verbs include the following: to teach, to report, to say, to confess, to bear witness, to announce good news and to make known. Art. on *kēryssō*, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology Vol. 3*, C. Brown, ed., Paternoster and Zondervan, Exeter UK and Grand Rapids MI, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> *Compact Oxford Dictionary*.

because the human-divine relationship is fundamentally personal and individual. The Wisdom literature of the OT makes this clear. Job protests to his 'friends': 'If it is true that I have gone astray, my error remains my concern alone' (Job 19.4, TNIV). The Book of Proverbs is given the setting, not of a king advising his people as a community, but of a father counselling his son as an individual (1.8, etc.). Secondly, I am zooming in on radical Scripture engagement because a recent research program (the 'Psalm Journey') which I directed in 2003-4 enables me to call upon empirical evidence concerning how individuals and small groups interact with Scripture. In this paper I intend to explore the dynamics of personal and group Scripture engagement in the hope of gaining a more complete understanding that may equip churches, Bible agencies, Christian educationalists and others to offer meaningful support to Christians like Marge, Jean and John who are struggling in their encounter with Scripture. I entitled the project the 'Psalm Journey.'

At this point I need to point out that the international audience of young adults (aged 18-30) which was the focus of my research was in some ways very different from the imaginary people who figure in the four scenarios with which I began. Only one quarter of my respondents attended church 1-4 times a month. The others were roughly evenly divided between those who attend church once or twice a year and those who do not attend at all. All except one non-attender belonged to other faiths: Saul is Jewish, Norah is Buddhist, Ashok is Hindu and Flora is Ba'hai. The exception in this last category is Kate who described herself as a Protestant, while professing to be superstitious, and testified that as a child she had baptised herself in the sink. Connie, Joan, John, Liz, and Tom, are nominally Christian, attending church once or twice a year. Edith, Elsie and Luke are regular church attenders. In all there were thirteen respondents representing a total of nine countries.<sup>9</sup> Although they may seem a disparate bunch, all adopted the values and expressed the felt needs that wider research has revealed to be common among young western adults, including many within our churches. In this sense my respondents were representative of their peers and may be considered to be fairly typical GenXers. Significantly all expressed an interest in contemporary spirituality and regarded themselves as being engaged in a spiritual quest for meaning and enlightenment. The majority pursued 'a spirituality of seeking' while the people who figure in my four scenarios

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<sup>9</sup> The international mix, which was not deliberate, reflects the high proportion of overseas postgraduate students at the University of Edinburgh.

would probably be classified as adopting ‘a spirituality of belonging.’<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, one would expect sufficient commonality in the way both types of seekers engage with the psalms to justify exploring the data from the Psalm Journey for clues that might help individuals like Marge and Bob and couples like Jean and John and Steve and Mary.

All thirteen of my respondents had a deep interest in spirituality and were students at the University of Edinburgh. The specific Scriptures employed in the project were six psalms selected from the biblical Book of Psalms. These psalms were chosen in the light of their perceived potential to resonate with key values and felt needs of the audience which I had ascertained during a pilot project. The felt needs / values and corresponding psalms were as follows:

	<i>Psalm</i>
Having a good time	126
Being well thought of	55
Desire to resolve suffering	22
High value placed on experience	30
Willingness to engage with ambiguity	73
Suspicion of religious institutions	74

The method of engagement was meditative being an adaptation of the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*. I gave the project the title of ‘Psalm Journey,’ and worked with two focus groups of 6 and 7 members respectively. Participants made a commitment to meditate on a single psalm for one week, devoting at least ten minutes daily to this task, and to repeat the process with different psalms for the following two weeks. They also agreed to keep a journal for recording their meditative interaction with the psalmic texts. At the end of each week members of the group met together for a *Lectio Divina* during which they meditated again on the psalm they had interacted with over the previous seven days and shared excerpts from their journals. At the conclusion of each Psalm Journey I carried out a one-to-one interview with each respondent in order to ascertain how they evaluated the Psalm Journey experience.

The data that emerged from these three sources – the individual journals, the transcripts of the small group meditation, and the one-to-one interviews – enabled me to put together a picture of both what my respondents had heard the psalms saying to them and how they had responded. The data revealed that a ‘connect’ had occurred between psalms and participants. In other words it indicated that an engagement had, indeed,

<sup>10</sup> *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, by R. Wuthnow, Los Angeles / London, 1998, pp 1-9.



taken place between readers and text. After reviewing and evaluating the data I was able to identify six key components of Scripture engagement. The first of these is that a *correlation* occurs between audience and text.

## CORRELATION

Correlation is sometimes described as a meaningful conversation.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the Psalm Journey a mental and emotional dialogue took place between the readers and the six psalms selected. Elsie, an American masters student told me: 'When I felt emotional about the psalms, it felt like I identified with what the psalmist was saying' (I-8: 7). Ashok, an Indian doctoral student, described the Psalm Journey as 'a communication between God and me' (L: 7). Edith, a doctoral student researching music in the American novel, indicated that she found she really could relate to Psalm 73 (I-11: 4). Liz, a Scandinavian masters student, said: 'I could now return to these three psalms and I know I have a relationship with them' (I-1: 4). Sometimes the conversation was calm and serene; at others it became excited, even agitated. Some respondents were less aware than others of being in conversation with the psalms. For John, a Canadian postgraduate student and a nominal Catholic, the conversation became more difficult as the Psalm Journey proceeded.

Probably conversation between text and respondents was made easier by the choice of a meditative mode of interaction. The periods of silence created space for respondents to sense the psalms resonating with their felt needs and ideals. I will now share some examples of this resonance, taking felt needs first. Luke, a British undergraduate studying Politics and Arabic, discovered that Psalm 22 fulfilled for him a therapeutic role when he found himself stressed out by overwork (Ps 22-D4). Norah, also an undergraduate, found that meditating on Psalm 126 brought relief from a state of depression (Ps 55-D2; 5). Meditating on Psalm 55 moved Liz, from Scandinavia, to share with the group the pain and devastation she had felt when her boyfriend left her (Ps 55-D1). Ashok found Psalm 73 affirming for him the importance of self-esteem. 'To me,' he wrote in his journal, 'self-realisation and fulfilment are the key aspects of finding strength in times of adversity' (Ps 73-D4). The strong emotional content of the psalms seems to have made it relatively easy for respondents to find in them an echo of their own felt needs.

Psalm Journey participants discovered the psalms resonating also with their ideals. John, a Canadian masters student, found that his high view

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<sup>11</sup> *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* by D. S. Browning, Minneapolis, 1991, p 15.

of equal regard was inversely reinforced by the plea in Psalm 55 that God would wreak vengeance on the friend who had shamelessly betrayed the psalmist. 'I honestly cannot think of a time in my life,' he wrote, 'when I have felt a strong desire for vengeance, at least not nearly as strong as the poet' (Ps 55-D2-3). Meditating on this same psalm awakened in Tom, a masters student, a desire to return to Zimbabwe to 'continue the struggle to make it a better country to live in' (D7). The psalmist's rhetorical question in Psalm 30:9: 'Will the dust praise you?' challenged Edith to ponder the purpose of human life (Ps 30-D1 and 5). These examples of resonance are typical of respondents as a whole. Sometimes they responded in terms of felt needs and ideals at the same time. An interplay seemed to develop between needs, values and text creating a triadic dynamic. Respondents were able to to organise their felt needs in terms of their ideals and relate both to what they heard the texts saying to them.

In passing it is important to be aware that some distinguished theologians have argued strongly against the possibility of any correlation taking place between the Bible and a sinful humanity. For example, in his book entitled *Unleashing Scripture*, Stanley Hauerwas of Duke Divinity School, says: 'The Bible is not and should not be made accessible to merely anyone, but rather it should only be made available to those who have undergone the hard discipline of existing as part of God's people.' Hauerwas appears to imply that the long established practice of random Scripture distribution by Bible agencies and others is misguided. He quotes approvingly the nineteenth century Danish philosopher-theologian, Søren Kierkegaard's contention that 'the Bible Societies have done immeasurable harm.'<sup>12</sup> However, Catholic theologian David Tracy argues strongly that there can be a meaningful correlation between theology and culture.<sup>13</sup> And Kevin Vanhoozer, who also teaches in Chicago but from an evangelical perspective, contends that biblical authority is located in the linguistic practices of the canon of Scripture rather than in those of the church.<sup>14</sup> Investigation in greater depth of this divergence of opinion on the viability of correlation would be fascinating, but is beyond the limits of this paper. For the moment it suffices to report that during the Psalm Journey my non-Christian respondents correlated readily with

<sup>12</sup> *Unleashing Scripture: Freeing the Bible from the Captivity of America*, by S. Hauerwas, Nashville, 1993, p 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, by D. Tracy, New York, 1975.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Ministry of Theology' in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, J.G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., Grand Rapids / Vancouver / Leicester, 2000, p 100.

the psalmic texts. This is clear from the following comments from three different respondents:

- 'It seems as if it [Ps 30] is reaching out to you.'<sup>15</sup>
- 'They [the psalms] made me think in the particular context – I'm living in this world – there's lots of stuff going on. And I never thought about religious psalms or religious texts in that context.'<sup>16</sup>
- 'I really liked Psalm 73. I really did relate to it.'<sup>17</sup>
- 'This psalm has cut through the mere context in which it was written and became modernized for me.'<sup>18</sup>

Similar comments could be cited from the others, illustrating the rapport that was readily established between respondent and text. Such a 'connect' between reader and text is, I suggest, a vital component of Scripture engagement because without it there can be no engagement. However, the Psalm Journey revealed that this 'connect' is a two-way street. The text, as we have seen, claims the attention of the reader. But readers also were active in a movement that was both cerebral and intuitive. This observation suggests two more components of Scripture engagement: imagination and interrogation.

## IMAGINATION

I shall first explore the imaginative activity in readers' experience, because my respondents on the whole explored the text intuitively before reflecting on it more logically. A meditative reading encourages an intuitive response. Readers sit in front of the text and engage in an imaginative appreciation of it. In the mind of Joan, the bravado of 'the wicked' portrayed in Psalm 73 triggered an imaginative association with prisoners. 'The psalm makes me think,' she wrote, 'of a movie I saw recently about prison inmates. In such an environment,' she goes on, 'it is important to put up a tough image of security and pretending to be cool about things, yet underneath the surface there are many regrets and worries' (D1). Mention of 'refuge' in Psalm 73.28 prompted Edith to write: 'I'm not really sure why, but it made me think about my room. It really is the centre of the world here in Edinburgh' (D4).

<sup>15</sup> Joan, Scandinavian female masters student (L: 6)

<sup>16</sup> Ashok, Indian doctoral student, (I-9: 2).

<sup>17</sup> Edith, doctoral student from New Zealand (I-11: 4).

<sup>18</sup> Norah, undergraduate student from Scotland (Ps 55-D5)

A great advantage of the *Lectio Divina* approach is that it creates space and time for biblical words and images to catch the imagination of participants enabling them ‘to hear and feel the text as well as see it.’<sup>19</sup> *Lectio Divina* is structured around several questions designed to stimulate the imagination while the meditation progresses. My adaptation of *Lectio Divina* for the Psalm Journey included the following questions:

- ‘As the psalm is read twice, listen for the word or phrase that strikes you?’
- ‘How is my life impacted by this word or phrase?’
- ‘Am I being invited to respond?’

Two-thirds of the words or phrases identified by way of response to the first of these questions were figurative expressions, confirming that metaphor possesses considerable power to stimulate the human imagination. In the Psalm Journey the popular metaphors were ‘We were like those who dream’ (Ps 126.1); ‘I am poured out like water’ (Ps 22.14); ‘You hid your face’ (Ps 30.7); and ‘Rise up, O God, and plead your cause’ (Ps 74.22).

I also sought to encourage imaginative reflection during the personal meditations by providing respondents with a small number of questions to mull over as they interacted with the psalm. Here are some examples:

- Psalm 30: *What profit is there in my death ...?* (v.8). For the poet spiritual fulfilment had to be experienced now, not postponed to an afterlife. Reflect on the extent to which this insistence on immediacy resonates with you.
- Psalm 55: We all like to be well-thought of by others. Take time to allow yourself to sense the poet’s abject horror when, in the midst of near-anarchy in the community and with his enemies clamouring for his head, his best friend turns against him. Have you been let down by a friend? What was your gut reaction?
- Psalm 74: The psalmist rather irreverently pictures God standing back with his hands in his pockets (v. 11) while his people’s world falls apart. Verse 22 has been paraphrased: “On your feet, O God – stand up for yourself!” Reflect on whether today’s believers are too polite in their prayers.

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<sup>19</sup> *Analyzing the Psalms: Second Edition*, by Ernst R. Wendland, Dallas, 2002, p 205.

- Psalm 126: Allow the images of this song – dreams and streams, sowing and reaping – to run in your imagination, and see where they lead!

These questions formed part of a ‘Minimal Hermeneutic’ which I prepared for each psalm. The Minimal Hermeneutic was given to respondents prior to each week’s meditation. It was never longer than two sides of A4 size paper and contained background information on the psalm relating to culture, linguistic expressions, and history. It avoided attempting to explain the meaning of the text. Instead it posed three to six open questions which were called ‘prompts.’ Some of these prompts, like those just cited above, sought to kindle respondents’ imagination.

In a very real sense the psalms tease our imagination without any external help. Pronounced reliance on figurative language is one of the formal resources of Hebrew poetry which Jewish literary scholar, Robert Alter, regards as ‘a particular way of imagining the world.’<sup>20</sup> According to John Goldingay of Fuller Seminary, this focus on metaphorical and symbolic terms in the psalms makes it easier for readers to find themselves in the texts and contributes to the universal appeal of these ancient songs.<sup>21</sup> Psalmic metaphors tickle the imagination, thus facilitating our capacity to engage with the text intuitively as well as logically. In the words of UBS translation consultant Ernst Wendland, expressions of verbal imagery ‘encourage listeners (or readers) to mentally conceive and emotionally experience for themselves a particular situation or event by supplying them with a vivid picture or even an entire scene into which they can enter by way of their imagination.’<sup>22</sup>

Walter Brueggemann makes the additional point that metaphors are ‘enormously elastic, giving full play to imagination in stretching and extending far beyond the concrete referent to touch all kinds of experience.’<sup>23</sup> If, as Richard Niebuhr claims, the human person is ‘a being who grasps and shapes reality, including the actuality of his own existence, with the aid of great images, metaphors and analogies,’ we ought not to be surprised that the psalms proved to be a rich resource for those who are seeking meaning and enlightenment for themselves and for life in general.<sup>24</sup> It is now time to move on and note that the data emerging from the Psalm Journey indicates the expressive metaphors of the Psalms offering more

<sup>20</sup> *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, by Robert Alter, Edinburgh, 1985, pp 151, 160-1.

<sup>21</sup> *Praying the Psalms*, by J. Goldingay, Nottingham, 1993, p 14.

<sup>22</sup> ‘A Literary Approach to Biblical Text Analysis’ in *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, T. Wilt (ed.), Manchester UK / Northampton MA, 2003, p 218.

<sup>23</sup> *Praying the Psalms*, by W. Brueggemann, Winona, MN, 1982, p 30.

<sup>24</sup> *The Responsible Self*, by H.R. Niebuhr, New York, 1963, p 161.

than a trigger for giving vent to joy or catastrophe. A hermeneutic of imagination has, indeed, the potential to open the psalms to contemporary audiences.<sup>25</sup> But so also does a hermeneutic of interrogation which is the third element of Scripture engagement attested by the Psalm Journey.

### INTERROGATION

A hermeneutic of interrogation involves a more analytical reading of the text. So, in addition to providing prompts to the imagination, I included in the Minimal Hermeneutic some additional prompts designed to evoke interrogative readings. I will now quote four of these prompts that were offered with the objective of inspiring respondents to interrogate the text and allow the text to interrogate them:

- **Psalm 22:** *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (v. 1). Imagine a situation in which you might have felt / might feel in the depths of despair. Then slowly and reflectively go through the text of the psalm exploring how it impacts the way you feel.
- **Psalm 30:** In verses 4 and 5 the poet interrupts his prayer to invite others to join him in thankfulness. Reflect on the ways in which other people contribute to your spirituality.
- **Psalm 55:** *The battle that I wage* (v. 18). Ask yourself how do I react to life's conflicts? (a) Opt out (vv. 6-8)? (b) Curse those who attack me (vv. 9, 15)? (c) Ask God (or some higher power) to lighten the load (v. 22)? (d) If not these, what?
- **Psalm 73:** The mood of the poet changes from self-pity in the face of the arrogance and violence of the powerful in his society (vv. 13-14) to a deep sense of self-fulfilment in worship (vv. 23-28). Reflect on ways in which you might become self-fulfilled without being self-centred.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf K. J. Vanhoozer's observation: 'The imagination is not merely the faculty of fantasy – the ability to see things not here – but rather a means for seeing what is there (e.g., the meaning of the whole) that the senses alone are unable to observe (and that the propositional alone is unable to state). The imagination is our port of entry into other modes of experience, into other modes of seeing and thinking, and as such is the unique and indispensable condition of participating in the communicative action of others' ('The Voice and the Actor: a Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology' in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, J.G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., Grand Rapids / Vancouver / Leicester, 2000, p 84.

Respondents, as I hoped, treated such prompts as incentives to bring their own queries to the text. Liz, for example, finds herself reflecting on her doubts about God:

I used to think that believing in God meant giving him responsibility and then sitting back waiting to see what tricks he would pull. Now it dawns on me that it is more about accepting his help to take the full responsibility and to fuller integration and happiness (Ps. 22-D5).

The reference to the Lord restoring the fortunes of Zion (Ps. 126.1) motivated Connie to ask: 'Why, if the Lord has the power to restore the fortunes of Zion, is he allowing such suffering and sorrow in Iraq?' (D3). Psalm 73 moved Kate to asks a similar question (D5) – the first of ten she fires at Psalms 73 and 74! Here are two of them: 'Will God punish street gangs who've never had a chance in life?' (Ps 73-D5). 'How can you still believe God takes care of you when he leaves you in your darkest hours?' (Ps 74-D2). This last question arose during her meditation on the poignant lament of Psalm 74: why had God failed to intervene on behalf of his people when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed and desecrated? For Ashok, the discovery that God can be questioned was one of the high points of the Psalm Journey (I-9: 3). Respondents not only put questions to the psalmic texts; they also heard some answers. After expressing her frustration that those who flout rules and disrespect others, so often come out on top, Edith writes in her journal: 'What I receive from this psalm is the assurance that if I'm being true (to God or to myself) then things will work out as they ought' (Ps 73-D1).

We have already noted that such an interrogative approach to the biblical text does not necessarily inhibit imaginative readings. In fact, British hermeneutical scholar, Antony Thiselton, contends that asking hard questions of the biblical text complements *Lectio Divina* readings by saving readers from unwittingly succumbing to self-deception and from promoting self-interest. Thiselton emphasises that an interrogative safeguard is particularly important for those who come to *Lectio Divina* from outside given interpretive traditions.<sup>26</sup> Here Thiselton is adopting French literary critic Paul Ricoeur's oft-quoted idea of a 'hermeneutic of suspicion.' It should be borne in mind that, although the phrase 'hermeneutic of suspicion' is often popularly employed to denote a sceptical reading of the biblical text, this may be a misuse of Ricoeur's terminology. The key point made by Thiselton is that in attempting to internalise a biblical text, meditative and interrogative readings enrich one another. Paul Ricoeur's con-

<sup>26</sup> *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, by A.C. Thiselton, Grand Rapids, 1992, pp 575-582.

cept of a 'second naïvete' calls on us to return to an intuitive appreciation of the text before ending our engagement with it. Ricoeur's paradigm, when loosely related to popular psychology's division of the human brain into two hemispheres, offers a helpful dynamic for Scripture engagement. The right hemisphere of the brain stimulates our intuition, imagination, etc., while the left hemisphere coordinates our analytical and logical processes. Ricoeur's paradigm encourages us to begin appreciation of a text by using the right hemisphere, then to move to the left, and finally to return to the right. On this understanding the marching call for the church militant to advance in Scripture engagement would be 'right-left-right!' In other words, begin with imagination, continue with interrogation, end by returning to imagination. So far, I have identified three components of Scripture engagement: correlation, imagination and interrogation. It is now time to move to a fourth, which is contextualisation.

### CONTEXTUALISATION

My Psalm Journey respondents did more than internalise the biblical text in human experience via exercising their faculties of imagination and examination. They also sought to contextualise the text in the external world. It was fascinating to note that they had little difficulty in discovering the relevance of the psalms for today. Their meditation was informed by knowledge of contemporary events gleaned from newspapers, radio or television. Again and again they used the psalms as a lens for evaluating the week's news. The war in Iraq, the political crisis in Zimbabwe, the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, and the economic exploitation of consumers by business corporations, all featured in individual journals and were shared in the *Lectio Divina*. So also did consideration of powerful political leaders of the time like George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Ariel Sharon and Saddam Hussein.<sup>27</sup>

John records in his journal that he found Psalm 126 'a good symbolic tool' for capturing the daily 'cycle of celebrations and tribulations' (D5). As the Psalm Journey proceeded, Ashok from India found himself progressively empathising with psalmic spirituality, discovering to his surprise that the psalms relate to everyday life (I-9: 2). Edith told the weekly group meditation that the rhetorical question of Psalm 30.9 – 'Will the dust praise you?' – brought home to her the futility of a suicide bombing that had taken place the previous day in the Iraqi city of Basra (L3).

Such reflections by Psalm Journey participants belies the popular notion that the Bible is no longer relevant in the modern world. These

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<sup>27</sup> The Psalm Journey took place in the first half of 2004.



young adults, most of whom had only a very tentative link or no link at all with the Christian church, readily brought together the ancient horizon of the Old Testament psalms with the contemporary horizon of the modern world. They demonstrated 16<sup>th</sup> century Genevan reformer John Calvin's famous dictum about the Scriptures being spectacles that enable human beings to view life from a divine perspective.<sup>28</sup> Evidence from the Psalm Journey suggests that the current disposition of young adults pursuing an interest in spirituality would be receptive to appropriate promotions of the Bible as a handbook for everyday living. It is this ability on the part of these contemporary seekers to contextualise biblical texts in modern everyday events as a means to evaluate such events, that prompts me to propose the fourth feature of Scripture engagement to be the contextualisation in the contemporary world of the message of whatever passage is in view. Once again, it's time to pause for breath and then to move on. The four elements of Scripture engagement noted so far are: correlation, imagination, interrogation and contextualisation. The Psalm Journey project highlighted two more, the first of which is actualisation.

#### ACTUALISATION

The Psalm Journey not only indicates that meditating on the psalms enabled respondents to view the world from a new perspective. Meditation also inspired them to action. The action respondents were prompted to take might be broadly described in terms of the traditional terminology of faith and works. Participants in the meditation were challenged to make a faith commitment and also to do something to make the world a better place.

We have already noted that most respondents became aware of the text making a claim upon them. In some cases this took the form of a claim on personal allegiance.

Joan told the others during the weekly *Lectio Divina* that she sensed Psalm 30 'reaching out' to her. 'For me,' she said, 'the psalmist was inviting, wanting me to believe in God' (Ps 30-L: 6). However, Joan declined the invitation because she remained unconvinced about the message of the psalm. Liz also acknowledged that a psalm (in her case Psalm 126) had challenged her to renew her faith. But she indicates in her journal that she dare not expose herself to the risk of believing in God (Ps 126-D6). However, in her follow-up interview Liz told me she was 'hanging on' to the possibility of exploring God further. Epiphanies may have been in

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<sup>28</sup> 'Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis' in *Calvin's Commentaries Vol I*, J. King (tr.), Grand Rapids, 1979, p 62.

short supply, but the data indicates that although the Psalm Journey experience fell short of effecting a definite faith commitment, it succeeded in motivating some respondents into action. John tells us in his journal how he repeated Psalm 22 on behalf of a friend who was passing through a difficult time and 'feeling especially alienated and alone' (Ps 22-D6). Tom, who wrote in his journal: 'I sometimes get tired of being a Zimbabwean,' was reminded by Psalms 55 and 126 of his duty to return to his homeland and share in the suffering of his people (Pss 55-D7; 126-D2). Meditating on Psalm 126 also induced Tom to clean up the university apartment he shared with two other students after they had repeatedly left the kitchen in a mess. He told us that he did so thinking: 'Maybe if I sow in tears I will reap with shouts of joy' (Ps 126-D4). Edith told how the Psalm Journey had helped her find an 'even keel' in bringing closure to a broken relationship: 'I deleted all the emails of the correspondence that took place, so that there was no way I could go back and dwell on it' (I-11: 11). Liz, who earlier said she didn't dare expose herself to the risk of believing in God, attended church on the Sunday immediately after completing the Psalm Journey (I-1:6). Tom and Ashok also reported that independently of each other they had gone to church following their three week meditation on the psalms. It was the first time Ashok had ever been in a church.

In addition to comparing the Bible to spectacles, John Calvin stressed the importance of putting the Scriptures into practice. Commentating on the command to be 'doers of the word, and not merely hearers' (James 1.22), he writes: 'We ought to labour that the word of the Lord should strike roots in us, so that it may afterwards fructify.'<sup>29</sup> The sixteenth century Genevan reformer reminds us that the ultimate objective of Scripture engagement is for the text to become actualised in our everyday lives, effecting transformation of personality and lifestyle. This desired outcome of Scripture engagement reminds us that the writer to the Hebrews declares the word of God to be 'alive and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' (4.12). It is, he says, like a sword that 'cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together' (GNB). It judges our most inaccessible thoughts and secret intentions with devastating effect: 'Everything in all creation is exposed and lies open' before God's eyes. The Greek verb translated by the GNB as 'exposed' and by the TNIV as 'uncovered' is an uncommon word which was sometimes used in the ancient world of a wrestler siezing his opponent and pinning him down, rendering him unable to move.

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<sup>29</sup> 'Commentaries on the Epistle of James' in *Calvin's Commentaries Vol XXII*, J. Owen (tr), Grand Rapids, 1979, p 297.

At first sight it is difficult to recognise in the data flowing from the Psalm Journey such dynamic critical power confronting respondents and obtaining a wrestler's submission. While there may have been no submissions, there is, as we have seen, evidence of a degree of actualisation of the Psalm texts in the everyday life of respondents. All indicated that they were now more likely to return to the psalms and the Bible. When asked 'What is different as a result of the Psalm Journey?' Saul's answer was: 'I now have a Bible on my desk.' Who knows, the Psalm Journey may yet turn out to be the beginning of a new spiritual odyssey into the wider Bible story. In the light of the positive impact of the Scriptures on human lives in many languages and cultures, the degree of actualisation the daily meditation effected over the three-week period of the Psalm Journey may reasonably be attributed to the self-authenticating faculty of the psalmic texts.<sup>30</sup> Such authentication of the psalms in the lived experience of respondents is the sixth element of Scripture engagement that was highlighted by the Psalm Journey.

#### AUTHENTICATION

My respondents without exception engaged with the text – they all listened to it, many wrestled with it, some affirmed it and some contradicted it. They did so because they became aware that the psalms were making a claim on their lives. They may not have responded to this claim by making a life-commitment, but all engaged with the text according to an initial upper case 'T'. The psalm texts did more than resonate with the needs and ideals of respondents. By providing a context in which participants in the Psalm Journey were able to seek a greater understanding of their spiritual identity and place in the world, they also evoked a sense of respect. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, originally uttered by people inspired with alternative visions of the future of the world, became what he describes as 'lingering texts,' preserved and revered by generations of faithful people. Brueggemann observes that from time to time during later generations these ancient texts suddenly burst into new life, exploding with unexpected relevance in new situations.<sup>31</sup> This explosion of unexpected relevance enables such texts to authenticate themselves in the experience of new generations.

Participants in the Psalm Journey recognised that the ancient psalms, are, indeed, lingering texts. They would probably hesitate to describe the

<sup>30</sup> Anecdotal evidence of the life impacting power of the Scriptures abounds in the publications of Bible agencies. See, for example, issues of the *UBS World Report*.

<sup>31</sup> *Texts that Linger, Words that Explode*, by W. Brueggemann, ref

impact in their case as explosive, but most would agree that the effect was enlightening and uplifting. Their reaction suggests that they discovered the Book of Psalms to be no ordinary text. I doubt if most would be ready to ascribe to the six psalms the status of 'Holy Scripture,' but they freely acknowledged that these ancient songs resonated with their personal spiritual quest to find meaning and fulfilment in life.

This response suggests that the psalms fulfilled for respondents a role that German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer accords to a 'religious classic.' Catholic theologian David Tracy of Chicago has given visibility to Gadamer's concept in American theology. According to Tracy, classic texts 'so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status.'<sup>32</sup> Tracy's words aptly describe the Psalm Journey experience of my respondents. It is for this reason I would contend that human interaction with biblical texts may be classified as 'Scripture engagement,' without a requirement that readers attribute divine inspiration to these texts. But, on the other hand, it is unlikely that Psalm Journey respondents would have interacted with the psalms in the ways they did, had these psalms not earned in the eyes of respondents a status equivalent to that of religious classics.

The capacity of psalms and other biblical passages to authenticate themselves in the lived experience of readers and hearers is attributed by Christians to the Holy Spirit. Whatever our role may be in Scripture engagement – be it as readers, facilitators, encouragers, or teachers – it is not our expertise that endows the sacred text with authority. The Westminster Confession of Faith, which serves as the doctrinal standard of my own confessional family, recognises that while a high view of Scripture can be argued for and defended, ultimately human assurance of the Bible's divine authority comes 'from the work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.'<sup>33</sup> For this reason genuine Scripture engagement will in the end always be art rather than science.

However, being an art does not exclude Scripture engagement from empirical analysis. As has been, I hope, demonstrated, Scripture engagement in its radical or grassroots dimension, can be analysed into the following six inter-related and active components: correlation, imagina-

<sup>32</sup> *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, by D. Tracy, New York, 1981, p 108. For Tracy classic texts are cultural or religious texts that communities have come to regard as normative (pp 248-49).

<sup>33</sup> *Confession of Faith*, 1955, Edinburgh, Section I.V. Kevin Vanhoozer argues that the relation between Word and Spirit is helpfully accounted for by viewing Scripture as being composed of divine-human speech acts. (*Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, Grand Rapids / Leicester, 1998, p. 426).

tion, interrogation, contextualisation, actualisation and authentication. If we convert these six elements into a narrative, the following definition emerges:

Scripture engagement is personal, group or community interaction with the biblical text which creates sufficient opportunity for that text to speak for itself. Scripture engagement is essentially discovery learning that activates both hemispheres of the human brain (right as well as left) and enables readers (or listeners) to discover for themselves the unique claim the text is making upon them.

This is, of course, an empirical rather than a theological definition. It is one that I think all of my respondents – less than one third of whom, let me remind you, are active churchgoers – would agree with. Because of this I suggest that it offers a common basis of understanding on which churches, Bible agencies and Christian educationalists might invite non-Christians to explore Scripture texts despite prevailing suspicions of the church and popular wariness of the Bible. Acting on such a common basis of understanding would, I believe, open up the Bible to the current generation of westernised young adults who see themselves as spiritual seekers who are allergic to the churches.

In conclusion, I wish to highlight two ways of utilising the six elements of Scripture engagement identified in this paper in attempts to communicate the Bible to our postmodern culture,. Each of these two ways focuses on a distinct audience. The first concerns spiritual seekers who resolutely remain outside churches of all manifestations from traditional to emergent. For such an audience the components of Scripture engagement could be translated into the following user-friendly six steps to be followed in the exploration of any Scripture text.

### SIX STEPS OF SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

#### ***1. Making contact***

Be still and silent for a few moments. Get quiet inside. Then read the text several times. Spend time pondering over it. Ignore for now any extra-textual helps. Listen to what the Scripture text is saying. Let it sink in. Discover where it ‘clicks’ with you. Find points of contact with your lived experience that will serve as bridges between you and the text.

## ***2. Getting out of the box***

Enter the Scripture text in your imagination. If it is a story, picture the scene, using all your senses: hear the sounds, smell the smells. Imagine you are one of the characters. Or an onlooker. If the Scripture is a poem, or a bunch of proverbs, play with the metaphors, stretching them to their limits. If the Scripture is from an epistle, imagine it being read for the first time in the church to which it was originally sent. Imagine the body language of the reader, and of the congregation. Imagine the discussion afterwards.

## ***3. Cross-examining***

Bring to the Scripture text any questions that may have arisen in your mind during the previous two steps. Direct these questions to the text. Does the text offer any answers? Identify any questions the text may be putting to you. Try to give honest answers. Make a note of these questions and answers. Now consult any available extra-textual 'helps' (commentary, background notes) on the passage. Reflect again on the questions and answers, making a note of any helpful clarification the helps have provided.

## ***4. Wearing the spectacles***

Re-read the passage. Take time to allow it to capture your imagination again. Then reflect on some of the items in this week's news. View them through the lens of the passage, again taking your time. Imagine you're a TV news journalist reporting one of these events on Channel NSP ('News in Scriptural Perspective'). What would you tell viewers?

## ***5. Making it happen***

Identify one thing you think the text is asking you to do to help others? If you're game, do it!

## ***6. Knowing the score***

Weigh up how you have responded to any claims the text is making on you?

The second audience I have in mind who might benefit from this type of 'open' Scripture engagement program is composed of people within our churches who are finding engaging with the Bible difficult and even boring. The six steps, expressed slightly more theologically, might rekindle the waning enthusiasm for the Bible of individuals like Marge and Bob, and family couples like John and Jean and Steve and Mary, all of whom we met in my opening four scenarios. The six steps in this case would be

set in a theological context that explicitly acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit in animating the Scriptures so that we come to hear the voice of God speaking in and through them and to encounter Jesus Christ as he steps out of the sacred page into our lives.

These two audiences respectively illustrate the challenge the churches today face in mounting successful programs of evangelism and discipleship. The key to success in the case of both audiences is a life-challenging and a life-transforming encounter with the Word of God.

As a postscript these two quotations may be appropriate:

'Meditation moves from looking at the words of the text to entering the world of the text.'<sup>34</sup>

'You can't hear God speak to someone else, you can hear him only if you are being addressed.'<sup>35</sup>

*[Delivered on February 12, 2009 at Taylor University]*

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<sup>34</sup> *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, by E.H. Peterson, London / Sydney / Auckland, 2006, p 99.

<sup>35</sup> In Peterson, 2006, p 79