

READING THE BIBLE AS A SCRAPBOOK

*An Innovative Approach
to Teaching Scripture*

How can we make the Bible meaningful to our students? I believe one effective way is to help them view the Bible as a family album or scrapbook, chuck full of old snapshots, souvenirs, tickets, postcards, love letters, collected bits of wisdom, and the like.

This suggestion, at least at first, may appear to trivialize the authority of Scripture. A scrapbook, after all, may suggest a rather haphazard collection of memorabilia that is shaped by decidedly human interests, rather than by divine inspiration. But hear me out, as I share how a scrapbook understanding of Scripture has not only revolutionized my teaching and transformed the lives of many of my students, but has also given me renewed confidence in the inspiration of Scripture.

**1. The Scrapbook
Metaphor and the Intrinsic**

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Value of Scripture. The most significant challenge facing the church today is not the nature of biblical inspiration. It may be the alarming fact that few Christians engage in any sort of regular Bible study. For the Bible to have authority, it must be read.

Now consider with me the following scenario. Outside of family, friends, or pets, what would you most want to rescue from your house if it caught fire? My guess is that it would be your personal memorabilia. You

would doubtless try to save pictures of friends and family, love letters from the attic, your children's drawings and valentine cards, and a dried rose from a wedding bouquet. These items, which go into making up a scrapbook, are the ones we most miss when they are gone. Why do we place such great value

on things with such meager monetary value?

The answer lies in how we live our lives. Our lives

BY GLEN GREENWALT

are lived as stories. Ask anyone who he or she is and inevitably you will be told a story that draws on all the bits and pieces that might be collected into a scrapbook. Conversely, one can hardly imagine a life more empty and devoid of meaning than one without a story to tell. Our very identity as human beings is storylike, complete with characters, plots, points of view, narrative overlays, beginnings, middles, and ends.

Unfortunately, in my days at the seminary, biblical study and preaching were contrasted negatively with storytelling. It took the head elder of my first church to point out the shortcomings in my preaching. After about six months of listening to my academically sound sermons, he asked if I had ever noted that when Jesus preached, He told stories, recited proverbs, and drew illustrations from everyday situations. At first, I thought I could pacify this elder (while weaning my congregation off stories!) by telling stories one week and preaching sound biblical sermons the next. Instead, my sermons—and later my teaching—became dominated by storytelling.

I discovered in my bimonthly forage into the world of stories that the Bible is far less an account of ancient history or even a treatise on church doctrines, than it is a collection of stories, aphorisms, records, and the like—a scrapbook if you will—of what it means to live faithfully.

Suddenly, the characters of the Bible—with their hopes and aspirations, their disappointments and despairs—became virtually indistinguishable from the fishermen and loggers, the housewives and widows who sat in the metal chairs of my upstairs Odd-Fellows' meeting hall week after week. In the magical epiphany of story, we, in our

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small fishing and logging town along the wooded banks of the Columbia River, became a part of God's victorious story.

Reading the Bible as a scrapbook reminds us that our stories are molded and shaped by its stories. When congregations and students learn this, reading the Bible is no longer an external requirement imposed upon them; it becomes an intrinsic need that arises out of their very identity as Christians. Even as one's own personal identity is shaped and formed by belonging to a particular family, so one's identity as a

Christian is shaped and formed by belonging to the lineage of Christian faith. When my students come to understand this, they naturally desire to learn about their spiritual heritage.

2. To read the Bible as a scrapbook is to recognize the self-authenticating nature of any story. It is in telling a story, as in living a life, that its meaning and power become evident. Stories and lives become real and powerful (i.e., authoritative) when we lose ourselves—or better—find ourselves in them. In a good story, we cross the boundaries of time and space and become characters in the story. The arguments that a literary or movie critic constructs about the meaning of a story are always secondary to and contrived from the story's own capacity to

shape and evoke immediate response.

In our justifiable concern to safeguard the authority of Scripture, we who teach and preach from the Bible may well spend too much time haggling over the nature of its inspiration and seeking to prove its authority, and not near enough time allowing the Bible to take possession of our lives and the lives of our students and congregations. Strictly speaking, an authority is not something that resolves arguments and ends debates. It is rather what authorizes or empowers a way of life, in much the same way as an inheritance of collected pictures, stories, adages, and memories shapes and forms a family's identity and character. Disagreements about the meaning or the importance of various events within the life of a family may arise, but for those who are members of the family—in contrast to biographers, historians, or even friendly neighbors—such controversies must be resolved within the larger context of their identity as family members. To put it plainly, those whose lives and speech are fash-

ioned by a particular way of life cannot escape its authority even when they protest against it; for their lifelong habits of speech and action betray them even as they protest—as demonstrated by Peter’s denials of Jesus.

To read the Bible as a scrapbook is to reinforce the inescapable authority of being shaped and formed by a life that is defined by the boundaries of Scripture. In other words, Scripture is a community’s collective memory over time of what it means to live faithfully to the calling of God.

3. The scrapbook metaphor of Scripture acknowledges the diversity of Scripture without losing either its unity or authority. In a scrapbook, not everything has identical value or purpose, yet nothing is unimportant. The ticket from a freshman date may not possess the monetary value of an autograph from President Clinton, but it is no less significant to the owner of the scrapbook. To a 16-year-old in love, it may very well have even greater value! Nothing that makes it into a scrapbook is unimportant. Likewise with Scripture. We revere Scripture not by denying its diversity, but by cherishing it. Not all of Scripture is written by persons of the same moral worth or spiritual insight, but whatever has been included demonstrates what the people of God have found most important in explaining and making sense of their own journeys.¹

Viewing the Bible as a scrapbook reminds us that God’s leadership over time has taken many roles. Certainly, God has spoken directly to His people on occasion. At other times, He has given visions to His prophets or so moved upon their spirits that they could not remain silent. God has also written laws on stone with His own finger. But the greater portion of the Bible is filled with historical records, collected bits of wisdom, poems (some of which were first written in honor of pagan deities), epics, dramas, testimonials, and so on. Consequently, much of the Bible represents the memories and the aspirations and even the bitter laments and foibles of human beings.

From the viewpoint of one reading the Bible as a scrapbook, the Bible is

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authoritative not because it is inerrant, or even because everything in it came by way of direct revelation. Rather, it is authoritative because it represents in its entirety those events and teachings that constitute our identity as Christians. Of course, not all of the authors of the Bible possessed the same sharpness of insight or the same moral qualities. But it is via their stories, aphorisms, rules, histories, and witnesses that God’s people have been inspired to enter into a relationship with God.

This leads to my final point:

4. What matters ultimately in interpreting Scripture from the viewpoint of a scrapbook is the company that one keeps. There simply are no methodological shortcuts for determining the meaning of Scripture.² What matters in reading Scripture is not possessing the skills of a legal jurist or the learning of a biblical scholar, but seeking to live life in accordance with the best available understandings of God’s unfolding story. To read and interpret the Bible faithfully requires the analogical imagination of a novelist, or better yet, the empathic feelings of a family member. Skills in Christian faith are best acquired by imitation and habit. In the final analysis,

authority is built in the Christian community not by force of legislation or wealth of knowledge, but by conformity to the way of Jesus.³

Using the model of the scrapbook, I have come to read the Bible not as the first voice of *counsel* to the church, but as the first voice in the *council* of the church. This means that the Bible must be read, not in isolation, like Luther in his Wittenburg tower, but as the gathering place of God’s people when they come together to seek God’s ongoing leadership in their lives. Whenever the church is faced with disagreement or dissent, the challenge for the Christian is not to retreat into isolation, nor to marshal all like-minded persons into a united front against those who disagree, but to invite all people into a council established around God’s Word.

Anyone who has actually tried to open such a conversation around the Bible quickly discovers that there simply are no shortcuts. It requires persistent, and at times even heated, conversation. None of us reads the Bible exactly the same and indeed, the Bible writers often differed among themselves. Yet in the very midst of these differences, the Bible is not without a unity that can, if we allow it, transcend the immediate differences of our lives. This success comes not in an identity of readings, but in a unity of reading.⁴

Because human beings are never pawns of God’s will, and even the prophets and apostles saw through a glass darkly, God’s presence in history is never experienced as a completed event. It is a process of victories and defeats, successes and failures. History as we know it never occurs exactly as God wills. Yet, despite its failings, the community of faith is lured forward toward ever new and greater possibilities of redemption.

As a result, the authority of Scripture rests as much in the tension between its many stories, admonitions, and principles as in its content.

The discovery of God’s will is necessarily a dialectical process. Stories are clarified through admonitions and principles, and in turn, principles and admonitions are enriched and take on life

through examples and stories. During this process of achieved synthesis, both rational and experiential, we see the patterns and shapes of God's redemptive leading emerge. We see this through the stories of Creation and God's selection of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as in the stories of Israel's history of captivity and release. But most importantly, it is through the stories of Jesus—His life, teachings, and example—that the normative bounds of the Christian community are set.

This is no license for Christian arrogance. Although Christians must answer all questions from within the bounds of the world of Scripture, that world is not a closed one. It is open to all voices of hurt and anguish. At the heart of the Christian faith is what Peter Hodgson has called "a sober, almost defiant hope" that impels us beyond every present achievement, however good, into an ongoing "emancipator project that will never be finished in history."⁵ Christian faith is credible only if it embraces and offers liberation to all who are oppressed—whatever their language, color, gender, or race. Only in this way can our story, the story of the redeeming God, become the story of all peoples.

These discoveries have had a practical effect upon my teaching. The scrapbook model has made it more narrative in structure. Rather than seeing my role as an expert conveying information, I see myself as the leader in a shared discovery. To accomplish this goal, I now include assignments that ask students not only to analyze and discuss ideas, but to also locate themselves in the ongoing story of faith. So far I have found a number of strategies that seem to work in this regard.

Often I simply gather together a range of biblical writings that pertain to a single case study, and then ask students to find the context from which the different voices of Scripture arise, and the implications of these voices for their

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lives today. For example, the creation of the world is variously described as the result of God's speaking the world into existence (Genesis 1), shaping and forming creation like clay (Genesis 2), slaying a dragon (Psalm 74), and even teaching wild beasts to hunt (Job 38-41). I then ask students to ponder questions such as these: Does it make a difference if the biblical writer is writing history, poetry, parable, epistle, etc.? Do the biblical writers differ in their approach? If so, how and why? How do the biblical writers challenge us to think differently about Creation than we now do?

What questions might the biblical writers ask us about the world if they were alive today?

Another strategy that I have used, especially in studying the Book of Revelation and Jesus' parables, is to have my students consciously imagine the text as the script for a play or movie. I ask them to identify the main actors in the story, the challenges and dangers they face, and how the tension of the plot is resolved. As a result, the Bible suddenly comes alive for students. In Revelation, the great red dragon is no longer some paste-up caricature on the evangelistic arcade, but a real monster breathing threats down upon them. And in the parables, the Pharisees are not stereotypical bad guys, but—more often than not—themselves! Besides case studies and dramatic re-enactments of the text, I have also begun to encourage students to use the visual arts in responding to class readings. In my class on parables, I have many students who opt to do video re-enactments of the parables. I require that they capture the original challenge of Jesus' parables, even if it means turning them on their heads and viewing them from the perspective of many of the unseemly characters who come on stage in the stories. I have also had students do drawing exercises in order to sense how place affects our perceptions, both in terms of physical landscapes and social settings.

These suggestions certainly are not exhaustive. I am only beginning to learn how to create a dynamic, interactive conversation around the Bible. I am greatly encouraged, however, by my first stumbling steps. Just this quarter, an unsolicited comment by a non-Adventist student in a class on Adventist eschatology expresses everything I ever hoped to achieve.

I know that I should read the Bible every day but I don't always get the chance. By taking this class I have made the time to read the passages that are assigned. The questions and thoughts

that are brought to mind as I read the assigned reading make me want [to] know more. I had some doubt about this class when I first signed up for it, but I am glad now that I did take the class.

A week later, this same student wrote:

I feel that I have become a more spiritual person since taking this class. It has started me thinking about a lot of different issues. . . . I feel that God is helping me to find my direction in life. That is why I am here at Walla Walla College, to get a better understanding of God while I get a good education.

It cannot be said better than that.

This is what reading the Bible as scrapbook is all about. It is about becoming part of God's never-ending story. ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This understanding of Scripture contrasts with traditional models of biblical authority based on some combination of God's will and the human text. As defenders of verbal inspiration rightfully recognize, once any finite object, belief, or practice is given divine status, no challenge to its status is trivial. Every textual variance or cultural adaptation becomes a possible occasion not only for uncertainty and doubt, but also for error and heresy. As a consequence, human interpreters find themselves in the ironic position of having to safeguard God's revelation by not only explaining away every apparent contradiction within Scripture, but also by linking God's intention with such morally questionable behaviors as lying or seeking revenge against the children of one's enemies. In the end, an infinite series of safeguards must be established. First, the Bible must be protected by an authoritative and true teaching office, which itself must be safeguarded by administrative checks, which in the end almost inevitably appeal directly to God for their authority. As a consequence, not only is the self-evident authority of Scripture encumbered with human safeguards, it is *de facto* replaced by human institutional orders. We are usually quick to recognize this as occurring in communities other than our own, but

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seldom do we recognize this regrettable consequence as befalling our own religious institutions. This is one of the great tragedies of faith.

2. Alden Thompson's work on inspiration has been extremely helpful in this regard by

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suggesting that we read the Bible in terms of the one (the principle of love), the two (love for God and others), the 10 (the Ten Commandments), and the many (all the rules of Scripture). See Thompson's book *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1991). But even this methodology is reductive, since the relationship between the one, the two, the 10, and the many is never clearly spelled out, nor can it ever be. This is the limit imposed by seeking to regulate a dynamic revelation by a concrete methodology. One has only to look at the difference between how the issue of slavery is treated in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy to see this point. In Exodus, one finds illustrations of the one, the two, and the 10, but the many clearly allow for slavery. Law after law were given regulating slavery. In Deuteronomy, on the other hand, while slavery continued, the commands of God consistently stood in opposition to slavery. From their vantage point, looking back upon their bondage and exodus, the Israelites' freedom stood as a condemnation of all slavery. However, it was only in the context of their more encompassing story that the evils of slavery became clear to them.

3. In fact, the earliest designation of the church was simply "The Way." To be a Christian simply meant that one walked in the path of Jesus. (See Acts 9:2.) For certain saints, the identity of the way of Jesus and the way in which they walk becomes so close that the line between the sacred text and the ongoing story of Jesus is impossible to discern.

4. Alden Thompson has pointed out to me that Ellen White makes statements that support the ideas reflected here. She writes, for example, "We cannot then take a position that the unity of the church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light. The church may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but we cannot force the mind and will, and root out disagreement. . . .

Nothing can perfect unity in the church but the spirit of Christlike forbearance. . . . When as individual members of the church, you love God supremely and your neighbor as yourself, there will be no need of labored efforts to be in unity, for there will be oneness in Christ as a natural result" (*The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* [Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987, vol. 3, pp. 1092, 1093]).

5. Peter Hodgson, *God in History: Shapes of Freedom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 182, 183, 222.