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Dwight J. Zscheile

Luther Seminary, dzscheile001@luthersem.edu

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Dwelling in the Word: Affirming Its Promise

DWIGHT ZSCHEILE

I have seen Dwelling in the Word change lives and churches. It has happened to my church and to people I know and minister among, as well as to countless churches around the world.* Dwelling in the Word is a grassroots practice of congregational listening to Scripture, to the Spirit, and to the neighbor that can help address the crisis of biblical disengagement in many churches today. It is not a replacement for Bible study, but rather a complementary practice.

Many congregations today struggle to help their members meaningfully engage the biblical story. It seems many Christians—even those who faithfully participate in various aspects of the church’s life—feel intimidated by the Bible. Let’s face it: the Bible isn’t an easy book to read. Sometimes, people pick up the message (spoken or unspoken) that reading and interpreting the Bible should be done primarily by those with expert knowledge, leaving others disenfranchised. Or the Scriptures get reduced to instrumental use as a kind of rulebook for right living. Many American churches seem caught between explaining away the Bible’s relevance and enforcing a kind of biblicism that refuses to acknowledge the genuine complexity and ambiguity that it contains. Dwelling in the Word seeks to break out of these patterns by inviting people to attend imaginatively to a biblical text, to listen carefully to a neighbor, and to advocate publicly for the neighbor’s voice. It is as much a practice of spiritual transformation as it is a means of scriptural engagement.

Here’s how it commonly works: A scriptural passage (usually no more than dozen or so verses) is read aloud in a group. Participants are invited to listen to where their imagination was “caught” or captured in the text—what word or phrase leapt out? Or, is there something in the passage about which they would like to ask a biblical scholar? After a brief period of silent meditation, people are invited to pair up with someone else, preferably someone they do not know well. Then there is a time of ten to twelve minutes of sharing in pairs, during which people must listen attentively to what their neighbor heard, because when it comes time to share with the larger group, they share not what *they* heard or wondered about, but rather what their *partner* heard. The practice concludes with prayer.

Dwelling in the Word creates space for a different kind of attentiveness to the Scriptures, the Spirit, and the neighbor than is often practiced in congregations. To

*See Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word* (St. Paul: Church Innovations Institute, 2011), or Patrick Keifert, ed., *Testing the Spirits* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

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Dwelling in the Word: Recognizing Its Risks

MARY HINKLE SHORE

In classes and discipleship groups at Luther Seminary, faculty and students practice various forms of group *Lectio Divina* or Dwelling in the Word.* These practices seek to honor everyone's capacity to listen to Scripture and to contribute to a shared understanding of a text. They foster the skills of listening to others and reading texts carefully. They offer people a way to pray with Scripture. Yet these approaches to the Bible also have limitations.

One of the problems with the methods is the way they can mask power differentials among participants. Dwelling in the Word is designed to welcome all participants and foster free speech. The democratic elements of the experience can obscure its leaders' real exercise of power over both participants and text. Someone chooses the passage of Scripture. In those communities that read a single translation, someone has chosen the translation as well. Someone decides the ground rules. Will participants speak to one other person, or to the group as a whole? May participants ask questions, and if so, what happens to the questions? Who answers them, and what counts as a good answer?

Decisions like these are unavoidably—but not always transparently—made by human authorities guiding the process. Of course, all Bible study methods and practices of group prayer require exercises of human power. With Dwelling in the Word, however, the problem of dishonest exercise of power is more acute because the process is so often hailed as accessible to everyone and “open to the Spirit.” The activity may be both accessible and open to the Spirit, but it is never unscripted by those who initiate it. We who practice these forms of prayer would do well to demystify what is not mystical about them.

A second danger of Dwelling in the Word is actually related to its ease of use. Participants in church Bible study often say something to their leader like, “Just tell us what it means.” For those leaders who feel incompetent to say what the text means, or who want to resist reinforcing the view that reading the Bible requires an expert the way reading case law requires a lawyer, Dwelling in the Word offers a way to shift the focus from leader to people. As people engage Scripture, they are not listening to experts. They are listening to each other and perhaps to the Holy Spirit.

Such listening is good and should be encouraged. Like any relationship, how-

*See Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word* (St. Paul: Church Innovations Institute, 2011); for a description of *Lectio Divina*, see Fr. Luke Dysinger, “Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*,” <http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html> (accessed July 11, 2012).

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begin with, *Dwelling in the Word* assumes that everyone can access the Bible meaningfully, while acknowledging that difficult questions will arise (questions for which expert knowledge is indeed helpful). Inviting people to wonder imaginatively about what they hear resists a kind of instrumentalization of the text—where there is one “right” theological or moral answer that people are supposed to find in it. Perhaps, most profoundly, it assumes that God’s Spirit is alive and working in this process, including speaking through the neighbor.

In a world where difference so often divides people and where congregations are typically not accustomed to listening attentively to another’s voice (even in their own midst), the practice of *Dwelling in the Word* cultivates a new posture of attending to what the word might be saying to us and to our neighbor—even the neighbor whom we do not know. Advocating publicly for the neighbor (with the accountability of that neighbor sitting there to correct if you get it wrong) helps church members learn to value and appreciate how God’s Spirit speaks through others in our midst. In a world where so many churches have grown disconnected from the neighbors around them (who are often even strangers), these are critically important habits to develop.

What I have seen over the years of practicing *Dwelling in the Word* with various groups is a remarkable transformation. People begin to feel more empowered to attend to Scripture and to each other. They see that pretty much any text of Scripture contains a fathomless depth of meaning, especially if they dwell in the same passage repeatedly over time. The Bible begins to speak to people in new and fresh ways—ways that typically invite them to learn more and to engage more deeply, including through pursuing more traditional methods of study.

The church where I currently serve offers a firsthand example. When my wife and I arrived seven years ago, people seemed quite hesitant to read the Bible or venture interpreting it, probably out of fear of being shamed for having the wrong answer. Introducing *Dwelling* was not easy—there were plenty of awkward silences. But then it all began to change. The Scriptures began to come alive, and people began to listen more closely to one another. People found new ways to relate the Bible to daily life. Church board members started showing up on time at meetings because they did not want to miss the *Dwelling* segment. One lay leader, for whom the Bible had been a rather distant text, gathered her family when her father died and led them in *Dwelling in the Word*. Through this practice, the biblical story had become her own, and now she had a way of inviting others into it. ⊕

DWIGHT ZSCHEILE is assistant professor of congregational mission and leadership at Luther Seminary and associate priest at St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

ever, our relationship with God and God's word requires more than one mode of communication. The community benefits from listening to texts in a variety of ways. Indeed, communities call leaders in part because they need help listening to texts in a variety of ways, not just in the way that is easiest to enact.

It is the vocation of Christian public leaders to read Scripture in and with congregations even when reading requires homework. Filling in backstory, noticing differences in literary genres, drawing connections between one book of the Bible and another, putting a text in its context within the church's tradition: these reading habits and dozens of others are called for as we seek to hear God's word and understand God's call to us today. *Dwelling in the Word* and *Lectio Divina* require none of them and, depending on how they are practiced, they may actually exclude these practices as creating too much distance between text and reader or privileging the voice of an expert.

Meanwhile, experts are actually quite helpful at times. When we experience symptoms of a medical problem, we may well benefit from talking with a friend who listens carefully and offers a few words in response. We may also need a doctor. Likewise congregations certainly benefit from *Dwelling in the Word*, and congregations also need readers competent in the academic study of the Bible, theology, and the history of the church.

Finally, *Dwelling in the Word* means dwelling in only a small bit of the word at any given time. Those involved in the intensive reading of Scripture also need opportunities for extensive reading. Scripture includes many voices, and a single text cannot bear the weight of many decisions that face a congregation. Reading multiple passages or a whole book helps us bring multiple voices to the table as we work together to discern God's will. Imagine, for instance, reading the proclamation of Christ's work in Phil 2:5–11 alongside the Christ hymn in Col 1:15–20. Hearing these texts alongside each other changes the way we understand either of them, and it may well change the way we understand what it means to bear Christ's name. It certainly confirms that the earliest Christians had diverse ways of understanding Christ's work, an insight that might make it easier to be in the same congregation with people who disagree with us about important things. Likewise, reading through one of the Gospels in its entirety offers a picture of discipleship and mission that is broader and deeper than the picture that a single story can offer.

Through practices like *Dwelling in the Word* and *Lectio Divina*, people who would never go to a Bible study connect in meaningful ways with God and God's word. Yet these practices also have risks and limitations. As we participate in them, we should be honest about both the connections they offer and the risks they hold. ⊕

MARY HINKLE SHORE is professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.