

Scriptural Conversation Approach

This approach was developed out of experience of the participants who shared in the Scriptural Conversation Project, which involved a number of key leaders in the Episcopal Church between 1985 and 1990. Participants in the Project included: John Vogelsang, John Koenig, Verna Dozier, Minka Sprague, Joseph Russell, Betsy Greenman, Caryl Marsh, Frederick Borsch, Pat Sanders, Micheal Wyatt, Edmundo Desueza, Thomas Downs, Lois Stephens, Roy Cederhoim, Reid Isaac, Carolyn Dicer, Carmen Guerrero, Donn Morgan, and Eric Law. Bible institutes were held in 1987 and 1988; small group meetings in the next couple of years continued the dialogue and refined the concepts and approach outlined here. The articles by Verna Dozier, Carmen Guerrero, Eric Law, and Michael Wyatt were also developed out of the ongoing work of this project. The following perspective and guidelines were developed out of this work.

Principles of Scriptural Conversation

When studying the Bible, one must always keep in mind that Scripture addresses people living in community. The Bible deals with politics, social ethics, justice, management-labor relations, and all the other aspects of a life lived in God's world. Though the individual's quest for wholeness is certainly a concern of biblical writers, that personal quest is usually seen in the larger context of a community called to live out God's call for righteousness and compassionate justice. From a biblical perspective, God's concern is not centered on individual salvation but rather on each individual being a part of the salvation of the universe which God created. While studying Scripture, therefore, the social context must always be seen as the point at which God's Word breaks into history and creation.

When studying the Bible, one must focus on the text and the group — not on the leader. A Bible study does not depend upon a theologically-trained leader sharing knowledge about the biblical text. It does depend on a group of people willing to struggle with a text, using available resources, to come to an understanding of God's call for righteousness and compassionate justice.

Based on this theory and on the experience of the participants who shared in the Scriptural Conversation Project, a process for examining biblical texts was developed. The conversation starts with the participants' interacting directly with the text. People speak out of their immediate experience, feelings, and ideas. There is dialogue between the text and the participants. At the next stage, the participants try to experience the text in its context. This is where we ask how the work of commentators enriches our understanding of the text. At the final stage, our present context is brought into the conversation. What does this text mean to us and how does it confront us with a need to change?

Some Other Key Principles Underlie the Approach Described Here

1. Scripture is best experienced when it is read aloud. Instead of each person reading the Scripture passage silently, one or more people read all or sections of the text aloud to the group.
2. We prefer to use the daily office, the lectionary, or set out to read a whole book rather than choosing Scripture passages that speak to a theme. In this way we are challenged by the text instead of finding Scripture that elucidates a pre-set agenda.
3. Dialogues with Scripture are conversations in groups, preferably of from 4 to 12 people. While people benefit from reading Scripture on their own, people are more likely to encounter and be challenged by the text when it is part of the different perspectives being shared in the group. This is also how truth emerges. There is going to be conflict if we are intent upon dealing with the challenges we bring to each other and the challenges of the text. The conflict can help us in our struggle for truth as long as we are willing to keep the conversation going and avoid imposing our views on others.

The Basic Process: Scriptural Conversation

- Step 1. Hear the passage read aloud by someone in the group.
- Step 2. There are questions to elicit the pre-understandings (assumptions of how the world operates, about language and its meaning, God and human beings and their relationship, about what is right and what is wrong) that people bring to the passage and their initial understandings. Done first in quiet, then shared in the group without discussion: people do not question or comment on what others say. After each person speaks, there is silence until the next person is ready to speak.
- Step 3. Hear the passage read by another person with questions or a process to enable people to encounter the passage in its context and to bring their initial understandings into dialogue with the text.
- Step 4. Hear the passage read again by another person.
- Step 5. There are questions, reflected upon quietly at first and then shared in the group, to bring the initial understandings and the life situations of the people into dialogue with the text.
- Step 6. Hear the passage read again by another person.

- Step 7. A question is posed about what difference the conversation makes or what the challenges are that arise from it. This is done quietly first, and then shared in the group.
- Step 8. Close with reading the passage again, or with prayer.

Leviticus 19:1-18

- Step 1. The passage is read aloud verse by verse by members of the group.
- Step 2. What images, words, scenes come up for you and why?
- Step 3. Some information about the passage: Leviticus was probably written in the early Post-Exilic period, when the Jewish upper class returned from Babylon to encounter the Jews who had stayed behind and adapted to many foreign customs. Other Jews had gone off to Egypt and mixed with the people and customs there. The author is reflecting on why they failed, while trying to recall the people to their identity. The author attempts to reconstruct the Mosaic period and present a program which the people should follow to claim everlasting possession of the land. Israel needs to reclaim itself as a special people with a special blessing from God.
- Step 4. Hear the passage again, imagining you are a Jew living in Post-Exilic times.
- Step 5. What did you experience hearing the passage from the perspective of a Post-Exilic Jew?
- Step 6. What are the themes and concerns that arise from your experience of the passage?
- Step 7. What are the connections of those themes and concerns to your life?
- Step 8. The passage is read aloud again.
- Step 9. What are the personal and communal calls and challenges?
- Step 10. Closing Prayer.