

Ruminations

A Seasonal/Quarterly Spiritual Formation Resource from Zoe-Life Explorations

[especially designed as a guide for personal or small group retreats-devotions]

Issue 18

May, 2024

Searching the Scriptures

by Jim Reiter

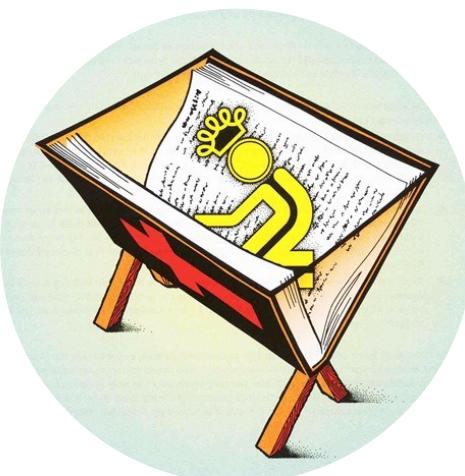
We've taken time and space (in the last three issues) to unpack the general nature and content of spiritual formation—or, what author and professor Steve Porter calls, "Sanctification in a New Key."

Here, we have employed the metaphor of "journey" so that, to borrow from Issue 15's overview...

- The "ways" (issue #15) speak of the terrain or landscape of spiritual formation—that is, basic considerations that fill and surround our journeys back home to God.
- The "ends" (issue #16) speaks of the grand destination of this journey: not just a return to true God but also "true self" and "true neighboring"—indeed, the fulfillment of Jesus' great love commandments.
- And, "means" (issue #17, this issue #18, and several to follow) speak of tools we ought to "pack" for the journey—graceful aids/practices that, informed by the presence and power of the Spirit, promote our advancement and progress.

Several considerations or realities have us starting this survey of the spiritual disciplines or practices with a focus on "searching the Scriptures." First, there is the Bible's primacy among many, if not most, Christians. (As a United Methodist, I am mindful of Wesley's self-designation as a "Bible

bigot." Then, too, there was the way in which the Scriptures served as "home plate" in his quadrilateral [i.e., the four elements which interact and combine to inform faithful beliefs and practices]. In the dance of Tradition, Experience, Reason and Scripture, he'd argue, we are ever starting with the Bible and returning to it.) Then, too, there is the Bible's prominence in the eyes of our culture—so that nothing might be more identified with the institution of the Church and Christianity as this one book. Finally, given this very primacy within and prominence without, there are the ways that the Scriptures are so uniquely powerful and provocative (and polarizing)—both within the Church and in the larger world.



In this graphic from his "See Through the Scriptures" teaching series, Rev. Harry Wendt draws words from Martin Luther—conveying some sense of the relationship between the Bible and the ultimate "Word of God:" "The Bible is the cradle wherein the Christ is laid."

Here, I must gloat: when the alliteration—in this case, the "P's"..."primacy," "prominence," and "powerfully provocative"—line up so perfectly, the point being made must be pretty poignant!

And so, we dedicate this issue of Ruminations to the topic which is "Searching the Scriptures."

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“For [Thomas] Merton, the task of acquiring information [about the Scriptures] is simply the ‘front porch’ of spiritual reading.” (Thompson, *Soul Feast*, p. 21) It is a basis of my distinguishing, elsewhere, between “informational” approaches to the Scriptures and more “formational” ones. (cf., March 2021 blog post, [*Embracing an Informational and Formational Approach to the Scriptures*](#)) Accordingly, it will form an organizational basis for our discussion in this issue:

- a first half devoted to “informational” concepts and concerns surrounding our engagement of the Scriptures, and
- a second half, focused on more deeply personal and formational engagements and encounters with the “Word of God.”

Here is, in fact, a distinction which we will need to acknowledge and respect throughout our conversation—here in this issue and beyond: that while many will speak

of the Bible as the “word of God,” the Bible itself will confine that designation more strictly to the activity of God’s Spirit and, even more specifically, to the person of Jesus Christ, the “Word of God.” (cf. John 1)

Noting this distinction is more than a casual aside, I might add. It gives nuance and meaning to several points we’ve set forth in this introductory article:

- Reducing the Bible to the primary (or only) “word of God” can give rise to a BiblioLatriy that under-girds and reinforces a lot of the provocations and divisions within the Church... and beyond.
- And, restoring Jesus as THE “Word of God” is key to our moving beyond heady, informational engagements of the Bible—to a deeper, more holistic, spiritual, and, thereby, mystical encounter with the divine “Word” in and through those Scriptures.

To this fuller and richer experience of the Scriptures let us now turn! 

Part One:

Searching the Scriptures from an Informational Standpoint

Affirming the Supreme Sufficiency of the Scriptures: “A Uniquely Effective and Powerful Book”

Across the years, I have conducted a variety of Bible Surveys—in classroom settings and from the pulpit. Sermon series have ranged from 8-10 week overviews (engaging main “chapters” in the “narrative” to which the books of the Bible point us) to a 30+ week experience (engaging chapters in Zondervan Publishing’s “novel-ing” of the Scriptures in *The Story*.)

A standard, inaugural sermon in each of these series was a message elevating the Bible as “A Uniquely Effective and Powerful Book”—making it worthy of the respect and the attention that the Church has assigned to it through the centuries. The transcript here of this message is from a survey/series at Pollard Memorial United Methodist Church in Tyler, Texas in 2008.

Hard to believe it’s been 16 years since I first preached this message! Several things strike me, now, as I offer these words on this side of things. They are impressions that I sense are worth acknowledging:

- For all the ways this message emphasizes the positive power and benefits of the Bible, it tends to neglect or overlook the ways the Bible and its misuse can be a part of tragic abuse and toxicity in the Church and beyond. Like the internet or nuclear power or any other number of realities, the Bible as it stands alone is “neutral.” It’s how we humans handle and employ it that determines whether its power and potential will be life-giving or life-reducing.
- On the heels of distinguishing [in the cover article] between the popular notion that the Bible is the “word of God”—versus the more biblical understanding that Jesus is the “Word of God,” there is, in many of these early sermons, a somewhat reckless association of the Bible with the concepts of “Gospel” and “word of God.” In some ways, this speaks to the ways that, a few years ago, I was more at home in an “Evangelical” stream. Since then, I have been about a certain “deconstruction” and “reconstruction” in my Faith life and thought (and not just in regards to the Bible). This acknowledged, though, there are still ways that the Bible can be said to contain and convey the “Gospel” and the “Word” which is Christ. While a certain “cleaning up” might be in order [and for that reason, I have included a few bracketed comments], this message nonetheless affirms a supremacy and “sufficiency” (cf., “Articles of Religion,” of the United Methodist Church) that justifies and demands the place and role Christians assign to it in life and living.

—Jim Reiter

Prefacing Remarks

I would remind you that there is a booklet that was sent out to many of you by the mail (and is available otherwise in the Narthex)—offering supplemental reading materials for this survey of the Scriptures which we will be about the next couple of months.

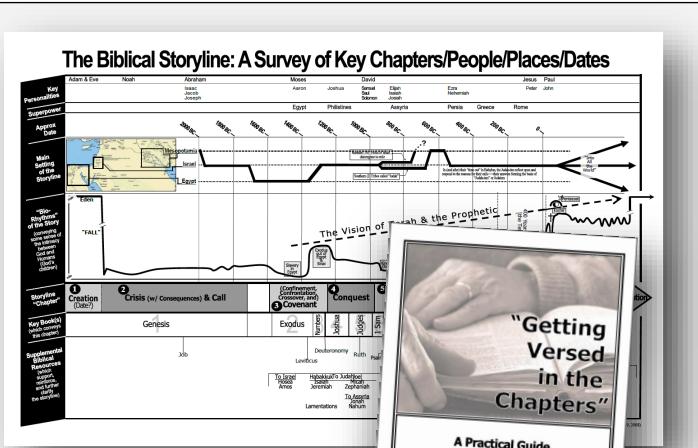
I recognize that I am not the only one to try to look at the major chapters of our Scriptures. And here, I don’t mean “Genesis 1” and, then “chapter 2.” No, when I say

“chapters” in the Biblical narrative, I mean the key headings or sections of the grand story line that we find ourselves in: “Creation” and then a “Oops” and then a “Covenant” and then “Bickering among the children” and, finally, “Christ” and “A Promise to Come.” These chapters are a large part of what I hope to flesh out and define in this supplement.

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But, beyond that, I've offered you other handles for approaching the scriptures—including directions for being about a *90-Day Reading Program*. There's even an article which seeks to unpack what is meant by Biblical “inspiration” and “inerrancy” and “infallibility”—and a way for us to navigate these concepts.



As suggested in this sermon's “preamble,” supplemental materials accompanied many of these surveys from the pulpit. Prompted by gurus in my life at the time (as, e.g., Rick Warren and Adam Hamilton), my hope in developing and providing these supplemental materials was that they'd serve to orient folks to the overall series (and “chapters”) but also serve to promote ongoing individual and small group studies beyond Sunday morning. For the ways these materials may be of benefit in a discussion of “informational” approaches to the Scriptures, pdfs of the following resources are available by clicking on hyperlinks embedded in each title:

- [A Practical Guide for Surveying the Basic Storyline of the Christian Scriptures](#), and
- The [chart, A Biblical Storyline: A Survey of Key Chapters, People, Places and Dates](#)

Opening Prayer

*As Thou, O Lord,
did inspire and guide the hearts and minds
of your prophets, scribes, and sages of old—
to capture and convey these sacred Scriptures.*

*Grant that by that same Holy Spirit
we'd be enabled in this place and time to
discover Your Way and Truth and Life.*

*Yes, come Holy Spirit, come—
for your Glory's sake and
our wellbeing, in Christ. Amen.*

Body of the Sermon

At the beginning of the book and movie, *The Neverending Story*, we meet Bastian, an 8 or 9 year old of very low self-esteem—who seeks refuge from neighborhood bullies in a old book store.

He strikes up a conversation with the gruff book seller, who holds a book which catches the boy's eye.

“What is that?” the boy asks, pointing to the book.

“Oh, that's something special,” the old man replies.

“This is a very special story. You see, In your stories you get to be Robinson Crusoe or Tarzan, But, when the story is over you get to come back and be a little boy again.”

“Yes,” Bastian meekly replies.

“So listen,” the old man continues, “have you ever been Robinson Crusoe in that submarine—while that giant squid is trying to tear you apart? Have you have you wondered if you would ever get out of it?”

“No, of course not. It's just a story.”

To which the old man says, “See, I told you... Your stories, the books you read are safe—because you get to enter and leave the same way you entered. But, this story is different. When you enter it, it's not safe. It takes you in. It changes you. It defines you. And, you'll never leave it the same way you entered it.”



[Note from JR:

Here, in this transcript, I have paraphrased the story. If you'd like to see a clip of this scene, [click here.](#)]

Did you hear that, dear Soul?

“That story, that book: it's not safe. It takes you in. It changes you. It defines you. And, you'll never leave it the same way you entered.”

Friends, I cannot think of a better summary—indeed, a better analogy or parable for the Neverending Story “in which we find ourselves.” (cf., Brian McLaren). Indeed, when we enter into it—and here, I don't mean just picking it up and giving it casual, cursory attention... But, when really enter into this story, it changes us. It defines us. We leave it different than the way we entered it.

It's part, I believe, of what's behind St. Paul's speaking of the Gospel—God's story of salvation [contained and conveyed in the Bible]—as nothing to be ashamed of. “For it is the very power of God unto salvation,” he writes.

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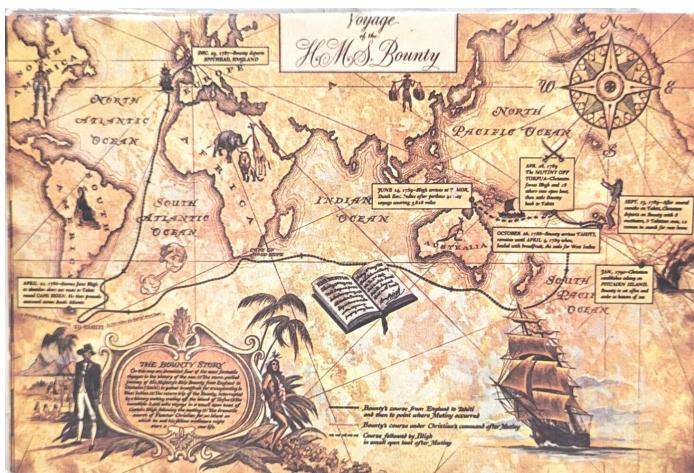
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Here, by the way, the word he uses there for “power” is the Greek “dunamis,” from which we get the word, “dynamite.” You see, it’s not some little power—like, say, a fire cracker. No, it’s big, it’s explosive, it breaks those who encounter, it’s transformative! “I am not ashamed of ‘The Neverending Story Of God’—for to those who enter and encounter it, it is the dynamite of God... unto a whole new and right existence!”

Dear Friends, for those who really want to get into it, this is a uniquely powerful and lifechanging and transforming story!

I suspect that many of you have heard the story of the mutiny on the Bounty. But, you may not have heard how the Bible played a big part in its epilogue.

In the late 1700s, a crew of sailors left England, with Captain William Bligh at the helm. Their mission was to make a 10-month journey to the South Sea Islands—where they’d be about some Botanical research (i.e., collect plants and specimens) on the way to an assessment of the suitability of those islands for eventual settlement and colonization.



Six months into their stay on the island, things took an unfortunate turn. Some of the sailors found a way to ferment whiskey from some of the native plants. Many took a liking to the native girls. Given their standards of living elsewhere, theirs was very much the impression that they’d discovered paradise. So, the bulk of the crew ended up casting Bligh and a handful of still-loyal crewmen off the island—setting them afloat in a little dinghy to their most probable demise.

Quite miraculously, though, the Captain was rescued and made his way back to London.

When a new expedition was sent out to recover the mutinous crew, they found fourteen—who were brought to face justice in England.

But, that’s not the end of the story, as Paul Harvey might say.

Nine from the original crew were unaccounted for—having taken refuge on an even more remote island. Their debauchery led to the ruin of almost all—save one lone survivor, Alexander Smith. Finding a Bible among the possessions of one of his shipmates, he began to read and study it (as it was a book Smith had never before encountered).

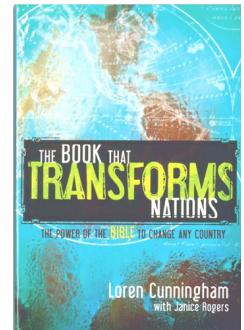
Here, I love the way Charles Swindoll wraps up the story...

He believed it and he began to appropriate it. He wanted others to share in the benefits of this book, so he taught classes to the women and the children, as he read to them and taught them the Scriptures.

It was twenty years before a ship ever found that island, and when it did, a miniature Utopia was discovered. The people were living in decency, prosperity, harmony, and peace. There was nothing of crime, disease, immorality, insanity, or illiteracy. How was it accomplished? By reading, the believing, and the appropriating of the truth of God!

Beloved of God, when you truly enter into it, the story (or “metanarrative,” as some have called it)... The story captured here in this book (or, more accurately, this library of books) is life-changing! It was life changing for the individual, Smith, yes. But, notice as well that it was transformative for a whole society. The society of that entire island came under the power and influence and the life-changing power of the Scriptures!

Along these same lines, I found another book (entitled [The Book That Transforms Nations: The Power of the Bible to Change Any Country](#)) which researches the ways that the Biblical narrative has positively impacted cultures around the world. As author, Loren Cunningham, writes, “When a critical mass of people have the Bible and apply what it teaches in their lives, a nation is transformed.”



Yes, this book, this Neverending Story is the “dynamite of God unto salvation.” It’s dynamite for unbelieving individuals. It’s dynamite for an unbelieving culture. And, it’s dynamite in the lives of those who believe.

It’s not just lifechanging to those “out there” but to each and all of us “inside here!” Countless stories could be told of Believers and their devotional lives and how bowing before the word—letting the word work within them—has been lifechanging and transformative.

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I am mindful of a story which Robert Mulholland shares in his book, [Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation](#). He recounts a time when he was engaging a lectionary text focused on the plagues (in the book of Exodus):

I read the portion and then asked the same question I had asked each day, "Lord, what are you seeking to say to me here?" This time the answer came.

"You are Pharaoh!"

"What?" I replied. "Me, Pharaoh? Moses perhaps, even one of the Hebrew people, but Pharaoh?

"You are Pharaoh!"

Then, with that Word, things began to open up—in the text and in me. I began to realize that, as a word spoken forth by God, God had spoken certain qualities into my "word." God had given me certain gifts and abilities and characteristics, certain qualities of personality. God had also shaped my "word" by being an active presence in the various experiences of my life. All of these dynamics of my "word" were God's "children," but I had enslaved them to my own purposes, my own desires, my own intentions, my own plans. Truly I was Pharaoh in my life!

As I began to wrestle with this Word, the lectionary brought me to the final plague, the death of the firstborn. I began to realize that for me to cease to be Pharaoh in my life, there would have to be the death of my "firstborn" desires to use God's gifts for my own purposes. If those gifts were to be liberated for God's use in my life and ministry, if they were to be the "word" God was speaking me forth to be in the world, I would have to cease to be Pharaoh. (p. 55-56)**

Brings to mind some similar pondering and journaling that I was about a few years ago—as I reflected on Mary's words, "let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) Like Mulholland, I found myself being led down an unexpected path of reflection and insight:

There are a lot of "little j" jims even as there are a lot of "little g" gods. There is one "big J" Jim [Reiter] even as there is one "Big G" God. Beyond all lesser voices which seek to name and define me (including my own voice), I am a word from the mouth of God. As God's word is active and alive, when He says my name, "Jim [Reiter]!", it shatters all lesser names and namings. As when He says "Light!" and there is light [Gen. 1], even so: when He says "Jim!", there is Jim [Reiter] in all of Jim's real fullness.

"Here I am, a servant of the Lord. Let it be—let me be—according to your word."

I am humbled.

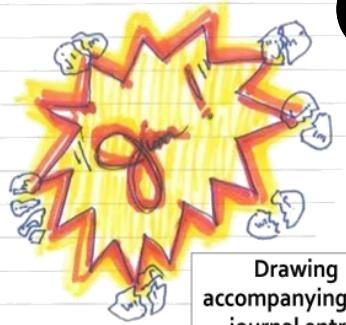
I am not "jim."

I am hopeful.

I am "Jim"... and will be "Jim."

I feel loved. Oh, how patient the Divine is!

I have dread. Oh, all that must die and be broken for "Jim" to be reborn and renewed and recollected!



Drawing accompanying this journal entry.

It is tangential, to be sure. It's unconventional, I will grant you that. But, is it unbiblical in the truth it sounds? That too many have debased themselves and need to hear and believe that they are a "word," spoken from the mouth of God. How does the Bible put it? "God's word will not return void." God does not waste breath! So, that when God says "Sandra" and "Terry" and "Jim" and "Bill" ... When God speaks a word, it's active and alive! And we can't let the lesser voices of this world define who we are! There are some here who need to hear and believe and trust that that this morning!

But, the bigger point to be made here, now is that this is just one way that I've personally encountered the word as God's "dynamite" for my existence.

Friends, I'm here to tell you that this book is dynamite. This book—this Neverending Story—conveys the power of God unto salvation! To borrow from Jesus and his parable of the Sower (Mk 4:1-12), the word of God is seed —each one with a potential crop or Orchard within! Each seed, every word has so much potential. No wonder the author of Hebrews shares as he does that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword—penetrating to the depths of who we are." (Hebrews 4:12)

At the end of the movie, The Neverending Story, Bassitan is changed. He's been transformed. From the frightened soul on the run, he's become a heroic figure who helps to redeem a fallen world. He emerges triumphant—as does the right and good. But, be advised: it doesn't come without cost and real challenge.

That said, with this Neverending Story in front of us, the abiding question—or questions—in front of me are:

- Do we really want to enter into this Story?
- Do we really want it to change us and define us... and tell us our story?

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**Mulholland's conclusion on the bigger point he is making in this part of his discussion is too valuable not to include here—given our fuller discussion in this issue: "This is what can happen when we come to the text formationally rather than informationally, when we allow the Word to address us through the text, when we are willing to take the posture of the object which the text addresses rather than trying to control it." (p. 56)

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- Are we prepared to enter the dark chapters?
- Are we willing to accept the costs and embrace the challenges it generates?
- Or, are we only looking for the vibrant, feel good chapters?

I am here to tell you that there is power and transformation in this story for those who enter it. But, be advised, it comes—like Christ the ultimate Word of God—to those who enter it not on their own terms but on Its Terms, on God's terms.

Yes, to be sure, it is a story of Easter and Resurrection and a new Heaven and Earth. But, be warned: we only get there as we travel through a Fall, and times of rebellion, and Good Friday, and persecution, self-denial, and taking up our own cross in imitation of Jesus our Lord.

Dear Friend, don't take the book if you aren't ready to be sucked in... and changed.

To read it and stay the same: it's something the Word and Spirit never intended!



█ A High-Level Summary of the Christian Metanarrative: "The Sacred Romance"

From an informational standpoint, it is important to have some idea of the main, overarching theme of the narrative or story to which the Biblical library points. Such is the focus of this excerpt from a sermon in the "Sacred Romance" series, preached at Chapelwood United Methodist Church in Lake Jackson, Texas in the Summer of 2002. It references work in the study course, "See Through the Scriptures"—which we will visit more fully in the next article.

—Jim Reiter

Teaching a Bible survey course here at Chapelwood (entitled "See Through the Scriptures"), I invited the class to engage in some pre-class reading. I prescribed the first few chapters of Hosea and the 15th chapter of Luke (where we find the "Parable of the Prodigal Son").

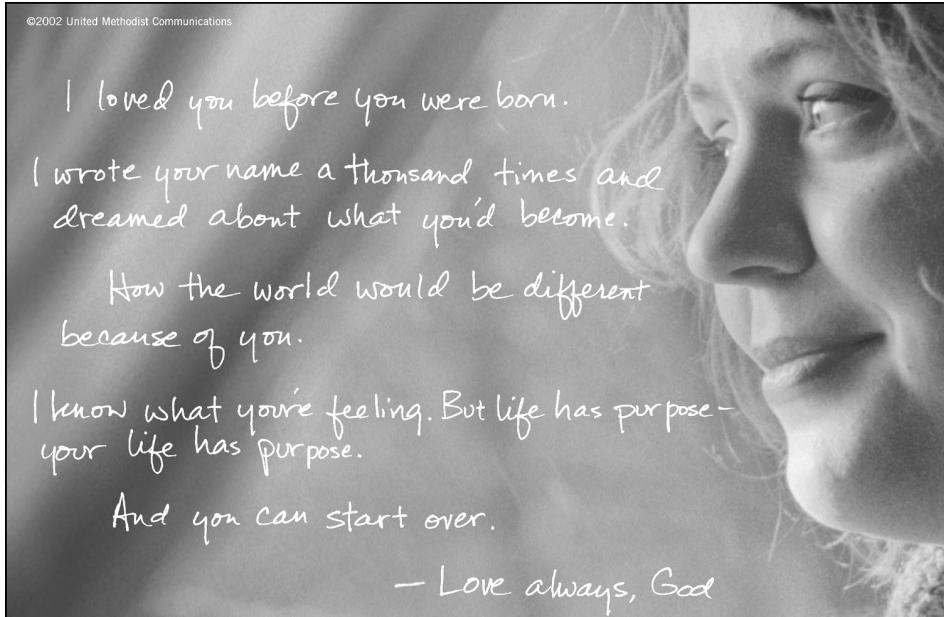
I recall the slightly confused individual who finally asked, "Why?... Why those chapters?"

"Because these passages," I replied, "have a way, I believe, of distilling and conveying the essence of the narrative to which the books of the Bible point."

There's Hosea, a prophet. He marries a prostitute by the name of Gomer. Bad enough as that may seem in itself, the real scandal is when she returns to her trade and he must seek her out and buy her back. And God's response to Hosea? "I know just what you mean... I have a love who is always playing the whore... flitting from one lover to another... But, like you, Hosea, I will seek her and I will restore and redeem her."

And then there's that "Prodigal Father." People love to call it the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" where "prodigal" means "wasteful.—indeed, "extravagantly wasteful." But, I choose to think of it as the parable of the Prodigal Father. For in the Hebrew-Jewish notion of things, he is the one who is most "prodigal"—most "extravagantly wasteful"—pouring out his love on such an ingrate.

I mean that boy effectively said "drop dead and give me what's mine." And then, he goes and spends it in all sorts of trivial pursuits. Meanwhile, back at the ranch,



there is a father who is constantly scanning the horizon—so that even when the boy is a long ways off, he runs to meet him and embrace and restore the wayward child.

"Why run?" we might add. Because, if the father does not get there in time, the villagers will most likely stone the boy to death—what, given the standards and customs of that day.

Yes, together, these stories convey the essence (the key theme) of the Biblical narrative—even as they convey the grandeur of the Sacred Romance.

Friends, God is the first and last and only real, red hot Lover. And you, dear Soul, no matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter how many ways you have prostituted yourself to this world, no matter how many days you have wasted in trivial pursuits: you are the apple of God's eye... You are the beloved....



Through the years, I have employed a variety of classroom curriculums for giving overview to the Scriptures. There’s been Trinity Bible Study, [Disciple Bible Study](#), and different offerings from Harry Wendt’s [Crossways International](#).

Perhaps the most fruitful and popular of these studies was Wendt’s [“See Through the Scriptures”](#)—a resource gives survey to the entire narrative of the Scriptures in 6 to 8 sessions. (An initial exercise in the course—that is, reading Hosea and the Parable of the Prodigals—was processed in the previous article.)

Several features draw me to Wendt and his materials: rich scholarship, yes, but also meaningful graphics which help to reinforce his teachings. Here, his words are meaningful: “Communication experts tell us that we remember... 10% of what we hear, 30% of what we see, 60% of what we hear and see, 80% of what we hear, see, and work at.” Cartoony as his graphics might appear at first, then, they serve a valuable role in his study materials—a key reason for my gravitating to them.

Here, in this excerpt (from a series recap at Chapelwood UMC in 2002), we get a more detailed review of the story (or “metanarrative”) to which the library of Christian Scriptures point.

—Jim Reiter

There’s value in repetition. It may be that, finally, with a third pass through, something clicks. And so, just one last time, I’d like to review where we’ve been and recap where we are right now—employing the image that is before us. [See image on page 8.]

Again, it is my understanding [that] no one can assume in the Church that the people—the adults in the pews—are familiar with the Biblical narrative. The rate of Biblical illiteracy among active, Church-going Christians is phenomenal... Even at the end of several weeks together, I can not assume that you’ve automatically caught it all. It may be, as you continue to go through this material, that finally something clicks.

So real quickly, for review, let us remember that we started over here with Genesis and a focus on Genesis 1-11. And we admitted that you really have to understand what

is going on in Genesis 1-11 because without it, there is no need for the rest of the story line. In Genesis 1-11, we have one, two, three, four... four times in which there’s been cycle of sin (or disobedience), followed by judgment, but also Grace. We saw it with the Garden, we saw it with Cain and Abel, we saw it with those divine beings whose actions precipitated the flood, and finally we saw it with the Tower of Babel. And that’s

what this picture down here, this image down here reminds us of: that sin—wherever evil comes from—is a key driver and precipitator in our story. No evil, no sin, no sense of a “fall,” we might say, and there’s no need for story line after Genesis 1 and 2.

But there is evil. And it isn’t ours to figure out where it came from. It’s just one of those things that makes its presence on the scene and it shatters all creation. All of creation is shaken by the impact of sin. And it results in a break between the human and Divine, between the male and female, between brother and brother, between divine earthly realities, between nation and nation.



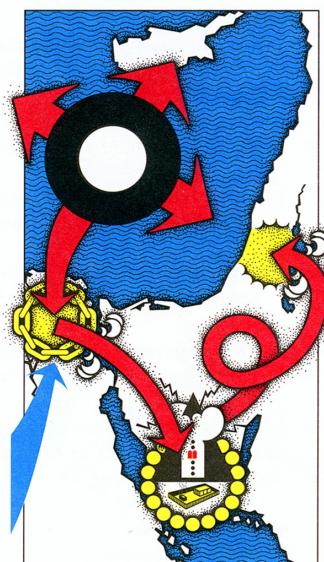
Wendt’s teachings stand out for the graphics he employs. His symbol for God, above, speaks to the ways that God 1) is without beginning or end and 2) is ever reaching out in Grace.

It ripples throughout and it spreads (that’s why these lines get bigger and wider). But, over that same time period, the Scriptures remind us that God’s focus narrows in on a plan/solution focused in one person, who is Abraham. And here we get our first “Divine Commitment Covenant.” [D.C.] It looks forward. Remember, it looks forward and says “No matter how you act, this is a unconditional/ unilateral agreement... You all remain faithless and fickle, I will still be committed to this promise.” And namely, it is a three-fold promise: that, Abraham and his descendants will be given land and offspring and that they will (in his name) be a blessing to all the nations.

We have the story of the other Patriarchs who eventually make their way to Egypt. (Through Jacob and Joseph, they end up in bondage in Egypt.)

God delivers with a powerful hand and sets up the next round of covenant making at Sinai—making his Presence known in cloud and fire on a mountain. He establishes a covenant, and at the heart of the covenant are commandments. His presence, His ongoing presence in a community that is joined together is through the ark and the tabernacle that travels with them. But the covenant is a “Human Obligation” covenant. In other words, instead of unconditionally looking forward (“I am your God and I will be forever”), it says “Remember, I am the

Lord God who brought you out of Israel” (that is, it recalls something from the past) and it continues, “therefore,



This panel, from Wendt, conveys the most formative events of the Old Testament: God’s breaking the chains of his oppressed children in Egypt, leading them out via a miraculous water crossing, bringing them to Mt. Sinai (where they will receive a covenant), shepherding them through the wilderness, and eventually delivering them to the “Promised Land” (after another miraculous water crossing).

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I will bring you into a land flowing with milk and honey. And, it will be yours to keep and enjoy and be blessed by if you do this, this, this and this... If you don't, though, curses will come"—including the curse which is "you will be stripped from that land."

So, can you see the difference a "Divine Commitment" covenant and a "Human Obligation" covenant? Sinai is the latter. It says, "If you stick to these stipulations, it will go well for you and your descendants. But, if you don't there will be consequences."

They do enter the Land and become a confederation of a loose knit group of tribes. And, every now and then, Judges, inspired by God's spirit, speak for God and or act on God's behalf.

Eventually, the people clamor for a king—so they can be "like all the other nations." It's confusing, you will remember: we do not know whether God (Yahweh) really wants a king or not. Reading between the lines of that part of the narrative (in Samuel), there seems to be some debate: God does not mind a "prince," but there are reservations about having a king (because He, God, is supposed to be King of Israel!).

Eventually, David does come to the forefront as the epitome of kings in their minds. So, that in time, whenever they have any idea of what Messiah should be, it will look like David. (And again, you will remember, there is the next "Divine Commitment" covenant in which God says, "No strings attached, David, I do want you to build a house for me, but I will make a house [or dynasty] out of you that will last forever.")

In time, the Prophets will enter the scene—raising all sorts of questions—hoping to direct the minds and hearts of the people back to Sinai. The point out that there is a human obligation implied in that covenant and that it doesn't appear that individuals or the nation are living up to it.

In time, these Prophets will begin to ask, "What's going to happen to us if we don't live up to the agreement?"

And the answer is "time out" in Babylon: the "Exile." There, they begin to formulate questions—like...

- Why did this happen?
- How can we prevent this from ever happening again?
- And, further, what can we do to bring back the Messianic/Davidic king line?
- What can we do to bring Messiah into our midst?

Their answers to the kind of questions form the beginnings and basis of Judaism.

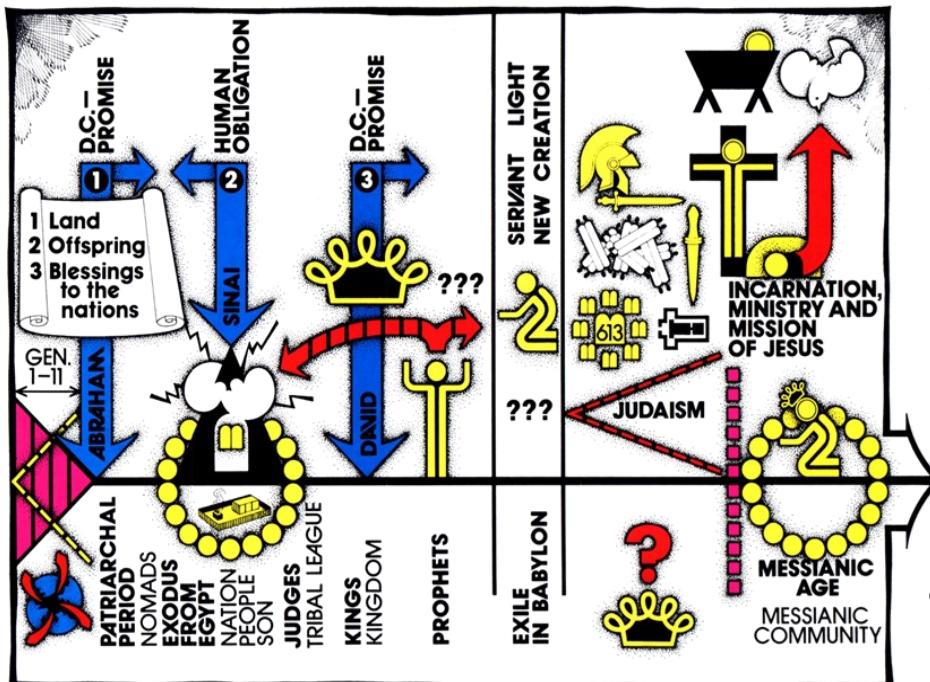
Of course, in the ensuing years, it is not the Garden of Eden they had expected. And again, when I talk about "they" in these years, we are really talking about the Southern tribe of Judah—going into captivity in 587 and Cyrus the Persian letting them go back home in 538 BC.

Between 538 and 63 BC (when the Romans take charge), Judaism incubates and ferments. In that same time period, you have different groups emerging. Of course, they believe in "One God, One Law, and One Nation," but these "denominations," we might say, arise. They have one creed, but each holds it with a different emphasis on different "syllables." There are those [Pharisees] who say if we just learn Torah and the Oral Tradition:

that's how we'll bring Messiah. Others [like the Zealots] say we won't bring Messiah without a sword. Still others [like the Sadducees] say, "No, it's all locked up in Temple worship."

Messiah does come. Apart from all these expectations (at least as they held them), Jesus comes in an outback manger, no palace to be found. He lives the life of a servant that is epitomized by the cross. The cross is the symbol of a servant without limit—servitude with no strings attached, unconditional, "no greater love than this," ... God validates that that is His Messiah by opening the tomb and raising Jesus from the dead. (The tomb is open, by the way, not just to let Jesus out. The tomb is open, as well, to let us in so we can see that it's empty.)

The Ascension is not Jesus' withdrawal from us as much as it is the transformation of His presence among us. In and through the Spirit, Jesus is here... Jesus the Christ, the Messiah is as radically and dynamically present here as He has been present anywhere in history!



Image, from Wendt, upon which the recapitulation in this article is based.

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Now, we live in this new Messianic age. Oh, it's radically redefined from what the Jews thought the Messianic age would be. Jesus had a way of doing that. You will remember in his message in Mark 1: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is near!" And that word "repent" speaks of a 180-degree turn. And we are going to find that, at every turn, the Messianic hope is there but it's 180 degrees from what they were imagining it to be.

So, now we live in this period [between the first and the Second appearing of the Christ]...



This series of images highlight crucial aspects and understandings surrounding God's full advent in Christ. The image on the left symbolizes the ongoing presence of Christ the Servant and His Spirit—at the heart of the ongoing community which is the Church, the "body of Christ." Noteworthy is the way that individuals are connected by the extension of hands to one another—a far cry from the hands on hips that mark humans in earlier frames. (right) The arrowed circle around the human in this image, by the way, speaks to a Latin term used to define humans in their fallen, sinful state, "incurvatis en se" or "wrapped up in themselves."



Excerpt from "Means of Grace" Series: Practical Handles for 'Searching the Scriptures'

Another set of recurring sermons series through the years would focus on the "means of grace"—defined by John Wesley, in his "General Rules to the United Societies," as "the public worship of God, the ministry of the Word (either read or expounded), the Supper of the Lord, Family and private prayer, Searching the Scriptures, and Fasting or abstinence." The hope in each message was to provide practical handles for cultivating each discipline in the lives of individuals and families.

Summer, 2009 saw one such series at Strawbridge United Methodist Church in Kingwood, Texas, entitled "The Power of Holy Habits." The Sunday for presenting Bibles to first and second graders was identified as a perfect time for a message on "Searching the Scriptures"—something that accounts for the tenor of the sermon, focused as it was on those children who had just received their Bibles.

—Jim Reiter



This morning's scripture lesson comes to us from Acts chapter 2, verses 42 through 47. It's found on page 1200 in the Bibles you just received. In time, I know that your Moms and Dads and your Sunday School teachers will help you learn what we mean by "Acts, chapter 2, starting with verse 42."

And as we come to read and hear these words, I'd like to share something I learned when I was a little kid, just about your ages: that when someone older, someone you respected came into the room, we would stand up for them. If I was sitting on the couch, for example, and one of my grandparents or older friends of the family would enter the room, I would stand up—even offering them my seat. You see, standing up is a way that we show we love and honor someone... and that we want that someone to know they are precious and valuable to us. That's why, in church, I even ask people to stand as we read the Bible. It's a way of saying we think the Bible (and the God of that Bible) is that precious.

Would you please stand, then, as we read from this very special book—given to us by God?

[read [Acts 2:42-47](#)]

My plan is to visit most directly with the first and second graders, who just received their Bibles this morning. But, my hope is that the adults in the room will overhear some things they need to think about, as well.

So, looking at the little handout I gave you this morning—outlining some of the things we can do to make the most out of the gift which is our Bibles, here are some of things that I think are important for us to keep in mind as we read and study the Bible.

First of all, you can see that I suggest that we begin with prayer—thanking God for the Bible and asking Jesus and His Spirit to help us understand the Bible. Even so, let's pray right now:

Dear Jesus, we thank you for the Bible and how it shows us God and how to live with God and each other. We really do hope that you would help us—even right here, right now—to better understand this book, filled as it is with things you would want us to hear and learn. Thank you Jesus for loving us. We do love you, Jesus. Amen.

The next thing I suggest is having a reading plan for getting into the stories of the Bible—a schedule that will make for shorter, more simple times of reading. Some people I know want to start at the beginning of the Bible and read it straight through. But, I think for somebody just starting the Bible, that can be a very tough thing to do. That's why, as part of my handout this morning, I have included a reading plan or two that will allow you and your parents to sample parts of the Bible, from beginning to end. There's even a list that that gives you

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key stories in the life of Jesus—for reading over a four-week period. I think you will see and feel the goodness of taking small chunks of scripture—to read each day with your parents and/or members of your family.

Which brings me to my next suggestion. We all need helpers around us so that we can better understand the Bible. You need your parents to read with you. Maybe at night, at bedtime? I really hope you'll start a practice like that. Because, you know what? Your moms and dads really need the Bible, too. And so, going home today, I hope you will say something like “every night, when I go to bed, we will have a plan: teeth brushed, everything lined out for the next day, and time for some reading from the Bible.” Maybe 10 to 15 minutes each night for some reading from your Bibles. Yes, reading with somebody is very important.

Sunday school teachers are also very important as helpers. You guys are so lucky to have the teachers you have! Of all the Sunday School teachers here at Strawbridge, your teacher might be among the best I've ever seen.

And, then, there are the other helpers who come to us in the form of book writers who help us to learn about and understand the Bible. When I think of the children who just now received Bibles this morning, there are two books that immediately come to mind. One of the books is What the Bible is All About for Young Explorers (Ventura: Regal Books, 1986) The other one (which looks kind of like a little kid's book, but don't let that fool you!) is The Big Picture Story Book. (Crossways: 2014)

It takes all the big parts of the Bible and gives neat pictures to look at and language that's easy for young readers.

Yes, when you read the Bible and you have your reading plan, you need the help of people and books that people have written.

As you continue down the list, note how it says “Remember the ‘Bigger Story’ of the Bible (and where the passage you are reading fits into that big story).” I've told your moms and dads that the Bible tells a great love story. That might be kind of mushy for you guys. Maybe, for you, it's more like the story of a mom or dad who love their children so much. And those children? They don't always behave correctly. And the parents try over and over again to tell their children, “I love you! I'll always love you! But, there are times when I might have to discipline you

and put you in time out. And, when you are there in time out, it might be good for you to think about what you've done. But, hear me clearly: I'll always, always love you—even when it does not feel that way!”

In many ways, that's the big story of the Bible. You will notice that I've even provided another helper in here to help you see the big story of what the Bible is about. A man named Martin Luther once said that “the Bible is like a cradle.” (You can see how that it looks like a cradle when I hold it open like this.) “The Bible is a cradle that brings us Jesus.” That's an interesting way of thinking about the Bible, isn't it? It's like a cradle that brings us Jesus!” So you need to keep the big picture of the big story in mind as you read the Bible.

And then I go on to say, “take time to memorize (those verses which are most meaningful to you).” In fact, I have included some of my favorite verses and passages.

- “This is the day that the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it!” (Psalm 118:24)
- There's the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: “Our Father Who art in Heaven.” (Matthew 6:9-13)
- There's other things in here you might want to memorize as well—like the names of the 12 disciples, or the names of the books of the Bible.

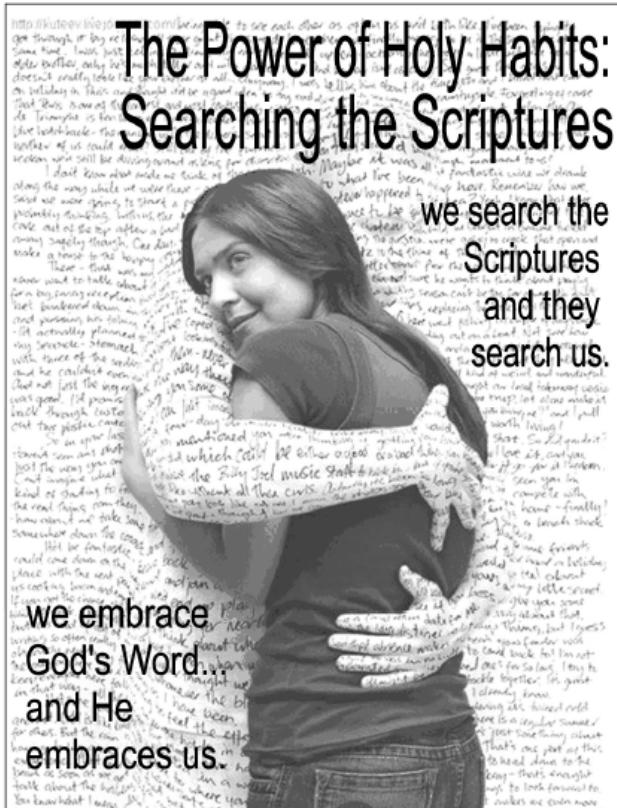
I hope your teachers and your parents are helping you to memorize these kind of passages and details.

Finally, there at the end of your list: I encourage you to “end your reading time—taking some time to think about the verses you read (and what they say about God, life, living, who you are,...)” Don't just read the words and, then, put it aside. But ask, “what do these verses I just read tell me about God?” and “what do they tell me about life and how God wants me to live?”

When we read that scripture from Acts a minute ago—about how members of the early church would listen to the apostles teaching and, then, turn those teachings into action, doesn't that sound like something we need to do today? Listen to the teachings of Jesus and others in the Bible... and do what they tell us to do.

Finally, there, at the end of the list, I ask us to end like we began—with a prayer. Even so, will you join me now?

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Dear Jesus,

Again, we thank you for the Bible.
We thank you for the verse we read today—
about how, from the earliest days
of the church, so long ago—
even then, they took time
to learn from others about your words and your way.

O Jesus, help us to want to learn your Bible.

Help our moms and dads and families
to teach us the Bible.

Help our Sunday school teachers.

Help everybody in this room to learn about your Bible
and your way of life and living.

Thank you, Jesus, for loving us. We do love you. Amen.



Part Two: Searching the Scriptures: Exploring Formational Approaches

Giving General Overview to “Informational” vs “Formational” Approaches to the Scriptures

The following Zoe-Life blog post, entitled [Immersing Ourselves in the Baptism of the Our Lord](#) (from January 2023), has a way of distinguishing informational readings of the Scriptures from more formational engagements. It does so by 1) giving general definition to each approach and, then, 2) illustrating these differences in the ways one might approach Mark 1:9-11 (the lectionary Gospel reading for the Sunday commemorating our Lord’s baptism).

It's not the first time in this issue, by the way, that we've given some suggestion of what a "formational" approach looks like—having invoked a few examples in the first article (a transcript of the sermon, "[A Uniquely Effective and Powerful Book](#)") on page 2ff. There, we offered the story of Mulholland's engaging the plagues in Exodus and coming to the realization that "I am Pharaoh." Then, too, in that same message, there was our engaging Luke 1:38 (Mary's "let it be, with me according to your word") and coming to realize how we are all words spoken from the mouth of God.

—Jim Reiter

Gospel texts at the core of this coming Sunday's observance of the Baptism of the Lord offer meaningful insights for spiritual formation.

At one level, there's the opportunity to note the distinction between an informational approach to the Scriptures versus a more formational approach—a distinction we unpack in the online course, [“Teaching Biblical Faith for Spiritual Formation”](#) in BeADisciple's Certification in Spiritual Formation program.

In his book, [Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation](#), Bob Mulholland compares the two approaches along the following lines...

In Informational reading we:	In Formational reading we:
Cover as much as possible	Cover what we need to
Read line after line	Read for depth, perhaps on only a word
Have a goal of mastering the text	Have a goal of being mastered by the text
Treat the text as an “object”	Treat ourselves as the object of the text
Read analytically	Read receptively
Solve problems	Are open to mystery

Differences and distinctions also emerge as we engage a particular text—as, for example, the Gospel texts for the baptism of our Lord, Mark 1:9-11:

⁹*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*
¹⁰*And when he came up out of the water,*

immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

From an “informational” standpoint, it is helpful to note the ancient device of “remez” or “kesher”—by which Jews of Jesus’ days could and would connect fuller biblical texts to fragments of that text. Think of it as a kind of ancient hypertexting—so that, in the Mark passage, above, “You are my beloved son” and “with whom I am well please” would automatically connect to other texts in the minds and hearts of a first century Jewish audience (saturated, as they were, in the verses of the Scriptures):

- “You are my beloved son”: their minds and souls click to verse 2 of Psalm 2, a popular song at the coronation and anointing (“messiah”-ing) of a king.
- “With whom I am pleased”: can you hear the click as they connect this fragment to Isaiah 42:1, the first of what are called the “suffering servant” songs?

From an informational standpoint, then, the inference is clear and striking for teaching and preaching: scandalous as it was for Jews of that day (as no one would have conceived of putting these two concepts together), Jesus is, at once, the anointed one [i.e., Messiah] and the Suffering Servant.

Thomas Merton would suggest that the informational is a necessary “front porch” for our entering into deeper formational readings. Even so, here. This seated notion of Jesus being both beloved and anointed as well as a

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servant who suffers for the sake and redemption of others has implications for my own identity and calling.

Here, I might add, this message is reinforced by a message at the heart of Epiphany (which we celebrate this Friday, January 6): that Jesus is not just the revelation or manifestation (Epiphany) of God but (fully human and fully divine as He is) Jesus is also a revelation of our full humanity. "What we see in Jesus," I have commented at times, "is what we will be in Jesus."

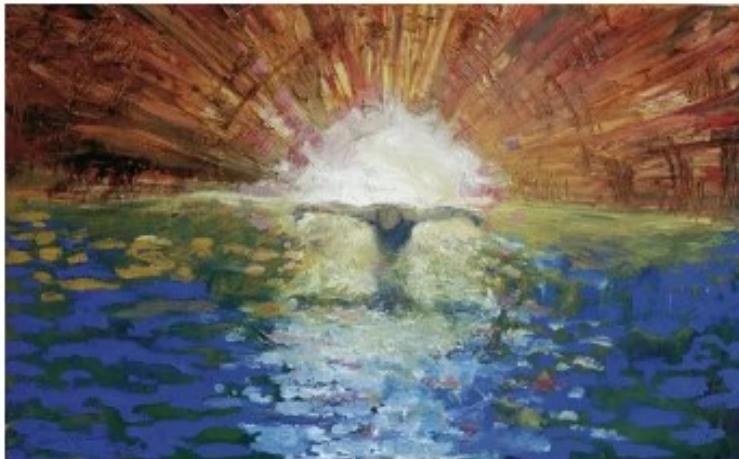
It's at this most intimate level that I find myself most challenged by this formational approach to the text and the baptism of our Lord. To be most honest, you see...

- Most times, I don't see myself as being that special to God. Through the years, I have yearned for a more personal experience of God's deep and full love. Oh, it's there in my head – like a John 3:16 banner hung in any number of sports arenas. But, deep in my soul, there's a question of how lovable I really am... and whether the Spirit at the center of life and living can really care for me.
- And when it comes to suffering and serving? Count me out there, too. With the majority of American Christians, I do not want to suffer or sacrifice—even if it means others will somehow benefit. Deep down, I am wrapped up in myself. "Incurvatis en se:" that's the way Augustine diagnosed our situation. I want a cake walk. Even with those I love the most, I find myself hitting a wall... and wanting them to come through for me!
- Don't miss, by the way, the way these two can and do conspire with one another — for the more I am confronted by my selfishness and self-centeredness, the lower I esteem myself as really lovable.

Truth is, I do not think I am alone here. Invoking Thoreau, I believe that most of us "live lives of quiet desperation"—in which these feelings of unloveliness and a shirking of suffering are predominate features.

But, the biggest consolation comes as I recall Jesus and his walk and prayers...

Amidst the confusion of these confessions, I find myself groping for a word of hope and good news. It is among the burdens of preachers every Sunday—as I was taught to unpack the command and the promise of every text.



"Baptism of Jesus" (Bonnell)

Amidst the command of this text, then, I acknowledge a sense of promise and hope—as I affirm that I am not alone. Others along the way have felt this way...

- The old soul there in Mark 9:24 ("I believe. Help thou my unbelief.") who was not spurned by the Lord.
- And then, there are the prayers of saints I hold dear...

⇒ Donne's
["Batter My Heart"](#)

⇒ Bonhoffer's
["Who Am I?"](#)

⇒ Merton's
["My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going."](#)

⇒ Nouwen,
in his various journalings

But, the biggest consolation comes as I recall Jesus and his walk and prayers...

*Where's hope
mid our days of quiet desperation—
cloaked in the lesser life of ego's reign?*

*To know we are not alone —
that others, too, carry this load?
Yes, there's some consolation there.
Perhaps.*

*Still greater and fuller, though:
to recall that our high priest,
author,
perfector,...
that He knows how we feel,
that He once despaired
as we do—
joining us in prayers of
"where art thou?"
and
"take this cup..."*

*Yes, He has been there...
and is here.
Yes, He knows what it is
to thirst
in a barren land.*

*And, in love,
with sacrifice,
He scandalously leaves the flock
to bring me—
to bring us—
home.* 

Fleshing Out a Fuller Understanding of Formational Approaches to the Scriptures

At this point, one might distinguish “informational” from “formational” approaches by reducing them to head study vs heart contemplation... or academic vs mystical. To some extent, this characterization works—providing some helpful starting points in a discussion like ours.

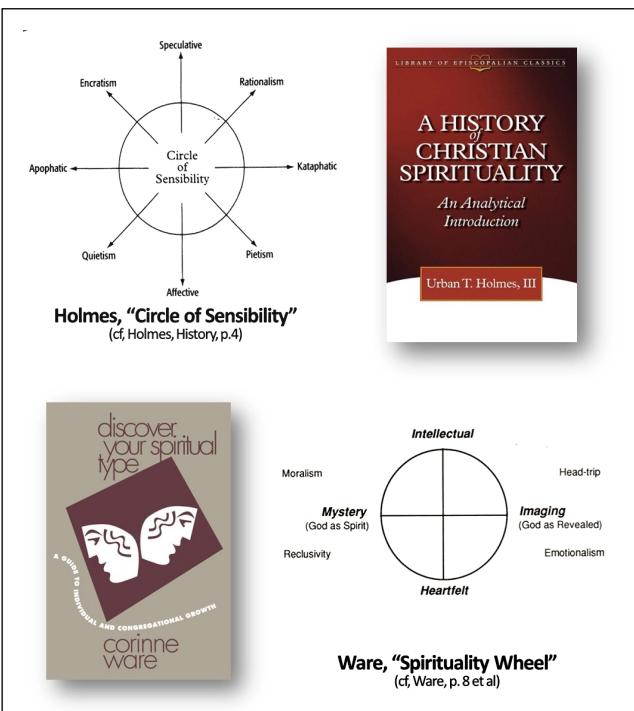
It should not surprise us, though, that it’s just not that simple or plain. There are nuances and graduations that expand the spectrum of possibilities for formational approaches to the Scriptures—beyond these black and white options.

It’s something that came through for me as I engaged discussions of spiritual types and prayer forms. (cf., Corinne Ware et al). Here, in this transcript of a lecture, entitled, “Spiritual Types & Prayer Forms,” (again from the online course, [Teaching Biblical Faith for Spiritual Formation](#)), I summarize such discussions on the way to introducing a more complex array of possibilities for formational approaches to the Scriptures.

—Jim Reiter

Summarizing Ware’s “Spiritual Types”...

Borrowing from “the Circle of Sensibility” which Urban T. Holmes developed and set forth in his [History of Christian Spirituality](#), Corinne Ware developed her “Spirituality Wheel.” (cf, [Discover Your Spiritual Type](#))



[Note:

For a fuller engagement of Ware’s Wheel—including a copy of her “Spiritual Type Inventory,” check out the following post at Zoe-Life.net: [“In Spiritual Formation, One Size Does Not Fit All!”](#)

Ware’s only real change was to make labels more user-friendly and easy to understand...

- In lieu of speculative and affective on Holme’s vertical axis, Ware employed “head” and “heart”
- In lieu of Holme’s apophatic and kataphatic (on the horizontal axis), Ware employed “mystery... God as transcendent” and “Imaging... God is revealed”
- While Holme’s did not give titles to ensuing Types, Ware would assign titles like Head, Heart, Mystic and Kingdom (or, what we’ve referred to as the “Activist”)

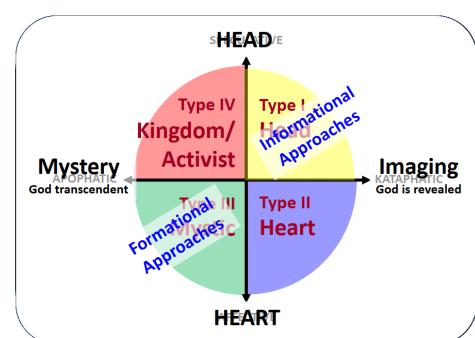
- Though not emphasized elsewhere, it’s worth pointing out here that one last modification was Ware’s adjusting the titles which Holme’s gave to four excesses in each quadrant...
 - ⇒ Holme’s would refer to these as
 - * rationalism
 - * pietism
 - * quietism
 - * and encratism.
 - ⇒ I don’t think I am alone in preferring Ware’s simpler and more understandable modifications of these extremes as...
 - * head-trip,
 - * emotionalism,
 - * reclusivity, and
 - * moralism.

Again, the purpose of these labels is their pointing to the dangerous extremes which each type can fall into—if they fail to keep balance or integration with the other types around them. Isolate yourself too much in a type and go to the extremes... and these are inevitable pitfalls. They are worth highlighting—here, now—for the ways they will come into play in our coming discussion.

An Initial Processing of Prayer/Bible Study Approaches and Types...

This Wheel before us, we can begin to process the two basic positions that have been our focus in this course: that is, informational vs formational approaches to the Scriptures.

From a high-level viewpoint, It seems reasonable to say that the informational (with its focus on head... and a sense that God is revealed and knowable) lays on top of Type 1 spirituality... and that the formational approach hovers over a more contemplative side of the Wheel.

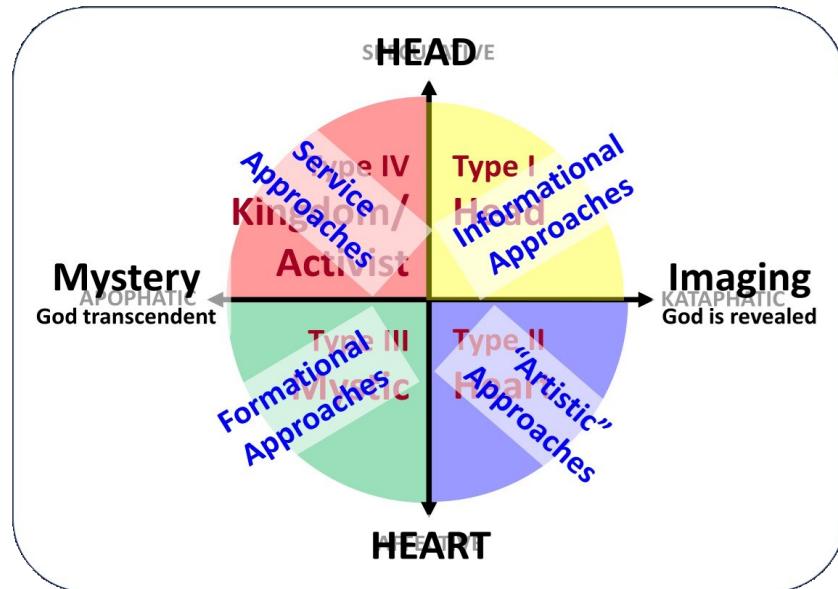


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But, here, we can begin to flesh out some variations from the other two quadrants in Ware's Wheel (II and IV)—variations which play between these extremes of head and mystic, variations which might begin to point us to other possibilities for approaching the Scriptures in a more formational way..

- In regards to Type IIs, I can not help but recall... and enjoy recalling the ways that music has been a part of my personal engagement of the Scriptures. Not just hymns, mind you, but musicians who have set the Scriptures to music. Here,...



- ⇒ John Michael Talbot comes to mind (and the ways he has set [psalms \(e.g., 95\)](#) and scripture texts ([like this Ephesian's canticle](#)) to chant and music
- ⇒ Or again, there's one of my favorite composers, [Allen Pote... and his setting of the 23rd Psalm](#) to music
- ⇒ Or still one more example: how refreshing it was to discover the group "Sons of Korah" whose mission is to bring a contemporary feel to [ancient psalms \(like 139\)](#)...
- ⇒ Yes, here's music that has heart and text dancing in very meaningful ways!

And this does not even include the ways that movies fit here—and can have deeply formative, spiritual impacts!

- In regards to Type IVs and their engagement of the Scriptures, my mind thinks of the shirts we wear at the local food pantry as we gather and serve each week.



Admittedly, there was a time (and it was not that long ago) that I would have heard this kind of discussion and would have denounced it as misguided and misleading.

Truth is, that was the culture that prevailed up until a few decades ago in the United Methodist Church—so that most curriculum and typical sermons were geared to Type I head spiritualities. (Might as well acknowledge the ways that Harry Wendt's materials can fall in line here.)

Altogether, these forms of study and preaching fostered a bias, unwarranted, that there was no real serious engagement of the Scriptures apart from the tools and methodologies embodied in most informational/head approaches.

As acknowledgement of different learning and teaching styles ascended and, maybe we ought to add to this, insights from various personality tools like Myers Briggs and the Enneagram... As these insights ascended, it was more readily apparent and obvious: there is not one definitive way to learn and to teach subjects—including the Our biblical Faith.

There are a variety of paths—each of which belongs. They all emanate from and return to the same mysterious and multidimensional reality which is God. One size can not and will not fit all! And, the sooner we acknowledge that, the sooner we arrive at a place of richer personal formation... as well as a place of greater usefulness and fruitfulness in our ministry with others.

For this reason, Ware does provide handles for spiritual direction for each of the types—including some sense of the ways they might approach prayer and Scriptures.

A more thorough definition, though, of the ways each type might prayer and approach the Scriptures is ours by way of materials written by David Csinos of the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto.

[See summary of Csinos work—an excerpt from this same lecture—in text box, next page.]

All of this to say that that there are some helpful resources out there that clarify the ways that each spiritual type approaches a variety of disciplines (including the Scriptures). But, do not miss, as well the notion that "teaching our Biblical Faith for spiritual formation" goes well beyond some of the narrow containers we can put it into.

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Excusus: Another Way of Framing “Spiritual Types” (with an Eye to “Searching the Scriptures”)

Working with Joyce Bellous, [David Csinos](#) (pronounced “Sin-aus”) has written extensively on a variety of spiritual practices as they relate to spiritual types. Their work is attributed to Ware and her Wheel – though, like Ware, they modify the labels of each type to accommodate the younger groups they are working with:

- * Word,
- * Emotion,
- * Symbol, and
- * Action.

Doesn’t take much effort to see how these lay on top of Ware’s Head, Heart, Mystic, and Prophet /crusader.

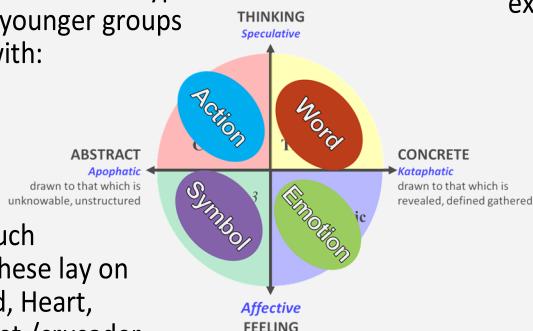
I came across David’s materials at [Roots on the Web](#), out of the UK—an exciting collective of churches including the Methodist Church, the Church of England, the United Reformed Church in England, Churches together in Britain and Ireland—among others. Going to [rootsontheweb.com](#), you’ll find a gathering of David’s resources and discussions—on a variety of spiritual formation issues as they relate to spiritual types...

- How does each type pray
- How does each type approach the Bible
- how does each type worship
- How would you plan in Summer and Autumn or for Pentecost or for Lent in Easter or Advent for each of the types

For our purposes here (with our focus on Teaching Biblical Faith for Spiritual Formation), we can confine our focus to the relationship between each of the Types and the Biblical witness.

He begins with an acknowledgement of the ways that each of spiritual styles can be found in the Bible

- The well-known verse Romans 12.2 (‘be transformed by the renewing of your mind’) is a fairly obvious example of a passage that speaks of the importance of a word-centered style of spirituality.
- An emotion-centered approach can be seen as David brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6. He seems to be on an emotional rollercoaster, full of highs and lows.
- Jesus demonstrates a symbol-centered approach to spirituality in his practice of solitary and quiet prayer (Mark 1.35), and the poetic imagery – depicting nature throughout the psalms – touches the abstract nature of this style.
- The words of the prophets, such as God’s admonition in Zechariah to care for widows, orphans, strangers and the poor (Zechariah 7.9-10), fuel



the world-changing passion of an action-centered approach to spirituality.

From there, he spells out the ways that a faith community can affirm and meet the needs of each type in, say, their experience and engagement of the Word in worship...

- For the word-centered...
 - ⇒ Even before a sermon begins or a text is read, help them to interpret things by offering some background information—including maps, notes about cultural context, authorship
 - ⇒ In the presentation of a text, read from various translations, offer a brief study or unpacking of a key word,
 - ⇒ Convey a Treasuring of the Bible—by employing a special version secured for readings—handling it in such a way that it conveys value and importance and priority to God’s words.
- For the emotion-centered approach
 - ⇒ helping them get into God’s Word by way of drama or reader’s theatre or song or a movie
- For the symbol-centered approach
 - ⇒ Employ Wonder (raising question throughout the reading of a text)... (‘I wonder what it must have felt like to have been in the boat with Jesus’).
 - ⇒ Embrace Taizé-type chant – allowing simple phrases of scripture to soak in a permeate soul... ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom’.
 - ⇒ Allowing time and space for silent reflection... NOT rushing the reading of God’s Word.
- And, finally, for the action-centered
 - ⇒ There’s the value and importance of diversity and inclusion in the reading and presentation of the Scriptures. Across time in a parish, is there a representation of the full spectrum of abilities, ethnic groups and races, genders, languages, and ages that constitute a parish and community?
 - ⇒ Empower listeners
 - ⇒ Note, too, the calls to justice embedded in folks being able to read and hear the word...
 - ✓ Do all have physical access to the chancel area to read?
 - ✓ Can all hear?
 - ✓ Can all those of age read?
 - For those of an action-centered spirituality, these questions are as crucial as any of those surrounding the meaning of a text.

(continued from page 14)

[At this point, the lecture turns towards an engagement of Fr. Chester Michael and Marie Norrisey's Prayer and Temperament and the ways that four distinct and ancient prayer forms which inform Ware's discussion—providing safeguards which provide balance and keep each type from going to the extremes. It's a bit more than is needed, though, for the purposes of this discussion—allowing us to jump to the conclusion.]

Wrapping UP...

You might remember Ware's sharing, fairly early on in Discover Your Spiritual Type, that

"Health is found in the "sensibility" of both being aware of the whole and discovering uniqueness and difference." (Ware, p. 9)

Yes, we arrive at health and wholeness when we...

- Affirm and embrace who and how we are. (That's individuation.)
- But, being about this individuation in balance with an awareness and appreciation and openness to others and their ways. (There's integration.)

It speaks, does it not, of a unity and essential symbiosis between all of the types—inviting us to stretch formational approaches beyond the boundaries previously established?

And so, as we wrap up, I'd like to revisit an image and thought from earlier. And, further, I would like to bring some revision to it—revision emanating from our discussion here.

As suggested earlier, I'll admit to the ways I have seen the informational and the formational in opposition to each other—seating the first as a Type I activity and the other mostly as Type III, contemplative activity.

Perhaps, in some higher-level survey, we might willing to settle for a positing of the information up here (in Quadrant I) and formational down here (in Quadrant II). It's certainly something I was inclined to do before now. But, as can happen when you take some time to get off the bus and walk around and get a fuller sense of the lay of the land, it's not that easy and simple.

Based on our discussion here, then, I come to see that all the types (and their approaches to the scriptures and other disciplines) can and do belong to the formational—provided they comingle and cooperate with one another.

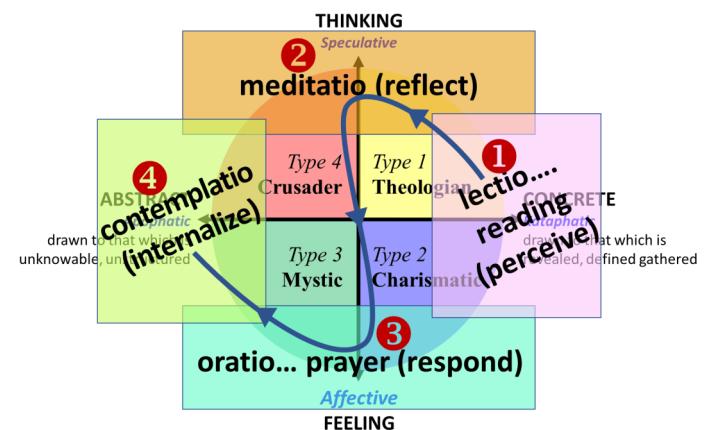
Yes, more mystical approaches of Type III's can be quite formative—working in tension and partnership with the Head approach of Type 1. But, so, too, the more moderate approaches of the Heart (Type II's) and the Activist (Type IV's)—each of which can be equally formative as they dialogue and interact with the Mind of Type I. It'd be hard, for example, if not impossible, to say which would have greater value or impact in a soul's formation and transformation: taking Matthew 25:31-46, for example (with its focus on "to the

extent that you did it to the least of these"),... and engaging it via lectio divina (Type II), or via a movie like Schlinder's List (for Type II's), or via participation in a Habitat for Humanity build (for Type IV's). In fact, in spite of a bias toward the informational which still exists and prevails in many circles, it becomes clear how all these types are formational—constituting holistic Christian formation and an integration of mind, heart, soul and strength.

If there is real opposition between the Informational approach of Type I and the other formational approaches, it is only as that Head Type migrates to its extreme—here, remembering that each type has an extreme to which it can go. So long, for example, as Type I's head-information approach remains connected to—remains in dialogue with—other forms of prayer and forms of scripture engagement, the informational bent of Type I can be quite formational and transformational. It is only when it disconnects and isolates itself from the others—going to the extremes of "rationalism" or a "head trip" (cf., Holmes and Ware), contending it's the only way,... It is only then that the informational has hit a dangerous, if not adversarial, place in the process.

Yes, all types belong in spiritual formation... and a formational approach to the scriptures.

It's one implication of Ware's sharing, as she does—about the ways each of the four movements in lectio divina gravitates to a different axis on the Spirituality Wheel:



- Lectio (1): the reading starts over here with a sense of things being revealed as we live—imagining ourselves in the scene
- Meditatio (2): comes next, so that we're reflecting and ruminating on the scene
- Oratio or prayer (3) has us responding in a heartfelt way
- And then, finally, we make our way to contemplatio (4)—being still and quiet in the apophatic mystery of God, internalizing our experience

It is a way of saying, is it not, that lectio dances all around the round floor of spiritual types—bridging, integrating head and heart and image and mystery?

(continued on page 17) →

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This may be, in part, behind Merton's assertion that the task of acquiring information is the 'front porch' of spiritual reading.

Dear Friends, the longer I study and experience the Christian journey of spiritual formation, the more I see and value and affirm the importance of moderate elements being reconciled in a dynamic, oscillating dance. Ware's integration resonates here with our Christian understanding of reconciliation, does it not?

Further, the longer I study and live, the more I see the dangers and pitfalls of any one partner taking over—contending that it alone prevails in some kind of solo performance.

In concert with each other, head, heart, mystic, and activist contribute to and conspire in spiritual formation together.

Take some time this week, then, to dance—maybe a slow dance—with Ignatius and Francis and Augustine and Aquinas [and the different formational approaches to the Scriptures they represent]. See and, hopefully, experience the ways that they bring balance to Sage, Lover, Mystic and Prophet—fostering a greater and fuller love of God—mind, heart, soul, and strength.



An Invitation to Engage the Fuller Ruminations Archive

As suggested in the blog post, ["I Heard It Through the Bovine,"](#)

Ruminations is a seasonal/quarterly offering of Zoe-Life Exploration—aimed at facilitating reflections and conversations about spiritual formation. It is especially designed to serve as a guide for individual and group retreats/devotions. Past [freely downloadable] issues include...

[Issue 1, Advent's Call to "Creative Waiting"](#)
(December 2018)

[Issue 2, Lent's Invitation to "Desert Spirituality"](#)
(February 2019)

[Issue 3, Pentecost:
A Celebration of Divine-Human Synergy](#)
(May 2019)

[Issue 4, The Art of Living Intentionally:
Crafting a Rule for \[Faithful\] Living](#)
(August 2019)

[Issue 5, Thanksgiving:
The Power & Promise of Gratitude](#)
(November 2019)

[Issue 6, Reel Theology: Focused Conversations
at the Intersection of Hollywood and Divine](#)
(Epiphany 2020)

[Issue 7, Whole-Life, Life-Long Stewardship](#)
(April 2020)

[Issue 8, Community & Spiritual Companionship
as "Means of Grace"](#)
(Pentecost 2020)

[Issue 9, The Gifts of All Saints' Day](#)
(Fall 2020)

[Issue 10, Rescuing Christmas
from "the Obscurity of the Familiar"](#)
(Christmas 2020)



[Issue 11, A Lenten Review of the Stages of Faith
\(including the "Dark Night of the Soul"\)](#)
(Lent 2021)

[Issue 12, Spiritual Formation
and the Journey to "True Self"](#)
(Easter 2021)

[Issue 13, "The Parable of the Prodigals":
A Lens for Exploring Facets of Spiritual Formation](#)
(Fall 2021)

[Issue 14, Soul Matters for Christian Leaders](#)
(Spring 2022)

[Issue 15, The Landscape of Spiritual Formation](#)
(Fall, 2022)

[Issue 16, The Destination
of Our Spiritual Formation Journeys](#)
(Spring 2023)

[Issue 17, "The Things We Ought to Pack":
Giving Overview to Spiritual Disciplines and Practices](#)
(Summer 2023)

For Further Reflection and Practice...

• Engaging the Contrast: Informational vs Formational Approaches to the Scriptures

- ⇒ [Ruminations](#), Issue 13 (Fall 2021) focused on various facets of spiritual formation as reflected in the “Parable of the Prodigals”—including the difference between an informational and formational approach to that text. Download and engage that issue by [clicking here](#).
- ⇒ Perhaps the best (so far as ease and user-friendliness) introduction and overview of each approach is Robert Mulholland’s [Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation](#) (Upper Room Books: 2001)

• Digging Deeper: More Handles for Informational Bible Study

- ⇒ Engage a deeper survey of the Scriptures via this “The Bible in One Hour” presentation, from the online course, “Teaching Biblical Faith for Spiritual Formation” (one of four courses in a larger Certification in Spiritual Formation program directed by Jim Reiter for the Richard and Julia Wilke Institute for Discipleship).
 - ◆ Click here to watch the video: [IFDC210, Week 2 Video, The Bible in One Hour \(youtube.com\)](#)
 - ◆ Click here: to download and engage an accompanying student handout for this video: [StS, Bible in One Hour, Student Handout](#) [Another handout—with a synopsis of the Biblical metanarrative and its key chapters (from Brian McLaren)—is alluded to in this video: [StS, Supplemental Reader \(from McLaren\)](#)]
- ⇒ Remarkable for their creativity and scholarship are [videos \(and downloads\) from the Bible Project](#)—giving overview to the Scriptures, books of the Bible, and key Biblical themes.
- ⇒ Comprehensive in the ways it explores informational approaches to the Scriptures is [Rick Warren Bible Study Methods](#) (Zondervan: 2006)

• Digging Deeper: Formational Approaches to the Scriptures

- ⇒ [Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation](#) is a Journal published by Richmont Graduate University in the early 2000's. While it ceased publication in the early 2010's, back issues are now being released on the [Conversatio.org](#) site—including this [issue \(3.1, released in Spring 2005\), focused on “Scripture and Formation.”](#) (While you are on the Conversatio site, take some time to explore the wide variety of spiritual formation courses and resources!)
- ⇒ [“Praying the Scriptures”](#) (a pamphlet produced by the Upper Room and distributed by Discipleship Ministries of the UMC), explores a variety of formational approaches to the Scriptures.
- ⇒ Explore “Spiritual Types” through the lens of David Cisneros (via his work at “Roots on the Web”): [David Cisneros: Spiritual Styles \(rootsontheweb.com\)](#) Note his articles focusing on styles and the “Word.” (While a lot of these sections are not accessible without a subscription, Roots does offer a one-month, no obligation, free trial—without asking for any credit card information!)
- ⇒ As suggested in the discussion on page 16, many have attempted to reconcile Ware’s “spiritual types” with the prayer forms defined by Fr. Chester Michael and Marie Norrisey in their book, [Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types](#). (One reasonably priced discussion [from the Upper Room] is the downloadable pdf by Helen R. Neinast, entitled [“MethodX Spiritual Types Discussion Guide.”](#) While one should be cautious about melding Spiritual Types with Jungian temperaments, there are still ways the two can be said to overlap—creating some interesting possibilities for formational approaches to the Scriptures.

For individuals and groups engaging these resources (as well as articles in this issue)—related to formation/ spiritual engagement of the Scriptures, *actively practicing exercises and activities prescribed in these resources will be crucial*. Otherwise, we perpetuate the dominance and the tyranny of an informational approach to matters —knowing about something but not experiencing it. (cf., the recent Zoe-Life blog post, [“KNOWING ABOUT GOD” VS “KNOWING GOD”](#)) To read about “Lectio Divina” and to learn its movements, for example, is not the same as digging and trying it!

Here, a few additional comments might be in order:

- 1) Don’t be surprised when some practices or activities just do not work for you. As we emphasize in all our spiritual formation work, “one size does not fit all!”
- 2) As needed, seek out a companion, small group, or spiritual director who can assist as you engage various practices.

The mission of Zoe-Life Explorations is to facilitate experiences and conversations which promote the spiritual formation of individuals and Faith communities.