



The Word and Witness Program: God's Word for Me and for Others

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In 1977 the Word and Witness program was introduced into the congregations of the Lutheran Church in America. This program consists of two components—an intensive study of the Bible and a training program for Christian witnessing. In the spring of 1977 I was invited to be an instructor in the introductory phase of the program and attended a training event to prepare for my role. In the summer of that year I served as witness instructor for one of the first training sessions for congregational leaders. During 1978 and 1979 I also led a Word and Witness group in my own congregation. My review of the Word and Witness program is based on these experiences.

I would like to begin my evaluation of the program by relating three parish events which seem to me to illustrate two important issues that the Word and Witness program addresses.

TWO MAJOR ISSUES

One Sunday morning an adult Sunday Church School forum was discussing the topic of social justice with a scholarly minister. In the course of discussion, a member of the group referred to Matthew 25:31-46 (“inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these...”) to support his contention that caring for others was inseparable from loving Christ. The minister interrupted to explain that biblical scholars had determined that in this passage Jesus was not talking to the church about its ministry to others; rather, Jesus was talking about the treatment of persons within the early church. “The least of these my brethren” referred to the poor and needy of the church, not to the poor and needy of society. Therefore, this passage really said nothing about social ministry. Some of the members of the class appeared puzzled; some nodded their acceptance of this word. The discussion continued, but no one referred to the Bible again.

That evening in a small group Bible study on Isaiah, the participants were struggling with the implications of the various interpretations of a certain passage. As the discussion proceeded, one member asserted that the group should simply pray and ask the Holy Spirit to show it which interpretation God had in-

tended as the correct one. The group did not pray, but they did spend the next half-hour debating whether or not the Bible worked that way.

Later that week at a meeting of the evangelism committee, the members were discussing their own feelings about witnessing to their faith in Christ. The members wished that they were able to witness more often and more effectively, but they had two concerns. First, they did not know how to articulate their faith in what seemed to them an honest and meaningful way. Their

faith relationship with God was important to them, but they did not know how to put it into words. Second, they were afraid of manipulating the other person and ignoring that person's own unique humanity in the process.

If my experience as a parish pastor is at all typical, it seems to me that these three vignettes are illustrative of two issues that arise repeatedly in our ministry. The first has to do with the Bible. While most of the people in our congregations know that the Bible is important, even central, to their Christian faith, they seem to be uncertain as to how to approach it. Is the Bible ancient literature or divine oracle? Is it folk wisdom or eternal truth? Is it historical fact or legend? Is it clear and straightforward, or is it the coded riddle? And what, oh what, does it have to do with me?

The crux of the problem is that the Bible has been extracted from the context of present-day life. The people are here and the Bible is over there somewhere. The scriptures have become objectified and thus disconnected from the vital center of their living.

Those who are familiar with the historical-critical method, like some members of the adult Sunday Church School forum, may feel that the scriptures are rooted back there somewhere in the ancient past and hopelessly removed from persons who do not have the time, skill, or inclination to dig back and reconstruct the original meaning. The feeling may be that the Bible remains the province of the professional expert who can help us appreciate what it meant to people of the ancient Middle East, but can say little about what it means today "for me." To be sure, there may be some broad social application such as "do justice," or "love your neighbor," but what can a scripture rooted in the past say to those secret hopes and fears that lie only half expressed in the heart and soul of *me*? What can the Bible say to *me* about existence, being, and identity, about suffering, longing, disappointment, and uncertainty?

On the other hand, persons, like the member of the Isaiah Bible study, may assert resolutely that the Bible says nothing at all if it does not speak directly to me in my day-to-day life. But the problem then becomes, how do I know that what the Bible is saying to me is something more than my own conjecture? If the Bible is not rooted somewhere beyond me, how can it address me? If the Bible is a sort of free-floating source of divine oracle, how do I know which of its answers is for my situation?

In either case, whether the Bible is seen only from a historical-critical point of view or only as an ahistorical divine message to me, the result is an impoverished view of scripture. Either approach ("this passage has one meaning and it is to be discovered in the past," or "this passage has one meaning and it is determined by my present situation") tends to flatten the Bible, extract it from the fabric of human life, and make it one-dimensional and monological, rather than to understand the Bible as a rich and complex Word from the Lord that invites, chal-

lenges and draws me into an enriching and profound dialogical encounter with life, self, and God. An impoverished view of the scriptures tends to reinforce and nurture a narrow impoverished view of life. Either of these approaches to the Bible treats the text as an object and then seeks to interrogate it, master it, and extract the correct answer from it, rather than treating the Bible as itself a subject that challenges, enlightens, and puts me to question as it engages me in a reciprocal process of reflection and encounter.

The second issue illustrated by these vignettes has to do with witnessing. While most of

the persons in our congregations know that sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ is important, even central, to their Christian calling, they seem to be uncertain as to how to approach it. As a result they often don't approach it and feel defensive about not doing so. Some people have a pretty clear idea of what they don't want to do. They don't want to come off like another fundamentalistic sectarian group pushing its own brand of ideology. Many of us know from experience how it is to be on the receiving end of such a witness. It is most often manipulative, calculated, and depersonalizing. The members of the evangelism committee described above were searching for something better. They were looking for some approach to witnessing that would allow them to honor the personhood of the other individual, allow that person space and opinions, and that would also allow the witnesser to be honest without being pushy. In other words, they were looking for an approach to witnessing that did not extract the other person from life's contexts and treat him or her as a one-dimensional character. They wanted a model for witnessing that was truly dialogical. If we by our witness are inviting another person to share in an aspect of our life (faith relationship with God through Christ) that we find especially personal and meaningful, it seems that such an invitation should not be issued in an impersonal or stereotypical way.

The committee's other fear was not knowing what to say. Their faith relationship with Christ was central and meaningful to them, but how could they put it into words that were effective and not just cliché? They were looking for a way to tell the good news that expressed both their care and respect for the other person and the Gospel's depth of meaning for themselves. How could they bridge the isolating and individuating distance that separates persons if they could not bring their faith into a language that was both relevant to the other person and true to God's Word?

In my opinion, Word and Witness' particular contribution to congregational life and ministry is in the way it joins these two concerns of approach to the Bible and approach to witnessing.

THE PROGRAM'S APPROACH

In its approach to the Bible, the Word and Witness program is unapologetically and unarrogantly critical. From the introduction on, it acknowledges that the Bible is not easy to understand. The Bible comes to us through peoples, cultures, and languages thousands of years old and with world-views very different from our own. Word and Witness maintains that it is important to understand as much as we can about these situations into which this Word of God was initially spoken because what is at stake here is nothing less than the Word of God for us in our

own time and place. For Word and Witness the critical study of the Bible is never just the uncovering of what God once said long ago and far away; it is also an encounter with God's Word that challenges and questions us seriously on the most essential level of our existence.

That Word, couched in human speech from people of the distant past, speaks to us today as we struggle with the meaning of this passage or that. To be so addressed by God's Word is to be met by God himself. Like Jacob wrestling with God at the

Jabbok River, we too are challenged to wrestle with him—about love and hate, faith and sin, life and death. It might well happen to us, as it did to Jacob, that life will be different when the wrestling is done. Certainly it is not possible to remain indifferent once God has met us in his Word (*Understanding the Bible*, vol. I, pg. vii).

Word and Witness holds two factors in tension—that Bible study is always study of an ancient history, and that Bible study is also encounter with the ever-present Word of God.

But encounter with the ever-present God in his Word is not just a matter of uncovering the text's meaning in those ancient situations into which it was initially spoken. Such encounter also involves uncovering the life situation in which I now live and the serious questions of meaning with which I now contend. Accordingly, an important part of the Word and Witness program are the frequent occasions in which the participants reflect on their own life experiences and questions of purpose and meaning. These moments of reflection and examination become the points at which the ancient word becomes current and is reintegrated into the vital center of the participant's own life. These occasions are provided by the small group setting and by the interpersonal experiences of the witness component. It is this combination of historical-critical method and personal reflection and introspection that give Word and Witness' approach to the Bible its strength.

In its approach to witnessing, Word and Witness focuses on initiating and nurturing an interpersonal relationship of trust that is facilitated by responsive listening and mutual disclosure. Respect for the other person's integrity and life situation are fundamental to Word and Witness' approach to sharing the Gospel. Only after we have discovered and affirmed the common bond of our humanity, only after we have listened to the person's self-disclosure, only after we have risked ourselves in encounter with them are we ready to speak to them in an appropriate way of our experience with Christ. If we are not willing to do this affirming, listening, and risking, then Word and Witness questions our real motivation for witnessing. The witness component also helps the participants to articulate their faith relationship with God in story format by identifying and sharing experiences from their own life journey.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Having identified what seem to me to be the special strengths of Word and Witness, I would now like to give a brief overview of the program.

A congregation's participation in Word and Witness begins with its leaders' decision to become involved in the program. This decision is important not only

because of the money involved (\$750 fee in 1981), but also because of the time that the pastor and the member participants must commit to the program. The pastor will spend nine days at a summer workshop and three in the winter preparing to teach the course. This time is important because much of Word and Witness cannot be grasped just from reading the materials. In some ways the instructor is as important as the curriculum, so preparation is crucial. During this training session the leader will try out many aspects of the course, will become familiar with the content, will learn and practice teaching techniques, and will experience something of what it

means to study the scriptures in a small group community where trust, disclosure, reflection, and introspection are valued. The pastor will also experience some of the anxiety of sharing personal witness with another Christian unknown previously. Since these skills and experiences are not necessarily part of a pastor's seminary training, this preparation is valuable for the pastor even beyond its application to Word and Witness.

For the \$750 fee, a congregation also receives three texts for each congregational participant: *Understanding the Bible*, I and II, by Foster R. McCurley Jr. and John Reumann of The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia; and *Telling the Good News* by Austin Shell of The Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, S.C., and John Stevens Kerr of the LCA's Division for Parish Services, plus a leader's guide with complete lesson plans for adaptation to the congregation's situation, a set of audio-visuals, several copies of *The Oxford Concise Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible*, and *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, edited by Alan Richardson, plus a shelf of other reference and supplementary books.

The congregational participants should expect regularly to spend about three hours a week in class, in addition to outside preparation. A variety of schedules is possible, but at the least the course should take a year to complete. The course is demanding and a congregation may well find itself needing to release persons from other parish responsibilities in order to allow them the time to participate in Word and Witness. The benefits can be significant. The pastor gets to spend more time studying and teaching the Bible and working intensely with a small group of parishioners. The participants get to focus time and energy on the scriptures and Christian witness and to work closely with their pastor. All the participants have a special opportunity to be a part of a more intimate Christian fellowship where they are stimulated and nurtured. And the congregation has the opportunity to affirm the importance of Bible study and witnessing in its ministry as well as to receive the benefits of having within its membership persons who are both excited about and knowledgeable about the Bible and their Christian faith.

THE BIBLE STUDY COMPONENT

The Bible study component of Word and Witness, *Understanding the Bible*, traces the theme "Kingdom of God" through the Old and New Testaments. The initial two lessons introduce the theme by looking at the way in which the three synoptic gospels introduce Jesus' ministry. This brief comparison of Mark's, Matthew's, and Luke's presentations of Jesus and his work allows the course at the very start to show how the proclamation of the Gospel is adapted to the situa-

tion being addressed. The synoptics proclaim the same Lord but present him in different ways because they are addressing different audiences and different life situations. In this opening section *Understanding the Bible* makes three important points that are stressed throughout the book—(1) the Gospel always begins with God's initiative, (2) God's Word is always personal, for you, and addressed to concrete situations, (3) the Bible is multi-dimensional and complex, not simplistic.

The next four lessons focus on the nature of the Bible and form an essential unit in the entire study. Before the Bible is studied, *Understanding the Bible* wants to be as clear as possible

about what the Bible is. Here again, *Understanding the Bible* asserts that an honest approach to the Bible (1) must seek to learn everything possible about the meaning of each passage in its original context, (2) must appropriate the living scripture as the Word of God accompanied by the Holy Spirit from ancient times into our current life context, (3) and must be evangelical, centered in the good news of God's grace to us in Christ Jesus.

This unit then goes on to expose the participant to some of the tension and complexity of the book being studied by showing the different languages and cultures out of which the Bible arose, the various versions in which the Bible can be found, the different ways the Bible has been interpreted over the years, the variety of literary types contained in it, the process by which passages and books developed, and how the canon came to be. This unit also first raises the subject of "myth" as a type of literature contained in the scriptures and allows for a focused and honest discussion of what is to be understood and not understood by the term.

The session on "Bible as Word of God" begins with the central understanding that Jesus is God's Word, and then moves on to a discussion of the sense in which the Bible is also Word of God. A section on "inspiration" puts the emphasis on God's inspiration of persons who then bear witness to God's Word in their own time and place. Another section discusses the place of a community of faith in the whole process of proclaiming, bearing, and interpreting God's Word to his world.

Repeatedly the emphasis is made that God's Word is a historical word that calls for a serious historical analysis; God's Word is an inspired word addressing one's own life and coming to one in the words of human persons.

The Bible is the Word of God, and the Word of God is always addressed to concrete situations. That being true, it is helpful to ask two questions of every biblical text. First, "*What is God doing or saying in this passage?*" The answer to that question must obviously have God as the subject of an active verb. Second, "*What is the situation in the life of the people in which God is acting or speaking?*" (*Understanding the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 56).

Proclaiming the Word of God today is not essentially different from the witnessing of biblical times. This means two things for us. First, God's Word comes to people in the words of other people. Second, proclaiming the Word of God assumes "inspiration," the presence and the work of the Spirit (*Understanding the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 57).

The final two chapters in this key unit give a quick overview of Old Testament and New Testament history.

Part three picks up the theme of "Kingdom of God" and shows how it developed through Israel's historical experience. Showing how the concept of "Kingdom of God" grew out of the concept of God's victory over the forces of life and history, the unit also provides a chance to study the religions of Israel's neighbors, the Exodus and Sinai covenant, Deuteronomy and Davidic Israel, the Exile and the prophets. The unit concludes with a chapter on the New Testament and the way in which Christ's resurrection fulfills the theme of God's victory.

The next unit looks at the ways in which God is proclaimed as King through Israel's worship and creation theology. This unit features a study of the psalms, a critical study of the Genesis creation accounts, and a look at creation themes in the major prophets. The link between creation and redemption is made in the last chapter which again turns to the New Testament to show the connection between Christ, creation, and Kingdom of God.

Volume II begins with a unit on "God's Future Reign" which introduces the concept of "Day of Yahweh" and also apocalypse. The idea of messiah is traced through the royal psalms and the prophets on into the New Testament.

Part four is a long section which deals with the theme "Kingdom of God" as it appears in the Gospel of the early Church. This unit includes studies of Paul, the New Testament epistles, New Testament apocalypse, Johannine writings, and New Testament ecclesiology. The unit concludes by returning to the three synoptics and the way in which they, as later New Testament writings, develop the kingdom motif.

The final unit is one chapter which shows how the Kingdom of God theme has been used throughout church history. It takes this occasion to address the issues of ethics and community, the social gospel, and Luther's concept of the two kingdoms.

Almost everywhere *Understanding the Bible* gets rave reviews. For the most part its presentation of the material is lucid and provocative. Occasionally the thematic approach is a bit confusing as the participant is moved back and forth between historic periods. The weaving in of New Testament chapters helps participants maintain a sense of the Bible's Christocentric unity without forcing Jesus onto the Old Testament material in an unnatural way. Some persons may claim that *Understanding the Bible's* presentation of the Old Testament is more forceful than its presentation of the New Testament. This difference may simply reflect the difference between the two testaments. Also, since the Old Testament material is presented first and five of the thirteen New Testament chapters are interspersed throughout the Old Testament material, one can get the impression that the Old Testament dominates the study. The discussion of creation in chapters seven and fourteen, and of the apocalypse in chapters seventeen, eighteen, and twenty-five are especially timely. In each case, *Understanding the Bible* provides for an honest airing of these troublesome issues and attempts to counter some of the more popular abuses of them.

From beginning to end, *Understanding the Bible's* approach to the scriptures seeks to balance a critical handling of the Bible's historical character with a reverent honoring of its inspired and transcending nature. In this way *Understanding the Bible* is Christocentric in its very method because it refuses to approach the Bible in anything less than an incarnational way.

THE HERMENEUTICAL ARCH

The Bible study component in Word and Witness stresses a critical analysis of the text's original meaning while it also creates space for discovering the text's message for our current situation. The witness component becomes the enabler of that contemporary discovery. In fact, it is Word and Witness' joining of a seriously critical study of the Bible with a seriously reflective examination of personal experience that gives the program its unique character. While the witness component is flawed in some ways, its gift is that it encourages personal reflection on the serious issues of existence. This shared reflection creates the space for the subjective reintegration of the text into the participant's life situation. The witness component encourages

this process in three ways. First it forces the participants to reflect on serious existential issues and their own life experiences as a part of formulating their “God Story.” Secondly, it facilitates the creation of an open and supportive atmosphere in the group by guiding the participants through some trust-building exercises and by encouraging mutual self-disclosure. Thirdly, it creates a mood and style of group life that values such reflection and expression. The witness component’s presence alongside of the Bible study provides the opportunity for the text to come back down to earth in the present life context of the participant and thus to complete the hermeneutical arch in which the biblical text that was once subject in a past situation, having been studied as object, becomes subject once again for us in the present.

One evening as our Word and Witness group prepared for a session on I Corinthians 13, a member of the group who was going through a painful separation and divorce stated that if she was going to participate in this study, it would have to be with the understanding that none of us really knows how to love in the way Paul describes and in fact we are all only beginners in learning how to love ourselves and one another. For the rest of the evening insights about Paul, the early church, God’s love and Christian community were intertwined with personal reflections about our own jealousy, resentment, hurts, broken relationships, needs for affection, and longings for intimacy. There was no doubt in our minds that night that we had been encountered and engaged by God’s living Word at the very heart of our daily life.

THE WITNESS COMPONENT

The witness component, *Telling the Good News* is too wordy and unnecessarily complicated. The program misses a golden opportunity to use audio-visuals creatively in helping the participants to sharpen their listening skills and to prepare for witness visits. The audio-visuals, probably because of the expense involved in AV production, are sub-standard. It is hard for *Telling the Good News* to maintain the participant’s interest beyond the closing chapters of the first volume, and the leader will probably need to supplement these units with other experiences. However, the over-all approach and direction of the component is certainly a step in the right direction. As an attempt at developing an approach to interpersonal witnessing consistent with Lutheran theology and style, *Telling the Good News* deserves our applause.

Part one introduces the concept of witnessing interpersonally. *Telling the*

Good News’ approach to witnessing is interpersonal in three respects: (1) the witness takes place within the context of a mutual relationship of trust, (2) the witness is tailored to the life situation of the other person and thus is not a prepackaged message, (3) the witness is framed in the context of the witnesser’s own life experience and not in the context of church teachings.

The witness encounter is structured into four so-called acts. First the witnesser meets and gets to know the other person. Then the relationship deepens as the witnesser listens responsively to the other person and discloses more of the self to the other. At the right time, the witnesser offers the other person an invitation to which he or she is able to respond. The invitation may be to something as ultimate as accepting God’s salvation in Christ Jesus, or it may be to something as provisional as getting together again. The final act involves parting in such a way that the encounter is drawn to a close but remains open to further contact.

The content of witnessing is described in terms of three stories: the other person’s life

story, parts of which are discovered during the interaction; the witnesser's own life story, appropriate parts of which are shared with the other person; and the story of God's love for his people, including the other person.

The next section of *Telling the Good News* helps the participant reflect on his or her life story and identify some times when the story of God's love became a part of the participant's life experience. This "My God Story," once identified and articulated, is then ready to be shared with others in appropriate ways when the time is right. The time allotted to developing the participant's life/God story seems a bit brief in *Telling the Good News* and should be expanded and developed in more detail.

The participant discovers and shapes his or her God story by reflecting often on his or her past and current life, by sharing with the group times of joy and sorrow, and by wrestling with serious questions of meaning. Such experiences create an attitude of openness and introspection that continue beyond the particular unit involved.

The participant prepares for witnessing by witnessing. First there is sharing of one's own story with the group. Then the participant visits other active members of the congregation in order to talk with them about their faith. Then the participant moves on to visiting less active members, and finally non-members. *Telling the Good News* provides various responsive listening exercises, role plays of witness encounters, profiles of some types of persons a witnesser may meet, and exercises to help the participant draw together his or her own kerygma. Other topics include exploring a negative response, witnessing to lapsed members, witnessing in daily life, witnessing to persons in different stages of personality development, witnessing across religious lines, and nurturing new members.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what Word and Witness has to offer to a congregation is an approach to the Bible that views the scriptures both as God's inspired and current word to *me* and as the historical record of an ancient people's witness to God's Word in its own day and an approach to witnessing that is sensitive to the other person's life situation and seeks to tailor the witness to that situation in the most personal of terms. Word and Witness does not gloss over the Bible's difficult

questions and tensions, but rather encourages the participant to take these seriously and, by wrestling with them, to broaden his or her own horizons and awareness of self, God, and his ways with us. Word and Witness facilitates the reintegration of the Bible into the participant's life context by encouraging serious thought about the meaning and purpose of his or her existence. In other words, Word and Witness takes the hermeneutical problem seriously by seeking to clarify and translate God's Word into the present across both the chasm of time and culture and across the distance separating individuals. Word and Witness seeks to bring God's Word into language for me and through me into language for others so that the Gospel also becomes a Word from the Lord for them.