



**Northwest Conference Revitalization Gatherings for Pastors
March 13, 2013- noon**

Purpose of Re-Connect:

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| 1. Mutual Learning Opportunities | 4. Prayer Support |
| 2. Sharing of Best Practices | 5. "Real Time" Peer Consultation and Support |
| 3. Extend Connection and Support | |

Agenda

- **Welcome/Prayer for Lunch/Introductions-**
 - **Small Group Connecting/Prayer-** Reflections on the last few months of ministry- What is going well? What new challenge(s) are you facing? How are you doing personally?
 - Prayer for one another

- **Large Group Discussion-**Reflections on Marker- **The Centrality of the Word of God** (2 Timothy 3:16)

"O that we may love our Bibles more, and keep closer to them than ever! and then shall we find the benefit and advantage designed thereby, and shall at last attain the happiness therein promised and assured to us."

—Matthew Henry—

Focus questions:

- Review 2 Timothy 3:16. What is your view of God's word? Why?
- How well is your church teaching God's word and making it relevant to our current reality? How are you accomplishing or not accomplishing this? What else might you need to consider in accomplishing this?
- How well is your church equipping and teaching people to study and apply God's word in life giving/transforming ways personally? What has worked and what hasn't worked for you in this area?
- Other thoughts/reflections?

Resources: Centrality of the Word- Reflection Guide
The Death & Resurrection of the Church- Phelan
Bible Engagement & Churchgoers Study
Research- Bible Engagement Chart

- **Prayer/Dismiss**
- **Confirm Next Meeting- Wed, April 10, 2013- noon**

Bring Your Own Lunch...Beverages Provided

"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another"... Proverbs 27:17



MARKINGS John E. Phelan Jr.

The Death and Resurrection of the Church

The news for American Christianity is not good. The newspapers are filled with tales of squabbles and contractions. The once mighty mainline has seen its numbers shrink as battles over human sexuality continue unabated. Every week, it seems, another mini-denomination is formed. And like rapidly dividing cells, even these groups cannot avoid further splits. A few months ago a group of Anglicans that had put themselves under the care of an African church broke off from it over money. Even the mighty Southern Baptist Church has seen erosion in its numbers. The Roman Catholic Church has only grown in recent years because of the influx of immigrants. On both the Catholic and Protestant right (particularly within the Reformed and Calvinist tradition) theology and behavior are being more narrowly circumscribed. The walls are being built higher. The gates are defended more fiercely.

We are hearing the death rattle of a movement that began as Christians grew in numbers and influence in the Roman Empire. As bishops became powerful and wealthy they were able to influence society and enforce their convictions both theological and moral. Eventually both church and state consolidated power in such a way that theological and political enemies were marginalized. Creeds became instruments of exclusion rather than tools for instruction. This was not changed all that much within the mainstream of the Reformation. The Protestant state churches of Europe continued to exercise power to determine the religious destiny of every person within a given state and to exclude those who threatened the religious homogeneity. It was the so-called Radical Reformers and, somewhat later, the Pietists who challenged this approach to religious life. They were suspicious of the creeds, not because they were inaccurate descriptions of the church's belief, but because they could become tools of state coercion and did not necessarily reflect the biblical record. Pietists rejected the theological anathemas hurled by both Catholics and Protestants. They were more concerned with following Jesus than getting the approval of the theologians in Rome, Geneva, or Augsburg.

John Howard Yoder argues that this so-called "free church" tradition amounted to a return to a more Jewish approach to religious life. Judaism was characterized by:

- the phenomenon of the synagogue—a decentralized, self-sustaining, non-sacerdotal community life form capable of operating on its own wherever there are ten households;

- the phenomenon of Torah—a text (that is at once both narrative and legal) around which a community forms as it gathers to read and exposit; and
- the phenomenon of the rabbinate—a non-sacerdotal, non-hierarchical, nonviolent leadership elite whose power is not civil but intellectual, validated by their identification with Torah (from *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, Eerdmans, 2003).

The heart of the free church movement, like Judaism, was not the state church or the national denomination, but the local community. For the Pietists it was a phenomenon of the home where people gathered to pray, sing, and read Scripture together. It focused not simply on "orthodoxy," right thinking, but on "orthopraxy," right acting. It encouraged the development of a way of life, not simply a way of thinking. It was more concerned about whether one

understood what it meant to follow Jesus than whether one understood the nature of the atonement. Like the synagogue, then, it focused on the close reading of the biblical text and careful reflection on the divine commands. It was led by people who had read carefully and reflected long upon the meaning and significance of those texts and whose lives reflected their intention to follow Jesus's commands however difficult and counter-intuitive they appeared to be.

Perhaps the resurrection of the American church lies here—in the re-engagement of Jesus followers with their core texts. These texts, both Old and New Testament, spell out a way of living that runs against the grain of our authoritarian and hierarchical political, intellectual, and religious cultures. As Pietists, as free church people, we would do well to emulate the careful reading and reflection on the meaning and significance of texts we see in the rabbis. We would also do well to emulate them in their willingness to let alternative readings stand alongside the more traditional and settled readings. We would do well, like them, to leave the culture of dissent alive—this is not only our Jewish heritage, but our Protestant heritage. I believe that if American Christianity is to revive, it will not be revived from the top down, but from the bottom up. It will be revived by people in all our diverse traditions who return to reading our texts and living our texts and loving our enemies—even our ecclesiastical ones. As heirs of the Pietist and free church tradition we would do well to remember this. ■

John E. (Jay) Phelan Jr. is senior professor of theological studies at North Park Theological Seminary. He blogs at additionalmarkings.blogspot.com.

Affirmation #1: The Centrality of the Word of God

Prep Sheet...

The Covenant Church states its view of Scripture as follows: "the Holy Scripture, the Old and the New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." (See question 1) When Philipp Jakob Spener presented his proposals for the renewal of the Church in 1675, his first concern was with the centrality of the word of God in the life of the congregation and of individual believers. He wrote:

Thought should be given to a more extensive use of the word of God among us. We know that by nature we have no good in us. If there is to be any good in us, it must be brought about by God. To this end the word of God is the powerful means, since faith must be enkindled through the gospel.... The more at home the word of God is among us, the more we shall bring about faith and its fruits.

What was new in Spener's proposal was not another doctrine of inspiration (there was general agreement on the divine inspiration of Scripture in his day), or a new recognition of the authority of Scripture. What was new was his recovery of the living nature of the word of God. The word is the "powerful means" to the creation of new life through the Holy Spirit. For many in Spener's day the word of God was simply information, or law, or rules; for Spener the word was power—power to effect change in the life of the hearer through the Holy Spirit. (See question 2)

The dynamic life-shaping power of the word of God has been at the heart of the Covenant Church since its founding. That life-changing word gave birth to the conventicles—the small groups that met for Bible study in confidence that the word would shape the life of the believer and the believing community. (See question 3) It provided the motive for private devotional reading of the Bible, a practice for which our forebears received the nickname "readers." It prompted the concern for faithful preaching, not of human opinion, but of the word of God, which has power to convict of sin and unrighteousness and kindle the desire for new life. This dynamic life-shaping power of the word leads us to affirm that both women and men are called to serve as ordained ministers. It is the reason we intentionally pursue ethnic diversity. It is the motivation behind every act of compassion and justice through the life of our

shared ministry.

The Evangelical Covenant Church believes that the effective power of the scriptural word is inseparably associated with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit never works independently of the word, and the word is made effective through the Holy Spirit. (See question 4)

The union of word and Spirit is a central theme in evangelical faith. It was by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the written word came into being (2 Timothy 3:16). Through the Spirit the word of God does not return empty but accomplishes that for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11). It is through the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit that the sinner who responds to the word is assured of being a child of God (Romans 8:16-17).

It is essential, then, to the life of the Church that it be a company of people who desire their lives to be shaped by the powerful and living word of God. The alternative is clear. Not to be shaped by the word is to be shaped by the world. (See question 5)

On every side attractive and persuasive voices urge us toward conformity to the spirit of this age. There is no escaping from these pervasive influences. Only the church that hears and responds to the word will be able to be a prophetic voice in this wilderness and bring healing to a confused and troubled world.

Discussion Questions...

These questions correspond to the underlined statements in this Affirmation.

1. What insight does this statement provide concerning how we are to live the Christian life?
2. How does this description of the Bible fit with our understanding of the Bible's significance in our church?
3. How do you think the conventicles compare to the small groups that we have in our church today? Within the Covenant the phrase "Where is it written?" is commonly used. How do we explore scripture as a community of faith rather than as individuals?
4. How significant is the role of the Spirit when we read the Bible?
5. If this statement were a measuring stick, how would our church measure up to this standard?

Application...

① In what ways are we **demonstrating** that the Word of God is central to our life as a church?

② How might the **centrality** of the Word of God become more evident in our life together?

Personal Reflection...

① Do I live as if I **love** God's Word? What does that look like?

② What aspects of my true **identity** in Christ do I need to be reminded of by God (e.g., I am God's child, I am forgiven, I need others, I am called to serve God, etc.)?

③ What do I want to remember from this session?

④ What action do I want to take as a result of this session?

Communal Prayer...

Leader: Wise and giving God, we thank you for revealing yourself through the story of your Word,

People: and in the life, death, and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ.

Leader: We thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit who leads and guides us,

People: to faithful understanding, passionate conviction, and needed encouragement.

Leader: We thank you for the gift of the body of Christ, the community of the church,

People: that helps us access truth in the Word, read truth into our own lives, and be the truth in the world.

Leader: Teach us to love your Word, oh God, and to trust it,

People: even as we struggle to understand it, are surprised by its living power, and are still learning how to share it with the world.

Leader: Teach us to listen for and return to Your Word, again and again,

People: so that we find our identity in your truth, hope, and love.

Leader: Help us to turn away from the loud voices in this world,

People: to reject voices of selfishness, short-term gain, and despair.

ALL: Remind us that, "only the church that hears and responds to the Word will be able to be a prophetic voice in this wilderness, and bring healing to a confused and troubled world." Amen.

More Resources...

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Gordon D.

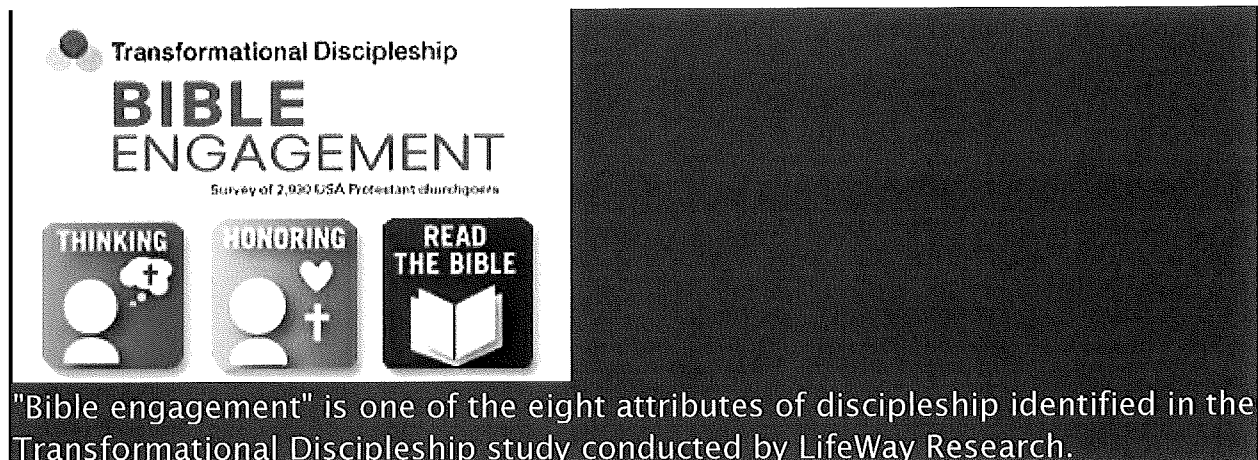
Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan, 2003) ISBN 0310246040. This informative book explains how various genres/books in the Bible are to be read and understood differently. It also discusses hermeneutics—applying the Word to context.

Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes, Justo L. Gonzalez (Abingdon, 1996) ISBN 0687014522. Gonzalez explores how a Hispanic perspective illuminates the biblical text in ways that will be valuable not only for Latino readers but also for the church at large. He introduces five "paradigms" for Latino biblical interpretation and provides concrete examples of biblical texts that gain new meaning when read from a different perspective.

Shaped by the Word, M. Robert Mulholland (The Upper Room, 2001) ISBN 0835809366. Being introduced to the concept of reading formationally as opposed to reading informationally can profoundly change the way you read the Bible.

Study: Bible Engagement in Churchgoers' Hearts, Not Always Practiced

by Russ Rankin on Thursday, September 06, 2012



NASHVILLE, Tenn. — While the majority of churchgoers desire to honor Christ with their lives and even profess to think on biblical truths, a recent study found few actually engage in personal reading and study of the Scriptures.

"Bible engagement" is one of the eight attributes of discipleship identified in the Transformational Discipleship study conducted by LifeWay Research. The study produced the Transformational Discipleship Assessment, which measures an individual's spiritual growth in each of these areas of development.

The survey found 90 percent of churchgoers agree "I desire to please and honor Jesus in all I do," and 59 percent agree with the statement: "Throughout the day I find myself thinking about biblical truths." While the majority agree with both statements, there is a significant difference in the strength of agreement. Nearly two-thirds of churchgoers (64 percent) strongly agree with the first statement, but only 20 percent strongly agree with the second.

However, when asked how often they personally (not as part of a church worship service) read the Bible, a similar number respond "Every Day" (19 percent) as respond "Rarely/Never" (18 percent). A quarter indicate they read the Bible a few times a week. Fourteen percent say they read the Bible "Once a Week" and another 22 percent say "Once a Month" or "A Few Times a Month."

"Bible engagement has an impact in just about every area of spiritual growth," said Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research. "You can follow Christ and see Christianity as your source of truth, but if that truth does not permeate your thoughts, aspirations and actions, you are not fully engaging the truth."

"God's Word is truth, so it should come as no surprise that reading and studying the Bible are still the activities that have the most impact on growth in this attribute of spiritual maturity," Stetzer said. "As basic as that is, there are still numerous churchgoers who are not reading the Bible regularly. You simply won't grow if you don't know God and spend time in God's Word."

The survey also reveals six actions that positively impact the Bible engagement scores of individuals.

1. Confessing wrongdoings to God and asking forgiveness.
2. Believing in Jesus Christ as the only way to heaven and the number of years one has believed this.
3. Making a decision to obey or follow God with an awareness that choosing to do so might be costly. Sixty-three percent of churchgoers say they have at least once in the last six months.
4. Praying for the spiritual status of people they know are not professing Christians.
5. Reading a book about increasing their spiritual growth. Sixty-one percent of churchgoers say they have in the last year.
6. Having been discipled or mentored one-on-one by a more spiritually mature Christian. Nearly half of churchgoers (47 percent) say they have been discipled or mentored.

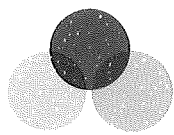
"Bible engagement points people toward maturity and maturing Christians have practices that correspond to Bible reading. Almost all churchgoers want to honor God, but more than a third indicate obedience is not something they have done when it is costly to them," Stetzer said.

"The impact of the Word of God on people's lives is seen in the relationship between Bible engagement and turning from wrongdoings and choosing to obey God – two indicators of higher Bible engagement scores," he added. "Such tangible life changes show the transformational impact of Bible engagement in the life of a disciple of Christ."

These findings on Bible engagement are part of the largest discipleship study of its kind. Results from each of the eight attributes of spiritual maturity will continue to be released over the coming months.

To help pastors, churches and individuals measure spiritual development, LifeWay Research used the study's data to develop a questionnaire for believers, called the Transformational Discipleship Assessment (TDA). This online evaluation delivers both individual and group reports on spiritual maturity using the eight factors of biblical discipleship. The TDA also provides helpful and practical suggestions on appropriate next steps for spiritual development.

To learn more about the transformational discipleship research visit LifeWayResearch.com. The TDA is available at TDA.LifeWay.com.



Transformational Discipleship

BIBLE ENGAGEMENT

Survey of 2,930 USA Protestant churchgoers

**READ
THE BIBLE**



How often I read the Bible

19%

Every
Day

26%

A few
times
a week

14%

Once
a week

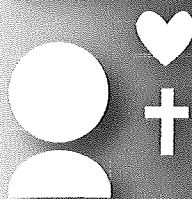
22%

At least
once a
month

18%

Rarely or
Never

HONORING



**I desire to please
and honor Jesus
in all that I do**

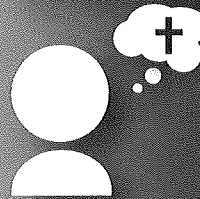
90%

3%

Disagree

Agree

THINKING



**Throughout the
day I find myself
thinking about
biblical truths**

59%

21%

Disagree

Agree