

Reading the Bible



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Overview

It is difficult to provide an approach to reading the Bible without asking the reader to engage in a great deal of study of the literature, the history behind it, and the religious thought it expresses. Such detailed study may be left to the professional who has time for it. Most lay persons are interested in the Bible as a guide to faith and life and a source of inspiration. Limitations on time usually mean that the study and use of Scripture will be the process of a life-time. But that may well be a gift in disguise. When one lives with the biblical books over a long period of time the biblical material engages one's own life in dialogue and is assimilated in ways that are right for one's needs. In this process the wisdom which comes from "living with" great texts and ideas is integrated with the more intellectual understanding one acquires of the text. And when one uses the text as a guide to faith and life and a source of inspiration, it is not really necessary to know everything at the beginning of the process.

With this in mind, though there is discussion of historical study of the text, the primary methods advocated have to do with devotional interpretation of the text, living with it, exploring what God would say to us now through it. It is, however, important to have available resources to use as necessary, when questions come up and passages are read which call for more information. This book will attempt to do this in a limited way.

The *first part* of this material provides a basic perspective on the Bible. The *second part* focuses on methods for the reading of the Bible. The *third part* deals with study of the Gospels and especially the Gospel of Mark. This provides not only an entry point into the study of the Bible but also an understanding of Jesus and his message which provides a necessary key to the reading of the rest of the biblical materials. The *fourth part* includes resources for reading the Bible which can be checked as one needs while reading various biblical books. This provides a statement about the nature of Scripture which comes from the Moravian tradition, summaries and historical background for all of the biblical books, and a list of New Testament passages which have been favorite to many. Here one should read as it becomes helpful and necessary. If the reader seeks to understand this material all at once there may be an experience of informational over-load.

The assumption of this volume is that the Bible is a gift of God, designated as a place to meet God, a place where God promises to be present for us -- as in the Sacraments. We may come to the Bible for

many reasons, seeking answers to our questions and longings, but what above all we meet there is God. Is it not better to know we are in relationship with the God who has the answers rather than to seek first the answers and secondarily to seek God? When we have the God who has the answers, then God can work out the answers with us in ways that not only were right for ancient times, but are right for our time and our needs. When we have God we have everything. When we have answers we have only some things. And to put all of the emphasis on the answers often places all of the emphasis on what we can discover. To put the emphasis on God is to make secondary what we can have, discover, produce; and to recognize that ultimately God has us rather than we have God. We have God because God has first given God's self into relationship with us in a pure act of grace. We only have to let God give God's self and draw us into God's life. But for some what is so easy is so hard, for then they are not in control. To be willing not to be in control, and to be willing not to know everything, to be open to the grace and action of God, is the first and basic lesson of the spiritual life.

The views expressed in this book have been much influenced by the understanding of Scripture in the Moravian Church. The devotional use of Scripture, especially advocated here, is very much a part of the Moravian tradition. Thus I have included in the Resources a copy of the paragraphs on Scripture from the present Moravian doctrinal statement (*The Ground of the Unity*). It is important to note that while Scripture is the sole *standard* of doctrine and faith and shapes our ethical life, only the Triune God is the *source* of our life and salvation. It is to God that we are directed in the Scripture in which God is revealed. Therefore Scripture is never an end in itself. See "The Moravian Understanding of Scripture" in the Resources.

GAINING PERSPECTIVE ON THE BIBLE

Finding a Norm

Why do we read Scripture? We read it because we understand that in some way it is God's word, God's message to us. Christians have debated as to just how it is God's word: whether it is God's word because it contains God's message, whether it is God's word because God speaks to us through it, or whether it is God's word in the very words on its pages. *The important thing is not how it is but that it is God's word.* It is also important to remember that when the early church in the second to fourth centuries selected the books to be included in our Bible it felt that *its selection would bring to Christians the faith of the apostles and would be what was needed for the faith and life of the church.* All through the centuries it has nourished this faith and life. And it has called Christians to pay attention to the earliest and original forms of faith -- and to pay particular attention to Jesus who in his person and teachings brings us our understanding of God and makes possible our relationship with God.

We do not necessarily have to understand how Scripture is what it is and how it does what it does. We just need to keep coming to it and reading it and living with it and its message. It will do what God wants it to do if we only read and listen, with our hearts as well as our mind.

When reading the Bible for understanding of the biblical books or for inspiration and personal assistance, it is helpful to recognize that *the Bible contains 66 books written over a thousand year span and often representing not only different historical periods and issues but also different approaches to issues.* These books also represent *different types of literature.* There are books of history, biography, prophecy (concerned with God's call to justice and not just predicting the future), letters, poetry (such as Psalms). Some types of literature have long traditions. For example there is Wisdom literature which contains the sayings of learned teachers about how one should live and the nature of life (e.g. Proverbs in the O.T. and

James in the New Testament). In Jewish Wisdom literature about the time of Jesus Wisdom had been personified, a feminine extension of God, who was seen as God's agent in creation and history (the same way Jesus is described in John 1:1-18). Then there is Apocalyptic literature (Apocalypse means "revelation") with its visions and prophecies of the future (for example Daniel in the O.T. and Revelation in the New).

Thus one does not find all of the books presenting a common approach and message. Jesus, when he used the Old Testament, used it selectively, finding himself more in agreement with certain writers and passages than others.

The early church accepted the Old Testament because this was part of its sacred heritage coming from Judaism. The form in which it accepted the Old Testament was from the Greek translation of it called the Septuagint, a version used by many New Testament writers and most of the early church. This differed some from the Hebrew Old Testament which only some New Testament writers still used but is now the basis for our present Old Testament. The Greek Old Testament contained more books than the Hebrew (which in recent editions of the Bible are printed as the Old Testament Apocrypha) and different forms of several books. There were even persons who debated as to whether the Old Testament had any value at all for the Christian church, but the church affirmed its value and did not think you could understand the New Testament without it.

There were also differences of view in the early church which is reflected in New Testament literature. For example, Paul indicates many differences between himself and others and mentions a major argument with Peter (see Galatians 2:11-14). The literature bearing the name of "John" indicates differences within its religious communities (I John). When the church put together the New Testament from the second to the fourth centuries A.D. it debated which books and how much variety should be included. For example, some thought that the four Gospels should be boiled down to one so that readers would not have the problem of coping with four with differing perspectives. But they decided to keep the four and thus to preserve variety. In fact, variety is preserved throughout the Bible though persons of faith have often wanted it all to say the same thing.

What unites all of the books is that they share in a common history which started with Abraham (or "Adam") and moves toward Jesus and beyond into the history of the church, and when they were put together into the Bible the church felt that they drew their life from the same God and somehow pointed to the same Christ.

One way to approach the variety in the Bible is to see the *central role of the Gospels*. The Old Testament came to the church as a whole from Judaism and it did not redo the Old Testament it used. When the New Testament was put together the books placed first were the stories of Jesus, the Gospels, and thus they form a bridge between the Old and the rest of the New Testaments. It is no accident that the Gospel of Matthew is first. It is the Gospel which most extensively points out Jesus' relationship with the Old Testament. Thus the church was saying to us, "Get to know the Gospels so that you will be able to understand the rest of the Bible." Now this is not simple because we have four Gospels with different perspectives. But I believe that the Gospels direct us to the person of Jesus whom they describe each in their own way. It is not the perspective of their *description* of Jesus that is final but *the Jesus of their description*. Jesus as person, the "mystery of Jesus Christ," which cannot be completely comprehended by any human mind, is then the key to understanding the Bible. *The Ground of the Unity*, the Moravian doctrinal statement, indicates:

But just as the Holy Scripture does not contain any doctrinal system, so the Unitas Fratrum also has not developed any of its own because it knows that the mystery of Jesus Christ, which is attested to in the Bible, cannot be comprehended completely by any human mind or expressed completely in any human statement.¹

Now, if you read the Gospels enough you would probably come to understand Jesus and get to know him from the differing witness of the four Gospels. It would be like talking to four different people about him. And we should talk to Paul too since he is our earliest witness to Jesus. Eventually the Jesus to whom they all bore witness would stand out, with yet some mystery remaining. There always remains mystery in our knowledge of anyone. A quicker and simpler procedure is to focus on one reliable Gospel, such as we will do here, while never forgetting that there are three others.

In these materials an interpretive outline of the Gospel of Mark is provided along with some introductory material and an approach to the study of a Gospel. Mark is our oldest Gospel and was utilized as a narrative source for Matthew. It is my understanding that Mark better represents what Jesus was like and said than Matthew, for Matthew reworks the sources concerning Jesus' life to present Jesus as having strong continuity with Judaism and few differences. Matthew in chapter 23 has Jesus advise his disciples to practice what the Pharisees teach, but not what they do. Jesus is presented as a new Moses, one who fulfills the Old Testament Law and gives his disciples a new Law from a new mountain (the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5-7). This perspective was very important for the people for whom Matthew wrote, supporting their understanding of Christian faith and community. But this interpretation of Jesus was not fair to some of Jesus' concerns and teachings. *The Gospel of Mark gives a better picture of the Jesus who was not only Jewish but radically reinterpreted many aspects of traditional Judaism.*

We could also ask the church to give us some understanding of Jesus and take this to all the biblical literature we read. Unfortunately, it is true that different scholars from within and outside the church will come to different conclusions about the meaning and message of Jesus. Thus we are confronted with variety both within the Gospels and within modern scholarship. Some commission of the church could try to arrive at a conclusion which could be recommended to all. But this attempt to resolve differences presumes that somehow we are better off if someone can give us an answer than we are if we know the person of Jesus who may be beyond simple answers. What I would argue is that there is no substitute for getting to know Jesus through the Gospels and for starting reading the Gospels for ourselves.

As one then reads biblical materials it is then important to ask: "*How does this fit with what I know of Jesus?*" If it does not, what is contained in a passage may represent the struggle of some persons with important issues in the history of God's people, but it is not something that I should use as the basis for my understanding of the Christian faith and life. Yet God and Christ are in some way connected with these persons who struggle over issues and provide answers which do not seem to fit with Jesus. Perhaps in their writing I can still find the God whom I know in Jesus even if I can't use all of their ideas. Paul is very helpful in pointing out to us the limitations of all understanding. In I Cor. 8:1 he says that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," pointing out the dangers in being too confident in knowledge. In I Cor. 13:8-12 he also points out that our knowledge of God is always imperfect and we will only completely know God when we see God face to face. In vs. 12 he indicates that God now fully understands us even though we do not now fully understand God. It is this understanding of us by God that really counts and it is the way that God enters into relationship with us that really counts. *We are saved and helped not by the extent of our understanding but by the gifts God gives in relationship.*

¹ . See Resources, "The Moravian Understanding of Scripture."

Clues to Jesus and His Understanding of Things

Let us for a moment consider a few of the things that the church, or its scholars, might say about the way Jesus is presented in the Gospels. Are there striking features of his behavior and teaching which would give us some help in understanding him?

Each Gospel presents Jesus with a particular slant (see the summaries of each Gospel in the section on New Testament books). Though looking at the slant of each Gospel gives us some appreciation of the rich variety in the early church's portrayal of Jesus, it does not give us an easy understanding of what Jesus did and taught. It is more helpful to consider how Jesus differed from contemporary Jewish leaders and religious groups, with whom he often engaged in argument, and how he rethought many aspects of the Old Testament. In other words, *Jesus seems to have had a distinctive point of view*. What was this?

The most striking aspect of Jesus' teaching can be found in his understanding of the "*kingdom of God*" which is really a term used in Judaism for the way God is present in the world and exercises influence. Many scholars have suggested that this term might better be translated the "rule of God," for when we think of "kingdom" we usually think of a geographical location. Much of Judaism of Jesus time understood that God was only present in heaven and little present on earth, because if God were really present everything in the world would be as God wanted it and all problems would be fixed. When God really came into the world, then the end would come and all things would be set right.

In Mark 4 where Jesus teaches a great deal about the kingdom of God, he indicates that the kingdom comes as seed sown (4:1-9) and may be as small as a mustard seed (4:30-32) and grows by its own slow process (4:26-29). In Mark 4:11 Jesus speaks of the "*mystery*" (Greek *mysterion*) of the kingdom.² In Mark 10:35-45 he argues with James and John that the kingdom is not primarily characterized by power and privilege, but by service. Jesus contemporaries had difficulty taking seriously his proclaiming the presence of God's kingdom, for they would immediately ask "Where is it? How have things changed?" It was especially hard to believe that God was really present when Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified. How could this happen to God's servant?

The *cross* thus became the symbol of the difficulty of seeing God as present in a world that was not greatly changed. Many felt that the cross happened to Jesus because this was somehow a special plan of God to provide redemption, but that it should not happen to them. But others knew that if God were really present with Jesus when all of the forces of the world massed against him, that doesn't just say something about Jesus' life, but ours. Paul said that the cross was a problem to everyone (I Cor. 1:18-31). Jews looked for a sign of power if God was to be seen as really present, Greeks looked for wisdom (for it to make good philosophical sense), but God gave the cross which was a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles. That God's presence does not overcome everything is even to be seen in how God chose people at Corinth, not many of whom were wise, noble, but who were foolish, weak, low, despised, etc.. And yet God was really there in them, even when they were very human and limited (I Cor. 1:26-31). Even the apostles were like men sentenced to death, fools, weak, in disrepute, hungry, thirsty, ill-clad, buffeted and homeless, reviled, slandered, as the refuse of the world (I Cor. 4:8-13). Amazingly, the resurrected Jesus in John 20 (who appeared to Mary, then went to heaven to complete his resurrection, and returned to appear to his disciples) appeared to his disciples with his wounds. Even in heaven he did

² . Though the word in Greek (*mysterion*) is often translated "secret", it really should be translated "mystery." A secret is something one does not know, but when it is told it is then known and understood. A mystery, even when it is known, may remain a mystery. In Mk. 4:11 even when the mystery of the kingdom is given to Jesus' disciples, it remains mysterious for it does not fit their previous understanding of the kingdom of God.

not get rid of them, for they said something not only about the way he died, but about the way he would live. It is as if he said: "As long as you need to deal with the difficulties of life and as long as you suffer and are wounded, I also will be wounded."

If this is true, God is present in the world, but the world has its own reality and dynamics. Jesus uses the concept of "mystery" because God's presence cannot be confused with what is and God's participation cannot be confused with what happens. Traditional ways of viewing God in the world understand God to be all-knowing, all powerful, all present, and therefore in control in this world (foreknowing or predestining events), leaving no room for complexity and little room for freedom.

Traditional perspectives create problems because one has to find reasons other than questioning God's power or the nature of God's participation as to why things don't go as they should. This can be blamed on the lack of faith, or the sin, of the person seeking God's action; or it can be explained by God's educating us through suffering (we do learn through suffering, but does God cause the suffering to cause us to learn?). Or perhaps for some reason God does not want to say "yes" at the present time. The presupposition is that God could really do whatever is needed if God wanted to and we were adequately responsive and responsible. I have come seriously to question this oversimplification. It does not fit my own experience or the experience of many others I know.

It has helped me to recognize that the New Testament deals with the *world as complex: God, humans, Satan,³ demons and angels, neutral powers* (political systems and nature), etc. God is sovereign in God's spiritual world, but in this world (even though made by God) there are many forces at work which cause some of the bad things which happen to good people.

Not only is life complex, but humans are complex. My understanding of the human being is that s/he is a biological organism, has a psyche (inner life: consciousness with a center of awareness which is often called the ego, personal and genetic unconscious etc.) which is extensively based in and affected by the body (just note what happens to consciousness when a person gets sick), has spiritual dimensions including having a soul or spirit (that part of the person which survives death and provides the person with resources beyond the physical), has a personal history which creates memories that continue to live within one's mind, and exists in various systems of relationships, primary among which is the family. Thus as one tries to understand oneself and what one does, what parts of oneself are involved?

Jewish and Christian *hope for the end* of the world during the NT period looked for a time when complexity would cease, when God's power would overcome all other powers, when the soul of the person would live in a spiritual body (rather than a fleshly one which struggled with the spirit), when the material world and God's spiritual world would become one by the transformation of the material. Though the influence of the "hope for the end" may powerfully influence the present (and this hope is very much in the NT), this powerful take-over has not yet happened and it is now 2000 years since Christians began to expect it.

Thus it would seem that we really need to learn to live with the world as it now is: a place of complex factors in which God is nevertheless present and acts. *That God is present with us in this complex world is really what enables us to live here and face its difficulty. That God is with us makes a tremendous*

³ . Many Jews and early Christians in Jesus' time felt that the world and life were so unresponsive to God's purpose that God was not really understood to be present in this world but was in heaven. Rather Satan was this world's ruler. Note how Satan in the Temptation offers Jesus the kingdoms of this world (Matt. 4:8).

difference and often changes many things. And we know that we also belong to God's world as well as this world, a world to which we travel at death. That also makes a tremendous difference.

Another aspect of Jesus' view of God is that *God is inclusive*: God includes the needy and the failed and even those who are not properly religious. Jesus associated with all sorts of common folk. While many of the sects of Judaism excluded those who were not righteous and pure enough, God seems to be including many who did not meet the religious standards. This is particularly clear in Luke where in chapter 15 the father receives back the prodigal son much to the objections of the righteous elder brother who typifies the Pharisee. Thus God is understood to be loving and we are told by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer, and implied in this parable, that we can address God on intimate terms as "Father," presuming God's love.

It is also important to think of *how Jesus was like his contemporaries*, for then we are more likely to see him as a person of his own time and culture rather than immediately trying to make him a person of our time. One thing that we must remember about Jesus is that *he was a Palestinian Jew*, an Easterner, not a Westerner. That is, his heritage was not that of western philosophy and religion, but that of the eastern religious teacher. Thus in many of his sayings Jesus likely did not intend to teach conceptual truths and to have all he said gathered into a system of thought. The eastern teacher told stories (like Jesus' parables) to introduce the listener to a process of reflection and discovery. At times exaggeration would be used to make a point. At times a story would be told which could not be understood or solved at all, and the mind would become so puzzled that a person would stop thinking and just be open to God (which is what was intended). Thus some of Jesus' sayings and stories are not specific answers to specific questions, but were intended to set his hearers on a spiritual journey where discoveries could be made in the process of living with the story. If we try to make the sayings themselves into a bunch of answers that fit logically together we may turn them into something they were never intended to be. For example, what do you do with the sayings about adultery in Matthew 5:27ff. Do you really commit adultery with a woman if you look lustfully at her, and if this happens should you really cut off the offending member? Perhaps these sayings were intended to provoke thinking about this issue rather than being literally intended.

Reading the Bible

A good way to start reading the Bible then is to *start with a Gospel such as Mark* (note the material included later which provides an approach to Mark) or Luke.⁴ Mark is the oldest of the Gospels. *Then read Acts to get some perspective on the early church*. Then you should get familiar with the basic stories of Old Testament history, if only so that you can understand the many NT allusions to them. A reading of *Genesis*, at least, would provide you with the "identity stories" which were so important to Judaism and the early church: the stories of creation, Abraham, Moses, the Exodus, etc.. It might be good also to read the prophet *Isaiah* to glimpse the prophet's sense of call and mission (Isaiah 6) and to hear God's call for justice and promise of hope (e.g. Is. 24-28). Isaiah was one of Jesus' favorite prophets and he identified with Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant and God's promise of redemption (Is. 40-55, often called II Isaiah). Because of the great influence of *Paul* and his many letters in the N.T., it would be good to read at least one letter of his to introduce you to his thought. I would suggest the letter to the *Galatians* which is relatively short and contains both significant autobiographical material and his central thoughts. With this you will have a basic structure from which to handle any other reading you do. The reader

⁴ . Luke is the only conscious historian among the evangelists (see Luke 1:1-4) and gives us a very helpful presentation of Jesus, but Mark is less complex. The collection of Jesus' teachings and some narrative in 9:51-19:27 contain very important materials, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Good Samaritan, and the three parables of Luke 15 (lost sheep, coin and son).

should note that there is a section titled “The Basic Story” which provides an overview of the basic stories of the Old and New Testaments.

You could then *select books that might fit your interests or follow some plan for regular biblical reading*. You will also want to keep in mind that there are assigned bible passages for each Sunday of the church year, arranged in a three year cycle. You may want to read these lessons before each Sunday. The Pastor will often preach on one of these.

A very helpful little book to assist in Bible reading is the *Moravian Daily Texts*, first published in 1731 (to secure write The Moravian Church, North, 1021 Center St., PO Box 1245, Bethlehem, PA 18016-1245). Though this devotional booklet does not have wide circulation in the U.S., it is extensively circulated all over the world in many languages and persons of many other churches make use of it besides Moravians. For each day there is an Old Testament verse which is considered the "watchword" for the day, something to live by and ponder. These OT text are selected in Herrnhut, Germany, by being drawn from a collection of about 2000 suitable texts. Then a NT verse is selected to match the watchword and this is called the "doctrinal text." The meaning of each text is suggested by a hymn verse so as to, as much as possible, leave your reaction to the meaning of the text a personal response. A prayer is included for each day. Besides this there are Bible passages selected for reading. For each Sunday the passages are those assigned for reading in church. The readings for the rest of the days follow a regular plan. On one line there are readings which would enable the user to read through the New Testament in four years and the Old Testament in eight. On a second line there are readings which would result in reading the Bible through in one year. There are undoubtedly many similar tools. Contact your denominational publication office.

Another good way to approach Bible reading is to secure a list of passages (see “Some Favorite NT Passages” towards the end of this paper) which have value for special situations in life and then use the passages which meet your needs.

It is also good to make a list of passages which especially speak to you or are meaningful to you. A starter sheet for this is located at the end of this book. You will then be able to go back to these passages when you need them.

A brief description will be here included of all of the 66 biblical books (and some of those written between the OT and NT) accompanied by some information about the history which is behind these books. Thus you will have some very limited information for understanding them historically. However, since little detail can be provided in this small volume, I would suggest securing a Bible which has introductions to each book and notes which help in understanding difficult passages, such as *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. By B.M. Metzger and R.E. Murphy, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Again, your greatest help in approaching any of the biblical books, whichever you select to read, is *an adequate understanding of Jesus who brings us an adequate understanding of God --- and also an awareness of the fact that God and Jesus will enter into relationship with you through this reading. Scripture is a place where they may be met and, as in the Lord’s Supper, they promise to be there for you.*

Reading Scripture Historically

Since in the section labeled "Resources" you will be supplied with a lot of historical information, it is good to start with some discussion of *historical criticism*. Historical criticism is a way of looking at and interpreting the Bible by the use of historical information and principles. *Historical criticism takes the*

Bible no less seriously than those who in faith regard the Bible as the inerrant verbally inspired word of God and feel that history is not important. Both approaches *intend* to take the Bible not only seriously but literally. However, those who believe in inerrant inspiration would understand the literal meaning of the text to be the very words of God, while those who would understand the Bible historically would understand the literal meaning to be the witness of men and women to the reality of God in their lives. Both would expect God to speak in some way through the text.

That we use the word *criticism* should not mean that we are being "critical". The word criticism comes from the Greek word *krisis* which merely means "judgment". Thus to practice criticism is to make judgments about the Biblical text on the basis of various methodologies, principles, or evidence. The judgments are made primarily to decide on the meaning of the text and, at times, to try to understand the historical events behind the text. The meaning of criticism is often misunderstood by those who feel that the value and authority of the Bible is being damaged by persons who are being *merely critical*. It is important to remember that most critical methods were developed to help persons understand the Bible. We should also recognize that we live in a world that uses critical (sometimes called scientific) methodology on everything and often asks historical questions. To be responsible the church must always seek to deal with the questions people ask if it is to communicate the Gospel to them.

Historical criticism asks such questions as:

1. Who wrote this material and when was it written?
2. What were the problems and concerns about which it was written? What was its purpose? What was the intent of the author?
3. Who were intended to receive the material and how did their cultural and social context and needs affect what the writer was saying?
4. If historical events are mentioned, how can we understand what happened from the sources of information? Are there others sources of information for this outside the Bible?
5. In the light of what we have discovered, what does God say to us and what should our faith response be?

The following are basic areas of information to keep in mind when reading the New Testament historically. We cannot provide similar information in a brief compass for the Old Testament since it came into being over 1,000 years within many differing historical periods. The writing of the New Testament really covers only the period from about 49 to 125 A.D., less than an hundred years. Most of us cannot spend the time to become experts in historical study, but most of us can master some basic information:

1. The Religious Situation

-- Jewish: Jesus and the early disciples all came from Judaism and dealt with religious issues in terms of the religious thought of Judaism. There were a number of Jewish sects in Jesus' day: Pharisees (the more strict interpreters of the Law), the Sadducees (a priestly group that adjusted their religious views more to contemporary culture), and the Essenes (many of whom withdrew from society into a monastic form of life and who gave us the Dead Sea Scrolls). The Essenes are not mentioned in the NT because they were destroyed during the war between the Jews and Romans and were no longer around when the Gospels were being written. Then there were also circles of wise men who taught what was expressed in Wisdom Literature and there was Apocalyptic literature, similar to the book of Revelation, very popular, but difficult to identify with any particular group. Christianity was at first thought to be a Jewish sect that regarded Jesus as

Messiah. Jesus was in conflict with some of the ideas of Judaism, as can be seen in the Gospels, and this conflict continued in the early church as portrayed in Acts.

- Greco-Roman: The Roman world into which the early church went was a cultural composite of Roman influence, Greek culture, and also influences from the East and Egypt. This was true of the religious situation. There were many religions with which the early church came into contact. The state religion was required of all citizens and then one could have whatever other religion or philosophy that one wanted. Jews were legally exempted from the state religion, but Christians were not. One very popular form of religion was expressed in the Mystery Religions which worshipped gods who suffered, died and rose again and by their resurrection guaranteed the believer the power to overcome all the powers that would limit or destroy their lives. It is important to recognize that writers of NT books would need to take into consideration the language and views of peoples' religions when they tried to communicate with them. When they wanted to talk about religious subjects they had to use the language which was available, with which people were already familiar. Thus even the same author will sound different when writing to different audiences.

2. The Political Situation

- Rome was the major political power and ruled the areas in which the early church developed. The church took various positions towards Rome, depending upon her experience with Roman rule at various times in her history. Rom. 13 and Acts regard Rome very favorably. I Peter 2 regards Rome less highly, calling for respect for government but regarding it as a human institution. Rev. 13 is very hostile to Rome.
- In Palestine the Romans ruled either through governors (such as Pontius Pilate) or through the Herods who were native kings responsible to Rome. The Jews had just lost their freedom to Rome about 60 years before Jesus' birth. Thus they longed for freedom and there were many revolutionary movements alive in Jesus' day. Jesus frequently addressed the issues of the revolutionary movements. The Jews finally revolted in 66 A.D.

3. Culture and Language Change

- The church moved from a Palestinian culture, strongly rooted in Judaism, into that of the Roman world which itself had been influenced by Greek culture. This meant not only a cultural change, but a change in the relationship of the church to the world in which it lived. Jesus and the earliest disciples were a part of their Jewish culture and they could speak to it and its ills. When the church moved into the vast Roman world, it could not speak to it in the same way. Thus where Jesus made some efforts to change his society, the early church could only try to create a new society within the church. Sayings of Jesus originally addressed to societal conditions in Palestine then had to be reinterpreted in "spiritual" directions (compare the concerns of the Beatitudes in Matt. 5 which are focused on spiritual concerns while those in Luke 6 retain the original social concern of Jesus).
- There were varied subcultures within Judaism. There were differences between Galilee and Judaea. Galilee was more influenced by Roman and Greek culture. There were differences between Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. There were those who thought in "Apocalyptic" terms, similar to what we find in the book of Revelation. Some of the differences we have in what was recorded as Jesus' sayings may be due to his communication with different audiences.
- Jesus and his disciples spoke Aramaic, a language akin to Hebrew. The church in moving into the Roman world needed to translate what Jesus said and did and its worship practices and creeds into

Greek, the common language of the Roman world. This helps to explain why we have some sayings of Jesus in different forms: they are different translations.

4. The history of the early church, in the context of which the N.T. materials were written, to whose needs and concerns they were addressed (see the included "Historical Outline of Early Christianity").

An interesting example of how culture and history affect the biblical materials is Paul. Paul grew up in the Roman world (the city of Tarsus in the Roman Province of Syria-Cilicia -- in lower Asia Minor), he was a Roman citizen, knew Greek well, was educated to some extent in Greco-Roman culture, but was also a Jew, of the Pharisaic party, receiving his higher education in Jerusalem. Thus he had a foot in both the Jewish and Roman worlds and understood them both. His missionary activities happened at a time when the church was just moving from Palestine into the Roman world and so was making the cultural and language transition. Paul realized that one had to speak differently in each culture: "To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews To those outside the Law I became as one outside the Law . . . that I might win those outside the Law." (I Cor. 9:20-21) One can see this in his letters. In Galatians he speaks primarily in terms Jewish about the Gospel, in Colossians he says the same thing in Greco-Roman terms, and in Romans he uses language which comes from both cultures. It is only in Romans and in Galatians that Paul mentions the Aramaic word (*Abba*) with which the Lord's Prayer began (Gal. 4:6, Rom. 8:15-16) and it is only in I Cor. 16:22 that Paul gives the Aramaic of the early Christian prayer, "Our Lord, come!" (*Maranatha*). Elsewhere these reminders of the Aramaic language of the worship services of the Palestinian church would not be meaningful.

Before the development of historical criticism in the 18th century, many students of the Bible used *theological criticism*. Even Jesus and the early church did this in regard to the Old Testament. Whereas historical criticism made judgments about the text through historical information, theological criticism made judgments about the text in terms of theological principles or important beliefs, somewhat as we have suggested using an understanding of Jesus as a norm by which to understand and critique parts of the Bible. However, even in Jesus' and Paul's time people were trained in argumentation to prove or disprove something (the science of rhetoric) and historical criticism was always in some sense applied. A type of historical criticism was applied in assembling the information about Jesus which went into the Gospels (see Luke 1:1-4 for his historical method) and in the selection of the books which were included in the New Testament (not all available books got in).

If we take historical criticism seriously, that does not mean that the message of Scripture is always and only what the words meant historically. God chose Scripture as a place to speak to us and God speaks to us *now* through it, even to say something to us that is not literally in the text. This is often spoken of as the Spirit of God leading us to new understandings. We suppose that this happens when we use the Moravian *Daily Texts* as passages taken out of their historical context and look for their meaning in terms of what God says to us now.

This is what Jesus says to his disciples in John 16:12ff.

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

He has things to say to them when they are ready for them. Since he will no longer be physically with them, the Holy Spirit will guide them into all truth, which truth has continuity with Jesus' truth and God's truth. It could not be given them before both because they were not ready for it, and because new times call for new applications of truth. In a similar saying in John 14:25ff Jesus indicates that the Spirit will bring to remembrance what Jesus previously said. To remember Jesus' sayings, the way it is described in the Gospel of John, is not to just remember word for word, but to remember what Jesus said in such a way that its *meaning for the present* becomes clear and that God can speak to us through it.

The Basic Story⁵

As one might expect, the sacred literature of a people contains the stories which constitute them as a people and provide the basis for their self-understanding. The earliest stories describe the world before the time of Abraham, the primary patriarch. These earliest stories have to do with describing the creation of the world and the origin of its problems.

We often think of Gen. 1-3 as the only story of creation in the Bible, but it is important to remember that there are many others, such as Psalm 8 in the OT and John 1:1-18, Col. 1:15-20, Rom. 8:18-27, Heb. 1:1-4 in the New Testament. The New Testament creation stories are very important because they are often interpretations of the Old Testament stories and they introduce Christ as God's agent in creation -- which means that what we find in Christ gives us the clue to what creation is or should be.

In Genesis 1 we begin with a world which is a formless void, covered by darkness, the chaotic raw material of what was to become the created world. A spirit (or wind) from God swept over the face of the waters which covered all. Then God spoke: "Let there be ... light a dome in the midst of the waters dry land lights in the dome of the sky swarms of living creatures ... birds living creatures of every kind" Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion" "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." On the seventh day God rested, a day which he made holy. This takes us to Gen. 2:3, With Gen. 2:4 another story begins "of the generations of the heavens and the earth" , which however is not really described as in Gen. 1.

In the story of Gen. 2:4-25 the focus is on the creation of humans. In a charming story we are told that God created man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, placing him in the garden of Eden to care for it., giving him permission to eat of every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Then God, realizing that man needed a helper as a partner, created the animals, none of which was really satisfying as man's partner. So God put man to sleep , took one of his ribs, and from it made a woman who was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.

The differences in the two stories are striking and a contemporary of Paul and Jesus (the Jewish scholar Philo) said that Gen. 1 told the story of the creation of the ideal heavenly human while Gen. 2 told the story of the creation of the earthly human. In Genesis 1 man and woman are created at the same time and both reflect God's image, while in Gen. 2 woman is created after man, derived from man, and only after animals prove unsatisfactory as a helper to man.

The materials which immediately follow the creation stories (Genesis 3:1-11:9) describe how the world got to be the way we now find it, no longer ideal and with many problems. These materials begin with the

⁵ . An interesting treatment of the "basic story" is Walter Wingerin, Jr., *The Book of God: The Bible As A Novel*, Grand Rapids: Zonzervan, 1996.

story of what came to be called "the Fall." The serpent tempts the humans to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they do so they discover that they are naked: they become self-aware. They hide from God while God seeks them out. Man blames the woman for what they did, the woman blames the serpent, and God punishes them all: the serpent will now crawl on his belly and be enemy to humans, woman's pain in childbirth will increase, and man will have to struggle to raise his crops. Because of woman's responsibility, her husband will now always rule over her (note how this is reflected in I Timothy 2:8-15 in the NT). Man and woman are excluded from the garden so that they may not eat of the tree of life and live forever. Thus death becomes a consequence. Man was called Adam (a Hebrew word which means "man") and woman was called Eve (which means "living") for she was mother of all living.

Thus the predicament of the world and its problems is explained by Adam and Eve's sin. Judaism saw this as producing the problems humans encounter in the world while some of Christianity even came to believe that humans inherit the guilt for what Adam and Eve did. It was believed that if only they had not done this the world would be different. For Christians what happened in Adam was seen as undone in Christ (Rom. 5:12-21). But this was only the beginning of the story of the world's problems. In Genesis 4 Adam and Eve have two children, Cain and Abel, and the two were quite different: one was a farmer and the other was a keeper of sheep. Their conflict was preordained. God seems to have regarded Abel above Cain, and so Cain in anger killed his brother, beginning the story of human conflict that is so much a part of history. Cain is sent away as a fugitive and the ground which drank his brother's blood will in the future resist him. To Adam and Eve another son, Seth, is given to take the place of Abel, through whom is traced future humanity in a genealogy which lists amazing ages for these descendants (Gen. 5).

To the predicament created by human failure is added the failure of the "sons of God", divine beings who looked down on women, saw that they were fair, and took them to wife, thus breaking the barrier between heaven and earth. What these "sons of God" did is only briefly treated here, but is greatly developed in later Jewish literature. Even I Peter 3:19-20 speaks of the spirits imprisoned in the underworld who had disobeyed God in the days of Noah. That this story is located just before the story of Noah and the flood indicates that what it describes contributed to the wickedness of the world which caused God to send a flood on the earth, saving in the Ark only enough persons and animals to restart the world after destroying it (Gen. 6-8). Then God makes a covenant with Noah and his family, giving them the responsibility which Adam and Eve had in the beginning, promising that such mass destruction will never happen again and placing a rainbow in the sky as a sign. But soon problems start again. Noah gets drunk and one of his sons sees him naked and is cursed. All humanity then descends from Noah's three sons and their genealogy is provided in Gen. 10-11.

As if this were not enough, Genesis 11 recounts the story of Babel, a city and a tower built by the descendants of Noah. God sees what they have accomplished and is concerned that now "nothing will be impossible for them." Since they have one language, God confuses their language so that they cannot understand each other and then scatters them over the face of the earth. There seem to be echoes of the story of Adam here where Adam tried to be like God by transcending his limitations and attaining too much knowledge.

In Genesis 12 we come to the story of the father of the Jewish people (and of Christians - Gal. 3:6-9), Abraham. Abraham is called to go to a new land and a great nation will come into being through him, his "offspring like the dust of the earth." Though he and Sarah, his wife, are old, God promises him a child (Gen. 15-18) in a series of stories which seem to be different versions of the promise. Then strangely God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22) and at the last moment provides a ram instead, a story which Christians came to understand as a paradigm of what God did in Christ.

Abraham is followed by his son Isaac and his wife Rebecca, whose children are Jacob and Esau, twins who struggled with each other even in their mother's womb. Jacob becomes famous as the person who wrestled with a divine being and gains a blessing and a new name, Israel. Jacob's son Joseph was envied by his brothers and was sold into slavery to a caravan going to Egypt (Gen. 37). There, after an imprisonment when he refused a seduction by his master's wife, he rises to a prominent position in Pharaoh's house because he interprets Pharaoh's dream (Gen. 41). When a famine occurs Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt seeking food. Ultimately he forgives them and they settle in Egypt. We then have the scene set for the eventual enslavement of the Jews in Egypt and their deliverance by Moses. The Moses story is reflected in Exodus and Deuteronomy. A Jew, raised by the daughter of Pharaoh, he comes to identify with the Hebrew people and flees to the land of Midian where he experiences God's presence in a burning bush and receives his call to deliver the Jews from Egypt. To him also God reveals his sacred name, "I am who I am," probably pronounced "Yahweh." (Exodus 3:13-15). [Moses has asked whom he should say sent him when people ask. To my mind God's giving of the name "I Am" is almost humorous besides being very profound. Moses wants a name, and God says he cannot be named. He is who he is, and Moses will have to be content with that.] God sends 10 plagues on Egypt, the last being the death of the first born. This finally causes Pharaoh to let the Jews go and Moses leads the people towards the Promised Land. The Jews cross the Red Sea which then swallows up the pursuing Egyptians. Then Moses and the Israelites sing a song of victory (Exodus 15). In their journey they are led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Water is provided from a rock and bread and quails are provided for them. Ultimately gathered at Mount Sinai they receive the Law (Ex. 20ff), pledge a covenant relationship with God (Ex. 24), and are asked to build an Ark (a portable tabernacle which could accompany them on their journey) (Gen. 25ff). God has cared for all their needs. Moses dies looking at the Promised Land from a distance and Joshua accomplishes the conquest.

These patriarchs of Israel all bear the clear marks of their humanity and their failures make them much like us: Abraham who to guarantee his security allowed his wife to be taken into Pharaoh's house, who drove away the slave girl Hagar and his son by her (Ishmael) because of the jealousy of his wife; Jacob and Esau who struggled with each other from birth; Jacob who stole his brother's birthright; Joseph whose pride created such jealousy in his brothers that he was sold into slavery. And yet God used them. Their story is the story of the creation of a people (variously called Israelites after Jacob who was renamed Israel, Hebrews, Jews) and the writers of the New Testament also understood them as the patriarchs of the church. This is the story of the origins of God's people which follows the stories of the origins of the world. These stories help us to understand who we are.

Following the settlement of Canaan, the Promised Land, much of the Old Testament can be seen as the story of the nation, at first united under Kings Saul, David, and Solomon, and then divided with separate histories as Israel in the north of Palestine and Judah in the south. David and Solomon as kings are prototypes. David is the great king who ruled during the idealized period of Jewish history and who was seen as poet, author of many of the Psalms. Of his line was the Messiah to come. Solomon is the king of great wisdom, who came to be seen as the origin of much of Jewish wisdom literature.

By 925 BCE the Kingdom was divided. By 721 the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria. By 586 Judah fell to Babylon. Though in 538 Jews were allowed to return from Exile in Babylon and gradually Jerusalem, with its temple, was rebuilt, it was not until the revolt of the Maccabees in 167 that a Jewish kingdom (the Hasmoneans or Maccabeans) was reestablished which lasted 100 years until the conquest of Palestine by the Romans. Some of the Old Testament books, such as Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah tell the history of the early Jewish Kingdoms, the Exile and the restoration while the prophets reflect the interpretation of these tragedies as God's judgment while offering God's hope. Such a book as Daniel, though written to appear that it originated in the Babylonian period, was actually written during

the Maccabean revolt in the 2nd century B.C. and describes the beginnings of the Maccabean Jewish kingdom. Other books in the OT Apocrypha give more information about this last Jewish kingdom before Roman occupation.

In the New Testament the primary stories are about Jesus. We have four, besides the information about Jesus preserved in the literature of Paul. These stories are called Gospels, a word which translates a Greek word meaning "good news". Thus these stories were not mere biographies, but intended to portray how Jesus' life and teaching was good news. The writers used earlier sources, sometimes indicating this (see Luke 1:1-4). Each story has its own perspective, but basically consists of:

- A Prologue, usually in the form of a story of Jesus' birth and infancy
 - Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and the beginnings of his ministry
 - A ministry in Galilee (northern Palestine, the area from which Jesus came)
 - A ministry in Gentile areas (only mentioned in Mark and Matthew)
 - A ministry in the south in Judaea and Jerusalem
 - The last days in Jerusalem: his arrest, trial, death and resurrection (often called the Passion Story)
- [Besides the narrative portions of the Gospels, there are gatherings of Jesus' sayings at various points, sometimes arranged topically as in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5-7. Jesus was also regarded as a teacher.]

It should be noted that though these stories follow the basic outline of Jesus' ministry that was remembered by the early church, they also follow an outline suggestive of the faith and life of the believer. In this way Jesus' story became integrated with our stories.

The book of Acts provides a limited, but our only, history of the development of the early church, its accounts ending about 62 AD. It starts with the experience of the Spirit on Pentecost by the Christian community in Jerusalem, takes the reader through the pressures from the Spirit and circumstances to move into the Gentile world with the formal decision to include the Gentiles in Acts 15, introduces us to Paul (a major missionary and theologian) and leads us through three of his mission journeys, ending with his visit to Rome, the capital of his world. Placed after the Gospels and just before Paul's letters, Acts then provides background to the reading of Paul's letters, the largest body of material in the New Testament.

Because these stories are foundational for our faith, because they are the stories of our spiritual ancestors, they are also our stories and part of our heritage. *We need to own them as our stories.* To know these basic stories also makes the books of Scripture much more understandable, for knowledge of them is assumed by the authors.

METHODS OF READING

Now let us turn to some suggestions on methods for reading the biblical books. The historical method, having been already discussed, is not included here. First there is the "Method of Dialogue", introduced particularly to indicate that many have found Scripture meaningful to them in debate and discussion rather than just trying to arrive at right and singular understandings of a passage. The method of dialogue will be of special value in Bible study groups. Then two methods of devotional reading of Scripture are introduced, the Benedictine and the Ignatian methods, one focusing on the words of the text and the other seeking to recreate what the text describes by the use of imaging. The devotional reading of Scripture is not concerned primarily with historical understanding of the text, but with allowing God to work in the

life of the reader through the text. It is more life centered than understanding centered. While the Benedictine and Ignatian methods as presented here are primarily designed for individual use, the design of a group meditation on the story of Jesus Baptism is also included here. If this is used the person who leads it should carefully read all of the instructions and cautions included with this meditation.

In the section on Reading the Gospel which follows this discussion of method, there will be suggested a method (“Approach to the Study of a Gospel”) which is partially historical study and partially devotional and then a sample of such study is presented dealing with the stories of Jesus’ Baptism and Temptation. Because each person is different, at least in private or personal reading of Scripture you will need to explore what works best for you. In groups, of course, the methods will have to suite the aims of the group.

The Method of Dialogue

Because we are persons of western culture, influenced by the methods of science and historical study, it is tempting to think that the study of Scripture only occurs when we have an expert who delivers a lecture on a book or passage so that we will understand it rightly. Or we may feel that only when we have all the correct information and the understanding of what the writer intended to say do we interpret Scripture rightly. However, there is another method, much used in Judaism and at times used in the Christian church, which is as old as New Testament times.⁶ This is the method of dialogue. In Jewish literature we have retained for us the record of the debates of great Jewish scholars. But debate also happened in the local synagogue where members of the congregation gathered to dialogue and debate the meaning of Scripture. It has been suggested that even the young boy Jesus may have listened in to these debates and perhaps participated, for at twelve years of age, when his family visited the Temple, he discussed many religious matters with the teachers (Lk. 2:46-47).

We have records of the great debate of the scholars and it is interesting to note that often they did not agree. They gathered around Scripture as the gift of God and what was accomplished by their debate was a drawing closer to the God of this gift. They benefited both from their interaction with each other and the way Scripture and their debate brought them closer to God and everything did not depend on the correct answer or understanding.

Such debate and discussion could be a very important way to learn from Scripture in small groups or classes where the discussion and dialogue is of more importance than arriving at right answers and where the "Scripture expert" would play a lesser role.

Devotional Reading of Scripture

The Benedictine Method

That God uses Scripture to speak to us now, to nourish our lives now, to inspire us and give us insight now, makes it clear that however important the historical critical method is, it is not enough. Several methods have been developed in the Christian use of Scripture to encourage a devotional, intuitive, personal response to the text and also to the God of text. Here the question is not so much exactly what the author meant, but what the text means to the reader and what God would say to the reader through the text.

⁶ . See Burton L Visotzky, “Reading with the Rabbis: Making the Bible a Timeless Text.” *The Christian Century*, October 16, 1991, pp. 932ff., Chicago: The Christian Century Foundation.

The particular approach outlined below has been associated with St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality, though it really is earlier. It uses a "ladder" of four steps which provide it with a broad appeal. It may be used with the Bible or with other devotional literature. It provides a methodology for meditating on the words of Scripture rather than using imaging which is characteristic of some other devotional approaches such as that of St. Ignatius mentioned below. Focusing on words rather than images works better for some people and some of the Biblical material (for example the letters of Paul) do not lend themselves to the imagining of the text.

Reading

Read the passage, paying special attention to words and phrases to which you intuitively respond. I would suggest first reading the passage through rapidly and then going back and reading very slowly, stopping with phrases or words which "draw" you.

Meditation

Here welcome the words that have drawn you into your life and "chew" upon them as a cow chews a cud, i.e. mentally say them over and over again until your mind becomes saturated with them. Another method might be to mentally focus upon them and hold them in the center of the mind for a while.

Prayer

This prayer is in the form of a spontaneous dialogue with God or Jesus about these words and what they might mean to you, and how they might be incorporated into your heart.

Contemplation

Contemplation means directly turning one's attention to God, without the use of words and images, in silence: a loving silence before God. Relationship with God is the ultimate purpose of all devotional exercises, and this is the fulfillment of all done in the exercise.

If portions of the passage still remain after the words on which the Meditation was made, then one might go back and continue in the passage to the next words that attracted one, repeating the above process as time allows. It is also helpful to keep the results of this process in a diary or journal.

A Meditative Method Similar to Ignatius

Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits in the 16th century, in his *Spiritual Exercises* developed a devotional approach to the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. This approach made extensive use of imagery, and if imagery works well with you, you might wish to try this modification of the Ignatian approach.

Exercise for the Morning (30-60 minutes)

1. Have paper and pencil or your journal at hand so that you can note any significant elements of your experience after the meditation is over.
2. Take a moment to become aware of yourself and of your needs. You might wish to write down one or two elements of your present situation which come to mind.
3. Read over the passage slowly to familiarize yourself with it. Think for a few moments about what this passage means according to your knowledge of the life of Jesus and the Gospels. Then allow this information to move to the periphery of your mind.
4. Place yourself in a comfortable position for meditation so that you can be comfortable and relaxed, but yet maintain attention. In a brief prayer offer this time of meditation to God for his/her using.

5. Close your eyes and "enter" your time of meditation. This will involve allowing your body to relax and your mind to slow its activity. Even though you have thought of some elements of your present situation and have thought of the historical meaning of the text, place this at the periphery of your mental vision and try to allow a space to "clear" in your mind in which the meditation can develop. It is sometimes helpful to focus attention on your breathing for a while so that your mind has something to give attention to. The rate of your breathing is also a good indication of relaxation, so that you will have some clue to your relaxation as your breathing slows.
6. Recall briefly the main features of the story in the text. **Then stop your active role and allow the setting of the scene and its story to develop in your imagination.** Do not create the story, but allow your mind and God to create the story for you. You will need to develop your inner senses of observation. **Pay attention** to what you see, hear, smell. You may even want to touch objects in the scene. Your relationship to the story as it develops may be one of **observer** or **participant**. You will need to decide whether you want to watch, or be there in the scene and perhaps experience the role of one of the characters in the story.
7. When the story has run its course, find some place at the edge of the scene in your imagination where you can sit down and discuss your experience with Jesus. Do not create the conversation, but allow it to develop around what you have "seen" or experienced.
8. Ask Jesus what one or two aspects of your experience you should take with you into the day. Conclude your dialogue with Jesus and remain for a time in silence with him, enjoying and experiencing the relationship.
9. Gradually return from the biblical scene to the present and open your eyes. It may be helpful to tell yourself that you will do this and that you will come out of your meditation refreshed, remembering the insights you have gained.
10. Jot down any insights gained in a journal.

Continuing the Meaning of Your Scriptural Reading During the Day

As a way of connecting your experience with the rest of your day you might wish to do the following:

During the Day

At several points during the day briefly remind yourself of what Jesus in your morning dialogue indicated you should take with you into the day or what you feel was significant which came out of the experience. This should only take a few seconds unless you feel strongly led to do more. The object is only to call to mind your morning experience so that it might continue to be effective for you and that the meaning of the text for you might be integrated into your daily activities.

Exercise for the Evening, before going to bed

As part of whatever other devotions you do, take a few moments to reflect back on the meditation of the morning. Then consider whether the text and its meaning has affected your day and its activities. Jot down any further insights gained about the text, God and your life from your day or your evening reflections.

Meditation on the Baptism of Jesus Mark 1:9-11

[It is important to be aware of the cautions mentioned below. The person using this meditation assumes responsibility for appropriate usage and exercise of cautions.]

Introduction

What follows is a meditation on the story of Jesus' Baptism. The rationale for its design and the meditation itself are presented in enough detail so that it can be used by others and provide a pattern for the development of other meditations. There is an important difference between meditating oneself and leading others in meditation. One who leads others must always carefully consider what one is suggesting, for the suggestions of the leader often operate much like hypnotic suggestion. In order to counteract this effect, the persons who are led should be told that they are in control of what they allow to happen in the experience, that they are free to drop out or not to follow suggestions at any time, and the meditation itself should be designed to allow this freedom. Talking over the intention of the meditation with the group ahead of time is important, especially if one is unfamiliar with the group, so that concerns might surface before the meditation is conducted. To illustrate the type of problems that could exist, I remember one woman who in the preparatory session said that she did not wish to participate because she was not ready to be baptized, something the meditation called for. Another person was deathly afraid of water, having nearly drowned, and to have forced her into the water to share the experience of Jesus' baptism would have been devastating to her. Some concerns can be resolved by discussion, as was the first case, while in cases such as the woman who nearly drowned it is better not to try to resolve such a profound fear in such a short time. The woman could participate in the meditation without going into the water herself or she could drop out completely, which she did.

Purpose:

The purpose of the meditation is to help persons to understand and to identify with the experience of Jesus in his Baptism and to relate this to their own experience of God. The Baptism is understood as a time when Jesus, called by the immediate presence of God proclaimed by John the Baptist (the nearness of the Kingdom which asked repentance), left behind his earlier life, submitted to John's baptism, received an awareness of the presence of God (the Spirit) and received his identity ("Thou art my beloved Son").

Outline and Description of Method:

First read Mark 1:9-11, then follows

1. Entrance Process to lead to relaxation and meditative state.
2. Imaginative portrayal of scene and event of Jesus' Baptism.
3. Imaginative experience of one's own baptism by John.
4. Dialogue with Jesus about one's experience.
5. Exit Process.

In use of the imagination one might completely portray the scene and determine the experience -- down to small details -- or one might suggest elements of the experience and scene and allow those meditating to fill in the details so that their experience becomes quite "personal", the details being supplied by their own subconscious and God's interaction with them at the time. It was decided to suggest basic elements of the scene and allow individuals to fill in the details, to be quite specific about what this event meant to Jesus so as to give a definite context in which persons could have their own experience, to only suggest the basic framework of their baptism by John so that this experience could be highly personal, and to only suggest their dialogue with Jesus but suggest none of its contents so that this also could be highly

personal. It would also be suggested that persons feel a measure of freedom to pursue individual directions of experience should that materialize.

I do not prefer doing meditations in which all details are determined and suggested because this readily becomes manipulation by the leader and allows little space for the experience to become a personal event between God, the person and the text. Enough content or detail would be supplied to keep the experience focused and to give persons a basis from which the experience could be developed in their own imagination.

Because the meditative state is a state of high suggestibility and since this might be the first experience of some with meditation, there should be a concern to help persons understand the nature of the experience, their freedom to opt out and not move along with suggestions if they experience real resistance. There should also be adequate suggestion in the words used by the leader that this would be a good and positive experience, an experience in which God and Christ would be close to them, and that they would come out of the experience feeling good and relaxed and refreshed. Sometimes the experience may be disturbing, especially if the person has something in his/her life that needs to be dealt with. That can be dealt with afterwards. Negative experiences should never be suggested because of the power of the suggestion itself. People will sometimes comment after experience with both meditation and contemplation, that while contemplation is deeply restful, meditation may not be. This is because in meditation one is engaged in a process of the imagination and the personal interactions with this process may produce some tension and uncomfortable insights. Even so, this should not be suggested, but discussed when it is observed.

If the leader wishes to provide an experience which will involve the participants less personally or if the leader is just beginning the leading of meditations and desires to gain more experience before calling the participants to more intense personal involvement in the experience, it is possible to omit the section where the participant repeats Jesus' experience. Then the participant would only observe Jesus' experience and then discuss it with him. Be sure then to make whatever modifications are necessary.

The leader of a meditation should keep in mind place and pace. The place should be quiet and as free from distraction as possible. If disturbances occur they can be anticipated and explained beforehand or dealt with as they occur during the meditation. For example, if there is a ticking clock in the room, explain that as they go into the meditation and relax the sound of the clock will undoubtedly become louder. They should just allow it to be part of the background of sounds and do not need to focus attention on it or try to eliminate it. I also indicate that if someone should fall asleep and snore (which does happen), it is not necessary to give their attention to this and they can go on with the meditation. If a baby cries or there is some noise in the next room, that can often be incorporated into the scene that is part of the meditation. In this way you are giving permission not to be concerned about or try to solve sounds that may intrude.

As to pace, it is important to present or read the meditation slowly enough to allow what is being suggested to occur. At times there will need to be pauses when an event is suggested which will take some time. The pace, however, ought not to be so slow that the attention or concentration of the participants is lost. Experience will help in this.

It is important throughout the process to be able to be aware of the persons who are meditating, especially if this is a new experience for them. Thus you should watch what is going on rather than trying to participate in the meditation yourself. If anyone should seem to be having a difficult experience, you can then deal with this. If you have suggested the nature of the experience as good, an experience of a loving God, chances are rather remote that anyone will have a bad experience -- especially when you have given them permission not to proceed if they experience resistance. Where you occasionally could have difficulty is in getting someone out of meditation if it has been a very good experience. Usually there is no real difficulty in patiently calling them back. If someone strongly resists, you can stay with them until they come out or just suggest them into sleep and let them sleep, awakening them a little later.

MEDITATION

Preliminary Instruction to Participants:

Meditation is a Christian use of the imagination so that what we might merely understand with our heads can become a part of our inner life and we can understand on the "heart level". Such use of the imagination was practiced in the early church when people "remembered" in the Lord's Supper what Jesus did (I Cor. 11:24) and repeated the stories of Jesus so that the power of these stories could become a part of their own experience. By relating the stories of Jesus to our lives through our imagination these stories can relate to our thoughts, feelings and needs and God can work with us in a very personal way. Today we are going to do this with the story of Jesus' baptism. We are going to create the scene in our mind's eye, we will watch it unfold, and then we will decide whether we would like to join Jesus in this experience, going through it like he did and then having a chance to sit down and talk with him about our experience. As you go through this you want to allow your mind to picture the scene or to create the dialogue with Jesus -- just allow it to happen; don't try to figure it out or to do it intentionally. Don't try to control the images. It is all right if they are not "correct" historically but borrowed from your present experience. Trust the experience.

This will be a good experience for you. Jesus will take care of you during it, and I will be here to guide the experience. If you ever feel that you strongly do not want to do something that is suggested, that is perfectly all right. Listen to your inner wisdom about what is right for you. When the meditation is over, I will call you out of your meditative state. If we are ready now, let us begin with prayer:

Loving heavenly Father, help us to know and feel what it meant for Jesus to leave Nazareth, to come to Judaea to be baptized by John. May his experience become ours through your guidance and may you guide this experience within each of us in a way that is right for the needs you see in us. We trust ourselves to you.

Read Mark 1:9-11

Entrance Process:

Sit in a relaxed position, both feet upon the floor, arms upon your laps or the chair arms. You may lie on the floor if you wish. It is important to find a position in which you will feel comfortable for some time.

You will feel the tensions flowing out of your body and your body becoming comfortable. Sense your neck relaxing, your arms relaxing, your legs relaxing. If you have a serious concern that does not allow you to relax, represent it in some symbol and place it on the floor alongside of yourself. You can pick it up later. Now you can sense that the flow of thoughts in your mind is slowing so that gradually a place is clearing in your mind, free from any distractions, a place to allow the story of Jesus' baptism to come to life. You now feel comfortable. It is as if your body were resting on a cloud or a giant pillow.

Sense your breathing. Your breathing is slowing, indicating your relaxation. When you feel your breathing has reached a comfortable pace, slowly count down from 10 to 1, counting one number with each inhalation-exhalation. At each number you will relax into deeper meditative level. When you reach 1, remain there and I will give you further instructions. (Pause) If you have not completed your counting, please do so. You have now arrived at your meditative level.

Portrayal of Jesus Baptism:

In the clearing within your mind you can now begin to imagine what it looked like near the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. Use whatever images your mind gives you, even if they are not like what you expected. Allow an image of the river to form in your mind. Listen to the flow of the water. Reach down and touch it to allow it to become real to you. Now look at the shore, the bank of the river. Is there grass, are there trees, rocks, animals? What of the people in the scene? If they have not yet appeared in your imagination, allow them to appear. How many are there? What do they look like, how are they clothed? Now look over the scene again. What do you see, hear, smell? What are people saying to each other? Visualize John the Baptist in the river. Can you find Jesus among the persons on the shore? What does he look like?

Jesus has come to John because John sensed that God was acting in history in a special way and Jesus wishes to open himself up to this. Jesus now stands at the shore. He removes his outer garment, knowing that as he takes it off to enter the water life will not be the same. With his garment he is putting off his old life with his family, his town of Nazareth, his previous work as a carpenter, and many of his old friends. When he returns to the shore he will take all this up again, but none of it will be the same. He steps into the water, his old life behind him, all the things that made him what he was. In trust he moves to the Baptist to discover what is there held in store for him. They exchange a glance and then the Baptist lowers him backwards into the water and raises him up again. A sense of the presence of God moves through his body as the Spirit comes upon him and a voice penetrates his consciousness: "Thou art my beloved Son". (Pause) Stripped of all that told him what he was Jesus now finds who he is. John releases his hold upon Jesus' body and Jesus moves slowly to the shore, there picking up his garment and his previous life, to wear lightly over what he now knows himself to be. He sits upon a rock near the edge of the river to wait for you, to share with you his experience. (Pause)

One's Own Baptism by John

Now you are standing near the shore. You look at John and he motions to you to enter the water. If you wish and feel comfortable in sharing in this experience, you remove your outer garment and shoes or sandals, thinking of what you might be temporarily placing there with

your garment: much of your previous life-experience, many of the things which identified you to yourself. These you will later pick up and wear in a new way. You have a feeling that God is inviting you to participate in this event. As you step into the river you feel the water around your body, cool and inviting. John reaches out to take you by the hand and steady you. Now you look into John's face. Does he say anything to you? He grasps you firmly about the shoulders and gently lowers you into the water and out again. Your feelings are those of trust and expectation. And now -- do you have any feeling of God's presence and is God saying anything to you through this experience: who does God say you are? (Pause) John now directs you back to the shore. You may walk back as slowly as you wish. When you arrive at the shore you pick up and put on your garment and all that you have laid off. Does what you are wearing now feel differently? (Pause)

Dialogue:

Now you may go to the rock where Jesus is sitting and sit beside him. See, he invites you. You may feel that you are not ready for this, and if so, then merely sit down on the shore and reflect on your experience. If you want to talk with Jesus, go to him and sit with him on the rock. How does he receive you? He will want to share with you his experience and you may want to discuss with him yours. Allow a conversation to begin naturally. Carry on this conversation until I ask you to bring it to a close and come out of your meditation. If you just want to remain with Jesus in silence, that is all right. At the end of your conversation Jesus will give you a phrase which will remind you of what happened here, and this phrase when you meditate on it, will enable you to return to this experience. (Long pause allowing sufficient time for the conversation.)⁷

Exit Process:

Now it is time to leave your meditative level and return to full awareness of the room in which we are. Complete your conversation with Jesus or your reflection on this experience. You are now beginning to return to your normal level of functioning. You become more aware of what is in the room, but you carry with you what you have experienced and the feelings of peace and relaxation which have been a part of this experience. I will now give you a few minutes to return from your meditation at your own pace. Then later we will share whatever you feel free to share of this experience.

Debriefing:

For persons with little experience in meditation, it is important for them to have some chance to talk about it afterwards, especially someone who has experienced something and may need help understanding it. In any case, even for the those experienced in meditation, it is always helpful to discuss what happens with others so that others can assist in discernment of what happened and insights can be shared. It would thus be good to be able to meditate as part of a group.

7. For this use of a phrase see Ira Progoff in *Process Meditation* where he discusses the use of "Mantra/Crystals", an expression which symbolizes an experience and which when used can reintroduce one into the same experience to relive it or to carry it further. Ira Progoff, *The Practice of Process Meditation: The Intensive Journal Way to Spiritual Experience*, NY: Dialogue House, 1980, pp. 258 ff.