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A Spirituality of Studying Scripture (Exegesis)

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In 1528, Martin Luther and his colleagues visited churches in Saxony.[1] He wasn't pleased: "Dear God, what misery I beheld!"[2] Most of all, he lamented the neglect on the part of leaders to teach Christian basics. In the preface to the *Large Catechism* Luther writes:

> Nothing is so powerfully effective against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy one's self with God's Word, to speak about it and meditate upon it, in the way that Psalm 1 calls those blessed who "meditate on God's law day and night." Without doubt, you will offer up no more powerful incense or savor against the devil than to occupy yourself with God's commandments and words and to speak, sing, or think about them.[3]

[1] This essay was first delivered, in a modified form, as a public lecture at my service of installation into the William A. and John E. Wagner Chair in Biblical Theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary on February 15, 2022, in Loehe Chapel.

[2] Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 347. Hereafter, cited as *BC*.

[3] Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *BC,* 381.

Many people rush through their readings of the Bible, looking for instantly available "nuggets" to consume, as though they were some sort of fast food. But a truly effective reading of the Bible is a spiritual discipline that requires time and patience, one based on dialogue, listening, and discernment.

For Luther, studying and teaching God's word were critical to ministry—as well as to the vocation of all believers. The catechisms were teaching aids to help it along. Those who neglected these things were "better suited to be swineherds and keepers of dogs than guardians of souls and pastors."[4]

The neglect Luther saw has strong parallels today. The late Eugene Peterson saw a growing tendency among church people to underestimate the value of Scripture study. The result is a spirituality he called "sappy," "soupy," and "self-indulgent." He writes: "Century after century exegetical techniques in the Christian community have been honed and our methodologies improved. It is an immense irony that a generation that has access to the best in biblical exegesis is . . . so largely indifferent to it."[5]

In congregations, leaders, and people, I sense an increased impatience with reading the Bible. It's not just among certain demographics or certain denominations. Instead of reading the Bible, we want videos, visuals, and online resources. We want ethical nuggets from Scripture rather than to wrestle with the ambiguity of a story. We want reading practices that promise quick results instead of planting seeds that yield fruit over the long haul. We have grown impatient with the texts God has chosen to speak to us. And in our boredom, we Google for quicker answers.

In Luther's words above, he points to Psalm 1, whose guiding metaphor is a tree. Those who dwell in the Lord's instruction "are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither" (v. 3). This metaphor captures a calling that remains today: to be grounded in Scripture, for the sake of a faith that bears fruit over the long haul.

Toward a Spirituality of Studying Scripture (Exegesis)

I wish here to draw attention to the profoundly spiritual nature of studying Scripture. That may seem like a funny topic, since most of us may already assume the practice is valuable. But "valuable" is not the same as "spiritual." And in church communities and Christian contexts especially, many of us never stop to ask, What is deeply "spiritual" about this work?

In some circles, the language "spiritual practice" is very broadly defined. I have seen puzzling, joke-telling, doodling, biking, eating ice cream, jazzercising, sleeping, sports betting, and binge-watching Netflix all identified as spiritual practices. And to be clear: I have no interest in questioning the sacredness of these activities for some people. Broadening the definition of "spiritual practice" is, by and large, a constructive thing. But it comes with an unintended consequence: in broadening the vision, we tend to overlook the ways *some* practices may be a bit *better* than others for deepening spirituality. All of life and its activities are sacred,

[4] *BC*, 379.

[5] Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 58.

certainly. But some practices are more globally, historically, and enduringly constructive at helping us engage with God.

Many people associate the language of "spiritual" with the intuition, subconscious, and emotions—not reason and thinking. Although spirituality involves our emotions, it also does not invite us to check our brains at the door. Transformative spirituality involves what Paul calls "the renewal of our minds" (Rom 12:2). And a critical source for this renewal is the study of Scripture, traditionally called "exegesis."

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The word *exegesis* is not widely known. Although there are synonyms, the word is worth keeping. It combines two Greek words that mean "lead" (*hēgeomai*) and "out" (*ex*). It refers to drawing out meaning from texts, like drawing significance out of music or artwork (or juice out of a tasty mango). Exegesis is simply an act of appreciating something's full significance. It does not require advanced degrees or extraordinary imagination. It needs just intentional attentiveness, along with a willingness to think about what we see.

I suggest three metaphors that show what exegesis is and highlight its spiritual nature: dialogue, listening, and discernment.[6] Exegesis is dialogue with God, listening for God, and discernment about the will of God. It's a practice that helps us hear God, talk with God, and know God's will.

For this discussion, I will use the Journey to Emmaus story (Luke 24:13–35) as a basis for and illustration of these metaphors. Although the story's model of Scripture study looks different than some conventional study practices today, the travelers' engagement with Scripture and Jesus show well what exegesis fundamentally is.

Studying Scripture (Exegesis) as Dialogue

The faithful study of Scripture is not passive reading as much as it is a dialogue—what Mitzi Smith calls a dialogical process of give and take.[7] It involves asking questions, pondering answers, and heeding voices that inform us.

[6] Similarly, Michael J. Gorman uses three words (or metaphors) for describing what exegesis is: investigation, conversation, and art. See his *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 9–11.

[7] "Interpretation is a dialogical (listening and questioning) process between readers and texts" that "involves negotiation (give and take) between the reader and texts in the process of meaning-making." Mitzi J. Smith and Yung Suk Kim, *Toward Decentering the New Testament: A Reintroduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 12.

The Journey to Emmaus story includes a lot of dialogue—among people, Jesus, and Scripture. The story is basically an extended conversation, prompted by experiences, questions, interpretive answers, and working conclusions. Although the two travelers talk more than ask questions, their dialogue deepens when it is provoked by questions (Luke 24:17–19, 26). These questions revolve around not just recent events, but how they were foretold in Scripture (vv. 25–27). What results is a Scripture study taking shape through dialogue.

Dialogue is the essence of exegesis, and it is fueled by questions, curiosity, and exploration. Although the text has not changed since we last heard it, our questions have—and that reframes the conversation. To ask questions means we lack definitive answers. To ask questions is to embrace curiosity and openness. As a result, we see and learn new things. Rachel Held Evans observes: "If you're curious, you will never leave the text without learning something new. If you're persistent, you just might leave inspired."[8]

In the Emmaus story, interestingly, most of the questions come from Jesus (Luke 24:17, 19, 26). And it is his questions that make the conversation more productive and discerning. When we study Scripture, the questions we raise are in some sense our own, but they come from the *process* of engaging the text and the God who meets us there. In that sense, our questions are not simply ours alone—they take shape in the context of an encounter. And the resulting dialogue changes us.

Studying Scripture (Exegesis) as Listening

The greatest obstacle to the faithful study of Scripture is not a lack of knowledge or faith. It is the basic idea "I already know what it says."

In the Emmaus story, the two travelers have a preconceived understanding of recent events and of Scripture. But their understanding is lacking. After hearing it, Jesus rebukes them: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" (v. 25). He calls into question their entire framework, calling them *anoētoi*, meaning "ignorant" or "unreflective." In effect, Jesus says, "You have no idea."

Jesus's rebuke invites the travelers to humility, which is the starting point for good listening—and faithful reading. To read texts closely is to listen carefully. And good listening requires a willingness to let go of our unhelpful preunderstandings. Many of us have heard some biblical texts countless times. And our familiarity tempts us to say, "I already know what this text says and means. I don't need to read it again." Richard Hays talks about this mistaken assumption as the "danger of overfamiliarity" with Scripture, which serves to "inoculate" readers

[8] Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), xxiv.

"against the mind-blowing message of grace that the New Testament offers."[9] Such a mindset would be like if the two travelers had interrupted the interpretive Scripture study of Jesus by saying, "Thank you, Jesus, but we already know all there is to know." Scripture is read faithfully, not by the all-knowing, but by those who admit *not* knowing. This approach of humility throws open the door to our encountering something—or Someone—anew.

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Among the metaphors I use for exegesis, listening is the one I find most instructive. Listening is countercultural in today's noisy society. Listening is also at the heart of contemplative spirituality. We all know good listeners and lousy listeners. We love good listeners. We put up with lousy listeners. Our call is to be good listeners of Scripture, and ultimately good listeners for the voice of God. In the Emmaus story, the travelers are slow to listen. At first, they seem more interested in talking. When Jesus asks, they are happy to share their knowledge of recent events with a naïve traveler. Only when Jesus invites them to listen do they learn. Only as they listen do their hearts—as they later name—"burn" within, implying a transformative encounter.

Listening is critical to hearing the word of God. At some level, listening is the core attitude of Christian spirituality.[10] Rowan Williams states: "Bible-reading is an essential part of the Christian life because *Christian life is a listening life*. Christians are people who expect to be spoken to by God."[11]

Exegesis, then, is a lot like prayer.[12] It is an act not only of dialogue, but even more of listening for God. Leaders of contemplative spiritual practices often emphasize that prayer is not about our words as much as it is about our silence and openness to God. As Thomas Merton writes: "Prayer is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart—it is the orientation of our whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration."[13] Like

[9] Douglas Estes, "Curiosity and Growth: An Interview with Richard B. Hays," *Didaktikos: Journal of Theological Education* 4, no. 3 (2020): 26.

[10] Henri J. M. Nouwen points out: "Listening is the core attitude of the person who is open to God's living and creative word." See *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), 88.

[11] Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 21, emphasis original.

[12] I am indebted to one of my teachers, C. Clifton Black, for the comparison of exegesis to prayer: "Exegesis as Prayer," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 23, no. 2 (2002): 131–45.

[13] Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 40.

prayer, exegesis is a spiritual practice of listening, just anchored in the concrete, sacramental texts of Scripture.

Studying Scripture (Exegesis) as Discernment

As a Bible professor, I field many questions about exegesis—most of them asking for more simplified steps to the process. But there is a challenge to offering a simple boilerplate for doing exegesis: more than an act of math or science, it is a practice of spiritual discernment. Although there are recommended steps and practices, spiritual discernment is complex, messy business, involving consideration of many angles, voices, and details. Doing it faithfully is not as simple as we may hope.

In the Emmaus story, the two travelers do not realize the significance of their experience until afterward. When Jesus disappears, they say, "Were not our hearts burning within us as he was talking to us on the journey, as he was opening to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:32). Their words string together several imperfect-tense verbs, indicating ongoing activity. It implies that their transformative experience took place not at a specific moment, but *throughout* their time with Jesus. Only after he disappears do they recognize it.

Like the travelers' experience, studying Scripture is not a straight path with standardized results. As a spiritual practice, the experience is neither predictable nor clear-cut. Rachel Held Evans points out: "Nor should we, as readers, expect every encounter with the text to leave us happily awestruck and enlightened. Inspiration, on both the giving and receiving end, takes practice and patience. It means showing up even when you don't feel like it, even when it seems as if no one else is there."[14]

As an act of spiritual discernment, the study of Scripture requires and engages our whole selves. In the Emmaus story, the two travelers acknowledge that their "hearts" were "burning within" them. While "hearts" is a fair translation (*kardia*), modern associations of "heart" language with emotions are misleading. For first-century Jewish people, the heart referred not just to the emotions but also to the understanding and intelligence, the source of thoughtful reflection, the will and seat of decision-making, the hub of learning and growth, and the focus of moral and religious character.[15] The connotations of "heart" language were many and various, which means the travelers did not suggest that their emotions *alone* were inspired, but their *entire selves*.

As an act of spiritual discernment, Scripture study engages the whole person. Johann Albrecht Bengel describes it as "apply[ing] your entire self to the text" and

[14] Evans, *Inspired*, xxiii.

[15] J. Behm, "*Kardia* in the New Testament," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 3:611–13. In Hebrew thinking, the different aspects of heart, soul, spirit, and mind were not so much distinct, separable parts of a person as they were references to the whole person from a particular point of view.

"the entire text to yourself."[16] Although Scripture study engages the mind more than some spiritual practices, this should be no surprise. Holistic Christian spirituality must engage our thinking, after all.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul calls believers to respond to God's saving work in Christ by presenting their "bodies" (*sōmata*)—that is, their whole selves—as their "reasonable" (*logikē*) act of worship. As a result, they may be "transformed by the renewing of [their] minds so that [they] may discern what the will of God is" (Rom 12:1–2). Paul's language puts strong emphasis on the cognitive aspects of spirituality. And he sees the renewal of our thinking as central to the work of discerning the will of God in the contexts in which believers live. For Paul, faithful discernment requires renewed thinking.

As a spiritual practice that contributes to the renewal of our thinking, Scripture study also informs and transforms our way of life and being. Martin Luther is an example. Amid years of spiritual exercises, practices, and acts of confession, it was the careful study of Scripture that especially changed his convictions, theology, and course of life. True exegesis engages our whole selves, in ways that change our minds and leave us transformed.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Linger

To summarize, the study of Scripture (exegesis) is a spiritual practice whose essence is dialogue, listening, and discernment. It is dialogue with God, listening for God, and discernment about the will of God. I want to conclude with an invitation that emphasizes one last aspect of exegesis: lingering.

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Many of us get impatient with the time Scripture study requires. It is hard work, after all! As Michael Gorman points out, it takes "enormous intellectual and even spiritual energy."[17] Eugene Peterson suggests such hard work "rarely feels spiritual."[18] Karl Barth offers most bluntly of all: "True exegesis involves . . . much sweat and many groans."[19] But there are few shortcuts to this spiritual practice. Faithful listening and discernment take time and energy.

[16] My translation (*Te totum applica ad textum, textum totum applica ad te*). Quoted in Peter C. Erb, "Introduction," *Pietists: Selected Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist, 1983), 18.

[17] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 11.

[18] Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 50.

[19] Karl Barth, "Preface to the Third Edition" (1922), in *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 17.

In the Emmaus story, when the travelers reach their destination, Jesus appears to be going further. But the two object: "Stay with us," they ask. The word for "stay" (*menō*) means remain, abide, linger. While the two travelers may have been hospitable, the likelier motivation is to extend their time with Jesus. Their transformative experience of his teaching and presence is worth relishing longer. Later that evening, their eyes are opened to his identity. This recognition does not happen at first encounter (on the road), but only after extensive time together. Yes, "the breaking of bread" is the moment of recognition (vv. 31, 35), but it transpires in the context of lingering together for nearly the whole day.

Scripture study thrives on this kind of "lingering." The Bible is not a database of information for quick downloading. Its faithful study takes time. Like the way we enjoy savory food, rich chocolate, beautiful poetry, or expensive wine. Wolfing it down will not do.[20] After all, the word of God is meant to be not just read or heard, but *experienced*. And formative experiences take time. The constructive critique I most often give to students engaged in the work of exegesis is, at the end of the day, pretty simple: "Dig deeper." That is, linger a little longer. Explore further. Listen and look another time. You have only begun to tap the riches of this text. As familiar as we are with Scripture, the call to linger remains.

In the community where I grew up, there was an avid reader of Scripture. At a ministry event where her volunteer work was recognized, the host pointed out that she had read the Bible over eighty times—once every year of her life since she was about ten. She commented in response: "Every time I read it, I never cease to see new things and to be inspired again."

Early rabbis and church fathers approached the Scriptures like a grand palace with many great halls, banquet rooms, chambers, passages, and doors.[21] Martin Luther spoke of the Scriptures as "a vast and mighty forest."[22] The call remains for us to wander a while in the forest. We will not emerge unchanged. And the longer we linger, the likelier we will find our own hearts burning within as we encounter the One who dwells there.

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[20] Eugene Peterson describes this way of reading Scripture as "ruminative and leisurely," meditative and savoring. See *Eat This Book*, 2–3.

[21] Observed by Burton L. Visotzky, *Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 18.

[22] Martin Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe* TR 1: no. 674. Quoted in *LW* 35:227. Similarly, he also called the Bible "the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies." "Prefaces to the Old Testament" (1545), in *LW* 35:236.