

insight



Fresh Approaches to Scripture Engagement

**Proposing by Text Message
Or, Taking the Genre of
Scripture Seriously**

By Peter Dray

**Mapping Scripture in the
Cultural Landscape of Japan**

By Liz Jeggo

**Blogging with Esther?
Moving Beyond Just Bible
Study Questions**

By Fiona Barnard

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Contents

- Page 3** **A Word from the Editor**
By Lynette Teagle
- Page 5** **Proposing by Text Message**
Or, Taking the Genre of Scripture Seriously
By Peter Dray
- Page 9** **Mapping Scripture in the Cultural Landscape of Japan**
By Liz Jeggo
- Page 13** **Calibrating Expectations:**
Helping Returnees Evaluate a Bible-Teaching Church
By Kah Foon Gillespie
- Page 17** **Blogging with Esther?**
Moving Beyond Just Bible Study Questions
By Fiona Barnard
- Page 22** **The *Insight* Team**



A Word from the Editor



Lynette Teagle

Originally from Singapore, Lynette joined Friends International in 2001 and serves as Head of Learning and Development.

Married to Peter and based in Oxford, she is currently researching for a PhD.



One of our wedding gifts, a set of traditional Chinese Mun Shou crockery (pictured above), has remained largely unused except on special occasions. Hand-delivered from China to England, via Singapore, in 1993, the heavy stoneware set is incredibly precious. Yet, as a young family, we felt it hopelessly impractical and set it aside in favour of more durable tableware – it was too exceptional for daily use, too fragile and heavy for childish hands to manage.

More recently, our children, now young adults with a deep interest in issues of identity and exploration of their bi-cultural heritage, have viewed the crockery with different eyes. After 27 years, the set has become a lasting remembrance of our wedding celebrations and the generosity of our guests, a potent symbol of our combined cultural heritage, and a rich part of our continuing story. This old treasure has new value in our family life.

This little story brings to mind Jesus' teaching that "every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52).

While we are convinced in this ministry of the sufficiency and effectiveness of every part of Scripture in our own lives and those of international students, some of us might be reluctant to engage with the Old Testament (of which the Law of Moses constitutes a major part) or certain genres. The seemingly dubious actions and decisions of Old Testament characters, or parts of Israel's tumultuous history, might feel too difficult to explain adequately in our limited time with students. But Jesus' words encourage us to persevere in handling all parts of the Bible well, in the faith that those who study God's Word diligently while also seeking to follow Christ will be able to bring out



“new treasures as well as old.” He raises our expectation that those who view God’s Word under the Holy Spirit’s direction will find valuable truth even in those “less comprehensible” parts of the Old Testament.

In this issue of *Insight*, Peter Dray develops thoughts from his sessions at the Friends International Conference 2020, urging us to reconsider how genres of Scripture – apart from the gospels – might speak into students’ lives in new ways. Similarly, Fiona Barnard suggests creative alternatives to the tried-and-tested question-and-answer Bible study approach, exploring what is known as an “oral hermeneutic” which might engage imaginations and emotions more effectively.

Turning to returnees, Kah Foon Gillespie asks searching questions about how they should rightly evaluate Bible teaching in their home country, and Liz Jeggo writes from her missionary experience about

the factors which Japanese students might need to overcome in order to develop good Bible reading habits.

We pray that this issue will help us continue to bring out “new treasures as well as old” as we study the Bible with our student friends from around the world.

“...Jesus’ words encourage us to persevere in handling all parts of the Bible well.”



Proposing by Text Message Or, Taking the Genre of Scripture Seriously



Peter Dray

Peter Dray is Head of Creative Evangelism with UCCF, the British university Christian Union movement.

He is married to Linda and father to Samuel and Toby. A former Christian Unions international secretary, he counts himself as a long-term supporter and cheerleader of Friends International.



Many years ago, whilst I was working as Staff Worker with Christian Unions in Lancashire, a cheeky student leader at the University of Central Lancashire put out a rumour that I'd proposed by text message. Over the following weeks, the only thing more irritating than being questioned about the rumour was discovering the number of people who believed I might just have popped the question in this way!

It would be scandalous to propose by text message. Though the meaning of the question is retained (“Will you marry me?”), the brevity and formality of the question's form is unsuitable both for the emotion of its content and for the response for which the asker is hoping.

“Will you marry me?” is a question you cannot (successfully) pose by text. The nature of a text message makes it ‘unsayable’. But that very same nature makes other things

‘sayable’ by text – quick notes about being late, or finding out if someone has food intolerances, for example. It would be strange to write a sonnet or a play about either of these subject items when a simple text message would suffice.

Indeed, all forms of text and speech make certain things ‘sayable’, and certain things ‘unsayable’ – a principle with important implications for our evangelism and discipleship of international students.

The Genius of Genre

Forms of text and speech are called ‘genres’ – categories of composition characterised by a similar style or form. The Bible comprises a dizzying array of genres. “God chose to use almost every available kind of communication,” write Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, “narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws of all kinds, poetry of all kinds, proverbs,

prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons and apocalypses.”¹ Successful interpretation of these biblical texts requires awareness of the unwritten rules that apply to each of these genres.

The Bible is unique amongst religious texts in its range of genres. This should give us pause for thought. Why might God inspire the Bible authors to write in such a range of forms – especially given the extra challenges that come in its interpretation?

Though God gives His reasons, I believe that there are probably several answers to this question. The range of genres acts as a safeguard to those with proud tendencies who might believe they can master Scripture (and its God). The diversity of scriptural forms also says something important about how God accommodates to humans within our own cultural contexts. These are both important principles for our ministry – but, for the purposes of this article, let me focus upon two further reasons God may have inspired a written Word of many genres.

First, the Bible’s many genres show us how highly God esteems beauty, including beautiful language. Though Scripture warns about pursuing eloquence as an end in itself (most notably in 1 Corinthians 1-2), the Bible’s form shows that poetic effort and artistry can be a means of calling us to

repentance and faith in Christ. John Calvin wrote of Isaiah, “Let us pay attention to the style of Isaiah which is not only pure and elegant, but is also ornamented with high art – from which we may learn that eloquence may be of great service to faith.”² Evangelical Christians – especially those working cross-culturally – have rightly valued clarity of communication, but we dare not too readily surrender an aesthetic commitment that God Himself holds in His Word.

Second, the Bible’s many genres reflect the scope of vision that God has for the transformation of His people. God does not simply want to impart information to us, but to sculpt us to reflect the likeness of His Son in every dimension. As Kevin Vanhoozer puts it: “The texts that make up the Bible do not merely propose doctrines to be believed or policies to be espoused. The Bible is more radical than that. Scripture proposes a new way of understanding: not only knowing-that but seeing-as, even feeling-as. It is one thing to agree with the proposition ‘God created the heavens and the earth,’ another thing to see and feel the planet we inhabit as God’s good though fallen and being-renewed creation.”³

Such a grand project requires a diversity of genre matching the breadth of human experience, ministering not just to our rationality, but also to our will, emotion and imagination. Because each literary form

makes certain statements ‘sayable’, and because they induce different responses in the reader, nothing short of the full range of scriptural genres can achieve God’s formative purposes in us.

We might say that the Bible’s form is as inspired as its content – though even this statement drives too hard a wedge between form and content. After all, we might ask whether proposing marriage is even the same question if it’s asked using a lazy text message!

The Full Counsel of God

This line of thought should move us to ask why the authors of the Bible (human and divine) employed their particular genre for the message they were conveying. Galatians and Romans, letters written with tight, logical argument, provided a suitable form for Paul to underscore the sufficiency of Jesus’ sacrifice as watertight, to those tempted to turn back to the works of the law. Conversely, the poetry of Psalm 23 conveys the emotion of knowing one belongs to the Shepherd God that legal discourse never could. Whilst the closing chapters of Revelation leave us with many questions about the new creation, their power is primarily in their appeal to imagination. But the apocalyptic genre would have been wholly inappropriate to describe the detail of Jesus’ earthly ministry – which is why

Luke chose to write an ‘orderly account’ (Luke 1:4) instead.⁴

Camping just in one genre of Scripture is therefore like consuming an unbalanced diet. It may do us good in some areas, but leaves us underdeveloped and liable to become sick.

Mature discipleship requires followers of Jesus to be moulded by what Paul called ‘the whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27). Those of us involved in shaping teaching programmes need to ensure a varied regime for our hearers – not just to keep their interest up, but because we aspire to a deep discipleship that the Spirit can engender only by means of the full resources of His Word. In university towns, where turnover of church membership is quick, this issue is all the more pertinent.

Where possible our style of teaching too, should correlate with the form of Scripture we are using. Precision is rightly the order of the day when it comes to unpacking Paul’s dense theology. A different approach might be more suitable when considering image- and emotion-rich psalms.

One of the most memorable sermons I heard was an overview of the book of Esther. The preacher simply retold the account in his own words, drawing out the details. Like the book of Esther, he never mentioned God by name. Half

an hour into their retelling, we wondered when the ‘real sermon’ was ever going to start! Instead, as his paraphrase drew to a close, the preacher paused – and asked, “Now, do you really think all of that was a coincidence?”

Not only was this a brilliant one sentence summary of Esther’s message, the sermon also did full justice to Esther’s genre. The sermon continues to give me immense comfort, especially at times in which God has seemed absent from my own story.

New Opportunities

Could there be implications for our evangelism too?

Most evangelism with international students in Britain seems to involve a couple of approaches. The first takes international students through the broad sweep of Scripture, Genesis to Revelation, providing them with a basic biblical worldview in which the central events of the gospel (and the call to repentance and faith) make sense. A second approach explores narratives from Jesus’ life in seeker Bible studies. I don’t want to undermine our commitment to either of these approaches, which have emerged out of group wisdom and which have proven fruitful. In some senses, the gospels are the most accessible part of the Bible to those new to it, and it makes obvious sense to locate details in the Bible’s bigger story. After

all, “a Christian worldview is formed by hearing and learning the big story of Scripture and seeing how all the little stories, whether of the men or women in the Bible, or of ourselves and our neighbours, fit into that big story.”⁵

However, I wonder whether these approaches can be supported and augmented by others, a couple of which I tentatively propose here.

Firstly, in a university culture very aware of mental health, we might use the psalms more often. As I cut my teeth in Christian ministry, I was sceptical of such an approach. I worried that it seemed too close to ripping verses out of context and treating the Bible like just a self-help book. It is, of course, possible to diminish the gospel to mere therapy.⁶ But we need not deny the tremendous emotional resources that flow from knowing the Lord. Further, the Bible’s truth claims can be established in many ways – including through its emotional resonance with how life really feels.

I recently met an Indonesian student who’d undergone a number of traumatic experiences. As we opened a psalm together, he reflected that here, at last, was a vocabulary powerful enough to match his pain. We moved naturally to talk further about how Jesus’ death and resurrection provide hope, even in the most painful of circumstances.

Another time, a Belgian student asked a highly philosophical question following a talk I'd given on suffering. I engaged her question, but then asked if I could share a Bible passage that's been of special comfort to me. I read Psalm 27. Afterwards she came and asked for the reference so she could read it again. I was delighted to hear she later signed up for Bible study.

A second biblical genre which we might employ evangelistically is wisdom literature. Many cultural commentators have noticed the craving of younger adults for wisdom.⁷ Bombarded with information yet often lacking inter-generational relationships upon which previous generations counted, they yearn for the knowhow of life that can't be learned from YouTube.

I've noticed increasing honesty, especially from Europeans, around the lostness they feel when it comes to navigating life: what to look for in a life partner, handling conflict, etc.⁸ The book of Proverbs might not instinctively be where you'd take a non-believer, but we can teach a biblical worldview inductively through identifying the categories upon which this timeless wisdom rests. Students who might not yet be open to a traditional Bible overview might welcome such an approach.

We ourselves need wisdom when it comes to opening

Scripture in our day, prayerfully seeking to understand our times. There are many considerations in play as we seek to engage today's international students with the gospel: pragmatic, cultural and convictional. But I'd love to call us all to confidence that we need not be embarrassed by the Bible's form, or feel we must keep only to the passages where we are most comfortable. It's an evangelical

conviction that all Scripture is God-breathed and useful (2 Timothy 3:16). And as our world continues to change and God's Word makes fresh connections within our own cultural moment, we might expect to see the reality of this conviction demonstrated in new ways amongst international students.

1 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Second Edition. Bletchley: Scripture Union Press, 1994. Page 19.

2. Quoted in John Piper. *Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully*. Nottingham: IVP. 2014. Page 30.

3. Kevin J. Vanhoozer. 'Love's Wisdom: The Authority of Scripture's Form and Content for Faith's Understanding and Theological Judgement.' *Journal of Reformed Theology*. Volume 5 (2011): Pages 247-275.

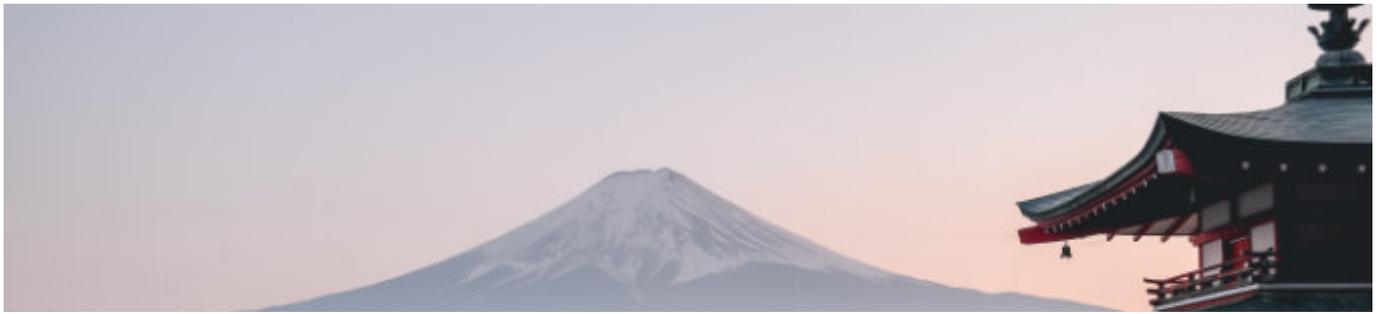
4. There are implications here for the precision we seek in interpreting different parts of Scripture. Anthony C. Thiselton helpfully distinguishes between transmissive (or 'closed') texts, such as instruction manuals or medical prescriptions, that cannot and should not be interpreted pluralistically, and productive (or 'open' texts) which have less to do with conveying information or facts, and which invite more expansive, imaginative and emotive interpretations. See his chapter in eds. Stanley E. Porter & Matthew R. Malcolm. *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids, IVP Academic. 2013.

5. David J. Hesselgrave. *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000. Page 146.

6. I've written more about the dangers of precisely this at <www.peterdray.wordpress.com/2017/10/23/countering-spiritual-air-conditioning>

7. See, for example, Nellie Bowles. 'These Millennials Got New Roommates. They're Nuns.' *New York Times*. 31 May 2019. Accessed 05 May 2020 <www.nytimes.com/2019/05/31/style/millennial-nuns-spiritual-quest.html>

8. In part, I think this same desire is reflected in the popularity in at least some circles of writers and speakers like Jordan Peterson, Ben Shapiro and Douglas Murray, all of whom appeal to wisdom. In the Covid-19 era, we might also make use of the genre of lament. Lament's power lies in giving us a vocabulary for our brokenness, and kindling gospel-shaped hope. For more on this, see Section 3 in Mark Vroegop. *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*. Grand Rapids: Crossway. 2019.



Mapping Scripture in the Cultural Landscape of Japan

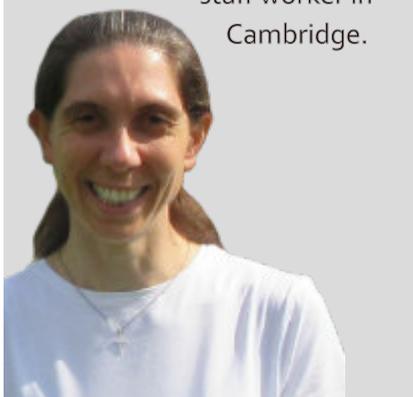


Liz Jeggo

Since 2010, Mike and Liz have been serving as OMF missionaries in Japan.

While also working for a local Japanese church, their main focus has been returnee ministry – reaching out to seekers and discipling/supporting believers, and seeking to be a bridge between overseas churches and the Japanese church.

Liz is a Friends International Affiliate but was previously a Friends International staff worker in Cambridge.



During our time in Japan, very few of our Japanese friends have been interested in coming to church, but a number have wanted to study the Bible. From where does this interest come? Japan is a hierarchical society, where those with greater experience, knowledge or training are hugely respected, so Japanese love to study and increase their knowledge in general: why, though is the Bible attractive?

In the West, a religion is seen as a set of formal beliefs and doctrines relating to the spiritual realm. People enter a religion because they believe it is true and are prepared to commit to it. In contrast, in Japan a religion is understood in terms of what it can do for us, what benefit it brings. People practise a religion because they think it can give them peace, protection, good personal relationships or some other benefit. Many non-Christians are interested in the Bible because they think it will

give them inner peace or advice on how to be a better person.

Where to Start Reading the Bible with Japanese

Eventually we want our non-Christian Japanese friends to see the truth in the Bible, and to believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. However, initially it's helpful to connect with their felt needs, so starting with passages that show how God wants us to live seems wise. For example, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 gives lots of advice on how to live. It also shows how impossibly high God's standards are, and so points to our need for forgiveness and God's help to change. It is here that we can begin to explain the gospel.

When Westerners tell the gospel they tend to start with the idea that Jesus died in our place to pay our debt and remove our guilt. However, this is only one dimension of the gospel. Jesus also died to cover

our shame, and to set us free from the power of Satan. Different people may relate more easily to a particular dimension of the gospel, depending on their cultural and personal background. Japan is a shame-based culture, so Japanese often have a greater sense of shame than of guilt: they know there are things they have done that they want to hide from others, things they want to forget but cannot. They may not have a strong sense of guilt about these things, but they probably feel shame because of them. The Bible has a lot to say about shame which we can share with our Japanese friends.

For example, in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve hid from God because they knew that they had done wrong in His eyes and felt the shame of it. God covered their shame by killing an animal to make clothes for them. This foreshadows the way Jesus was killed, not only so God would forgive our sin, but also so that Jesus' blood could cover our shame. If we believe in Jesus, He removes our shame by cleansing us so that we are whiter than snow (Psalm 51:7, Isaiah 1:18). For a Japanese, burdened by a sense of shame, this is an attractive message.

Which Parts of the Bible do Japanese Find Difficult?

Japanese who become Christians often do so only after years of seeking and doubting. Why does it take so long to turn

to Christ? There are many reasons, one of which is simply that life in Japan is busy, so they have little time to devote to seeking. But another significant reason is that the Japanese mindset is so different to the Biblical way of thinking; hence it takes a long time for Japanese even to understand what the Bible teaches, let alone believe it.

While each person is different, there are some things in the Bible that Japanese people generally find challenging. Having read through Matthew's gospel and done a course covering the basic Christian beliefs together, I asked one of my Bible study groups what aspects of Christian faith they found hardest to believe. They mentioned four key things:

Firstly, the story of creation. In Japan, children are taught evolution and the Big Bang as fact. The idea that God created everything from nothing seems like a fairy tale. Knowing that I studied Physics at university, they were curious about how I could believe that God created the world.

Secondly, they find it hard to understand why people need to have their sins forgiven. There is no word in Japanese for the Biblical concept of sin, so the word used to translate "sin" means "crime". Most Japanese, therefore, do not see themselves as sinners. This group had come to understand the biblical meaning of sin, but they still couldn't see any need

to have their sins forgiven. In Japanese thinking, if you do something wrong, you will experience some punishment, maybe a sickness or accident for example. Alternatively, you can cancel out the bad thing you did by doing something good. And that is the end of it; there is no need for forgiveness. Many people believe that after you die you just stop existing. Those who believe in an afterlife seem to think that most people are good enough to go to heaven, so the idea of judgement after death is hard to accept.

Thirdly, they doubt that Jesus really rose from the dead. Experience tells us that dead people stay dead. The idea of a supernatural God with supernatural power is hard for Japanese to understand. For the same reason, biblical miracles, including the virgin birth, are also difficult to believe.

Finally, they struggle with the idea that Jesus is the only way to be saved. Since Japanese are looking for a religion that works, they see no difficulty in practising more than one religion at once. The Christian idea that Jesus is Lord and so we must turn away from other religions and trust in Jesus alone, or that we must prioritise loyalty to Jesus over other loyalties, is difficult to understand.

In seeking to answer these questions, I found some Japanese websites (listed on the next page) that address a

number of these, and other apologetics issues. Such articles can be helpful in answering questions from our Japanese friends, and as I talked with my Bible study group, many misconceptions were cleared up. However, the reality is that Japanese will only believe when the Holy Spirit opens their minds to the truth, and so in reading the Bible with our Japanese friends, we need a lot of patience and prayer.

Japanese Bible Translations and Translation Difficulties

There are a number of different Japanese translations of the Bible. The translation preferred by many churches is called the Shin-kai-yaku (新改訳). An updated version was published in 2017, and is now available as a free downloadable app. This is an accurate word-for-word translation and is popular in Japan because Japanese value both precise accuracy and the preservation of tradition. However, it contains many words that are not used in every day Japanese, making it hard to understand, and its use of formal, respectful language to refer to God, while communicating something of his holiness and authority, makes him seem distant and unapproachable. Many young people prefer one of the thought-for-thought translations, which are easier to understand and make God seem more approachable and loving. Those who understand English, may read a simple English translation of the Bible

like the Good News translation or the Living Bible translation or the NIV if their English is very good. The difficulty is that this may make it harder to connect with a church in Japan. Becoming familiar with various Japanese translations early on can be helpful, especially if the reason for the differences is explained.

There are some biblical words which are particularly difficult to translate into Japanese. The word “God” is usually translated as kami (神), but this comes from the traditional Shinto religion and denotes one of the 800 million gods found in mountains, rivers, rocks etc. rather than the all-loving, powerful creator God of the Bible. In reading the Bible with Japanese, it is therefore helpful to introduce them to Genesis 1-3 or similar passages which will enable them to see how the biblical God is different to the Shinto kami.

Different Cultures, Different Understandings...

Our culture inevitably affects how we understand the Bible. For example, although there is a Japanese way to say “I love you”, it is rarely used, except perhaps by a man proposing to his fiancée, or a mother in a moment of tenderness towards her young child. Love as a concept is not usually thought about and the Japanese word for love, ai (愛) is not often heard. Therefore although the Bible talks repeatedly about God's love for us and our love

for God, Japanese Christians tend to think in terms of respect for God, gratitude towards God or obedience towards God rather than love for God.

There are also parts of the Bible which Japanese understand more instinctively than some other nationalities. For example, when the son leaves home in the parable of the prodigal son, Japanese readers feel keenly the great shame he brings on the whole family, a shame to which the original Jewish hearers would also have related. The even greater shame incurred when the father later welcomes him back is shocking indeed. By reading the Bible with Japanese, we can learn from their insights.

Encouraging Regular Bible Reading

Many Japanese believers read the Bible daily and receive much spiritual nourishment by doing so. However, some Japanese Christians, especially new believers, see no need to read the Bible regularly, and others, though recognising the benefits of reading the Bible, struggle to maintain regular Bible reading as part of their daily routine. Why is this and how can we encourage them to develop and maintain the habit of reading the Bible regularly?

Firstly, regular reading of holy books is not part of the religious mindset of Japanese people. Buddhism and Shintoism, the traditional

religions of Japan, place no emphasis on reading holy books. Only those who are “extra devoted”, monks or priests, would spend time studying the religious scriptures. So Japanese who become Christians may need to be taught the importance of opening the Bible daily, as well as how to engage with what they read in a meaningful way.

Secondly, Japan is a hierarchical society where knowledge or training are hugely valued. Japanese may therefore feel that they should only read the Bible with a qualified teacher. We can help them by teaching them how to read and understand the Bible themselves, and where to go for information or explanation when they have questions.

Thirdly, for those who try reading the Japanese Bible, the difficulty of understanding or relating to the words of the Bible can be off-putting. This relates to the language issues mentioned above: specialist words are hard to understand, some have Shinto connotations which make the new believer feel uncomfortable, and the formal language causes God to seem distant. Over time, this becomes easier as the style of writing becomes more familiar. We can encourage them to read the Japanese Bible alongside an English translation, until they become familiar with the Japanese language.

Finally, many Japanese believers don't read the Bible

regularly because life in Japan is genuinely busy and pressurised, even more so than in the UK, and they simply struggle to make time for it. Some can read the Bible while commuting to work, but others find the cramped conditions too distracting. While being understanding about the pressures they face, we can help our friends to think creatively about when in their schedule they could carve out time, and encourage them that even a few minutes each day is better than not at all.

Conclusion

God's Word has the power to change lives. It is a great privilege to read the Bible with Japanese people, to see them growing in knowledge, understanding and faith, and to witness God transforming them as His Spirit works through His Word.

Useful Websites:

- Christian Apologetics in Japanese (translated from English): www.gotquestions.org/Japanese (e.g. Why did God create us?: www.gotquestions.org/Japanese/Japanese-why-create-us.html)
- Christian Apologetics in Japanese: www.true-ark.com (e.g. Did Jesus really rise from the dead?: www.true-ark.com/bible-christ-resurrection)
- Free downloadable app for 2017 Shin-kai-yaku (新改訳) translation of the Bible (including audio): www.graceandmercy.or.jp/app



Calibrating Expectations: Helping Returnees Evaluate a Bible-Teaching Church



Kah Foon Gillespie

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She is a mission partner with Covenant Community Methodist Church, Singapore and All Souls Langham Place, London. She has been working with Friends International since 2014 and is married to

Jonathan
Gillespie,
an
Anglican
vicar.



How can you tell if you have stepped into a good Bible-teaching church? As a teenager who had come to faith in Singapore, I had it all figured out – watch the congregation during the sermon and see if people bring out their own Bible and refer to it often. Sermon length was the other “tell” – only nominal Christians were content with 15-minute sermons. Forty minutes was the norm for those who took God’s Word seriously!

As diagnostic tools, they were blunt but broadly accurate for Singapore in the 1980s. They were a chocolate fireguard when I came to the UK in 2002. Over the years, I have met international students who also had their expectations of a good Bible-teaching church challenged in the UK. There was the Nigerian student who was concerned the pastor didn’t believe his own sermons as his delivery was so dispassionate. Or the Korean student who was not sure the congregation

believed, since they were so unemotional (“Why don’t they cry?”). Then there were the students from Hong Kong who concluded the Bible teaching was just an academic exercise, since it focused so much on what the text said (“like reading comprehension”) and not what it looked like in our lives today. And the South American Christians who were surprised how little Scripture got memorised, even in a church reputed to have a high view of God’s Word.

It is easy to see when Christians from other countries have culture-bound ideas of good Bible teaching, even if they justify their expectations with biblical arguments. It strikes us as regrettable if Christians from overseas never get stuck into any local church because of such quick judgments. But are our own criteria for judging whether a church has good Bible teaching universal? Let us consider a few possibilities.

Expository Preaching

By expository preaching, I mean preaching that strives to expound the message in the Bible text, such that all the sermon's points are the points in the passage as discerned by careful exegesis of the text within its context. If the Bible is living and active (Hebrews 4:12) and is inspired by God and useful for teaching, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16), then expounding what the Bible itself teaches, rather than the preacher's own philosophies, opinions and commands, is a non-negotiable.

To that extent, expository preaching is good Bible teaching anywhere in the world. As a young Christian, I experienced the lasting transformative power of preaching that faithfully uncovered God's Word from IFES speakers from all over the world. However, the complication is in the variation of how expository preaching is expressed.

Storytelling

One of my British colleagues recently expressed dismay over the preaching of a well-known Singaporean pastor because he told so many stories in his sermons. To my British friend, spending half your time in the pulpit telling stories is not the mark of a preacher committed to expounding the biblical text. And yet the pastor concerned is recognised by many

Singaporean evangelicals as one of our best Bible expositors. Is story-telling the mark of bad Bible teaching?

To be fair, I have listened to homilies beginning with jokes that are completely irrelevant to the Bible text or indeed, the rest of the sermon, and it makes my heart sink. And I still remember the horror of listening to a pastor begin his sermon on 1 Peter 1, "Be Holy", with racy stories that had us chuckling about how unholy we all were. But good Bible expositors do not use stories gratuitously or to undermine the message of the text, they use them to help their listeners engage more fully with it. A contemporary story that is analogous to a biblical event conveys the emotional impact of the latter. Personal testimonies, especially from the preacher's own life, help concrete thinkers make sense of propositional truth. Perhaps there is a danger that people will focus on a fallible human leader instead of the infallible Word, but only if preachers set themselves up that way. Paul frequently told his testimony (Acts 22/26, Galatians 1:11-2:14, 1 Thessalonians 2, etc) and pleaded with believers to follow his example as he followed Christ's example (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Preaching Through a Book

We often also expect good Bible teaching to preach through a book of the Bible, since this helps put the text in the driving

seat rather than the preacher. With topical preaching, the preacher might cherry-pick biblical truth. Preaching through a book also allows the preacher to explain the historical and literary context, which helps the congregation evaluate for themselves whether the message is from the Bible. If the preacher leaps from verse to verse all over the Bible, they cannot easily do that.

With my IFES background, this is the approach that I personally most appreciate. However, it is not the norm worldwide, even in churches that see Scripture as absolutely authoritative. For example, many Chinese churches would have thematic preaching schedules, and even where a sermon series is based on one book of the Bible, it is common to have a sermon expounding just one verse. Either way, the congregation is kept busy flicking through their Bibles.

Is this categorically bad Bible teaching? If preachers have conscientiously studied each verse they teach in its context and selected them not out of fear of others or selfish ambition but what they are convicted is biblical truth, and if they desire to introduce their flock to something of the full counsel of God on issues that relate to them, on what basis would we say that this approach is unacceptable? Do we have biblical warrant for warning returnees away from such churches? Jonathan

Edwards and Charles Spurgeon preached thematically, and Martyn-Lloyd Jones famously spent four successive Sundays on Romans 1:1 alone. We also need to be careful not to judge a church on the basis of the pulpit alone. For example, as a teenager, I went to a church where the sermons were often topical. However, everyone also went to “Adult Sunday School” for a couple of hours every week where we were taught through books of the Bible.

One Main Point

Lastly, we are often taught that a good sermon should have one main point with sub-points which support it, that when it comes to bringing God’s message to His people, a sermon should be a bullet, not a scatter gun. And indeed, on several occasions when I have listened to an East Asian or African preacher with a British friend, they have come away shaking their heads saying, “But what was the main point? What was he trying to do with his sermon?” Meanwhile, I have been convicted about three different sins, had my heart warmed by God’s love and learnt half a dozen new Bible facts. In my heart I wonder why my friend cannot just prayerfully do business with God throughout the sermon without worrying about the main point. Can’t a scatter gun hit the target just as well as a rifle, if one gets close enough?

Training Practitioners, Consumers or Learners?

There are other marks of good preaching that we may consider important, things which our church works at conscientiously – a Christological hermeneutic, a gospel emphasis, a harmony of Word and Spirit, and so on. However, if over 80% of the pulpits in the UK do not fulfil your criteria, it is unlikely that an international student will find a local church back home that ticks all the boxes.

I praise God that the UK has helped to raise up excellent preachers for the global church by training international students in faithful expository preaching. For example, UK returnees to Singapore have become pastors and even planted churches, importing British “best practice”. Though these churches have primarily attracted the Western-educated, their influence has gradually widened.

However, it is 1 in 100 students who will return home to preach, and the danger for the other 99 students, if we give them too precise a view of what good Bible teaching looks like, is that they merely become highly critical consumers. I know Singaporean returnees who were actively involved in their British church, but never settled in any church in Singapore because none measured up to the standard of preaching to which they had become accustomed. They had learnt the art of dissecting the

substance, structure and style of a sermon, but not the art of listening expectantly and humbly to God’s Word being taught by leaders who Scripture says deserve respect (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, 1 Timothy 5:17).

I suggest that our focus should be on helping returnees to recognise and avoid out-and-out heretical churches and cults, and beyond that, teach less about evaluating the quality of Bible teaching and more about being a good Bible learner.

Recognising Non-Christian Churches and Cults

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

I asked student workers in several countries how they would help young Christians identify sound teaching in a local church in their context, and every one had as their top tip – check what the church believes about 1) Jesus and 2) the Bible. Is Jesus God, Saviour and Lord? Is the Bible the source of authority rather than the pastor’s word or some other text?

Helpful sub-questions include: Is the church’s teaching on Christ, God and the Bible

different from what you have learnt in the UK? Does the group claim to be the only true church in the world? Does the church promise you health, wealth and a self-fulfilling life as a Christian? Does salvation depend on what you do or what Christ has done? These “tests” have the advantage of being accessible even to young believers we have not had much time to disciple before their return home.

Bible Study Skills

Of course, anything we can do to help students acquire the habit of daily Bible reading and the ability to read the Bible for themselves – inductive Bible study skills, Bible overviews, use of commentaries or study Bibles – will help their discernment and supplement the teaching they get from the pulpit. We can over-rely on our preachers to feed us, drawing primarily on each Sunday’s excellent sermon to sustain us through the week, but Scripture tells us we need more. We are also to meditate on God’s Word day and night (Psalm 1:2, Psalm 119:97), live it out (Joshua 1:8, James 1:25), talk about it (Deuteronomy 11:19) and teach each other in line with it (Colossians 3:16).

Learning Skills

Students sometimes complain to me about the bad Bible teaching in the churches they go to after graduation. When probed, they clarify that they do not mean the teaching is

unbiblical, but that it is tedious – “I learn nothing new.” This experience is fairly common among those who went to student churches known for good Bible teaching. There, the sermons could cater specifically to university students, stretching them intellectually, adding to their theological knowledge and speaking directly into their stage of life. “Normal” churches, with much more diverse congregations, cannot do that. Learning from a sermon becomes harder work.

As a student returns to a different country, especially to more rural areas, many in the congregation and perhaps even the pastor, might be less educated than our returnee. Does that mean a returnee cannot learn from them or grow in such a church? It seems a worldly assumption, for there is much to learn from older brothers and sisters who have persevered in faith, perhaps in the face of opposition, and still love Jesus.

When it comes to Sunday sermons, we can encourage returnees that even if the preacher’s explanation of God’s Word really leaves them cold, they can still praise God for the time and space to meditate on the Bible verses in view, praying for the Spirit’s guidance. Over time, as the effects of reverse culture shock fade, a returnee could well find that they relate better to the sermons. And if they are worried that they will stop growing as Christians because of how slowly they are

increasing in theological knowledge compared to their time in the UK, we can remind them that Christian maturity emerges not just from knowledge, but also from such things as self-control, perseverance and love (2 Peter 1:5-7), not just from learning new truths, but living each new day in the light of truths already known.

Conclusion

I realise I have slightly subverted the question I began with, “How do we help returnees evaluate a good Bible-teaching church?”, suggesting instead that we consider our task to be more like, “How do we help returnees avoid cults and then appreciate, persevere with and grow within an (imperfect) local church?”. It may not be the whole picture, but it is a perspective worth considering.



Blogging with Esther? Moving Beyond Just Bible Study Questions



Fiona Barnard

Fiona claims to have learnt the important things of life in Brazil, where she grew up.

Living now in St Andrews, Scotland, she is a Friends International staff worker as well as an ESOL tutor in the council. She is married to Ian, an academic.



“I understand! I can see it! Is that what God is like?” Su’s¹ face was aglow. Something very significant had happened to her that evening. She had been attending International Café all year. She enjoyed the friendships; she endured the ‘religious slots’ at the end. In fact, the great life-giving truths of the gospel had floated unperceptively right past her heart and mind. The Bible, Christianity and Jesus figured nowhere on her pragmatic radar, or at least until one Easter when the CU presented a five-minute wordless Bible overview mime, known as Lighthouse Everything Skit.² Su gazed as the Creator formed butterflies and flowers, mountains and oceans with a sweep of the hand. She was intrigued as He sparked life into a motionless person with His breath. She smiled as the two danced gracefully together, in harmony and wonder. What happened next surprised her: why would the girl abandon her True Love for a clumsy

thug? Why would she be so distracted by people and activities that only brought despair and self-harm to her soul?

Then, as she observed the figures brawling before her, perhaps Su was awakened to the tug-of-war between goodness and evil, between beauty and ugliness, between that for which she longed and that for which she had settled. Backwards and forwards the battle raged, unrelenting, tragic, until the vicious demons killed the wonderful Creator and seemed to have won the war. Su gazed, disappointed, and wondering what was next. As the Lord of Life sprang back, throwing His arms open wide, flinging the devils away, her heart was filled with joy. Suddenly, God’s big story found echoes in her heart. She understood, as never before, that she was part of that narrative. She felt it. She wanted to dance with the risen Creator too. Ten years later, she

is back home, stepping out faithfully with Jesus.

John's gospel opens majestically: "In the beginning was the Word." But what does it say about the Word? First that the Word spoke the world into being: the magnificent Himalayas and delicate ladybirds and elegant giraffes, intoxicating lavender and minty eucalyptus and pungent garlic, clapping thunder and chirping crickets and chatty parrots, rough tree bark and spiky hedgehogs and ice cold water, teeth-on-edge lemons and lip-smacking honey... And second, that the Word became flesh: watching, touching, singing, walking, joking, eating, lamenting, drawing, weeping, questioning. The Word came touching and tasting and hearing and smelling and seeing.

When we talk about Bible engagement, our longing is for students not only to hear the story and accept the propositions. We yearn for them to meet the Living Word, the Lord Jesus. We want them to jump into the Spirit-breathed written Word, heart, soul, mind and strength. We pray that they will inhabit this God-centred world with every blood vessel of their being, responding faithfully to the dialogue between biblical text and 21st Century culture, wherever they live.

So my question is this: are talks and studies with questions and dialogue the only bridge to this

Spirit-gifted mindset? As we plan programmes to enable students to understand the Bible's context and themes and message, how can we complement discussion with alternative approaches? How might will and understanding be unlocked through sensing and imagining, experiencing and participating in God's Word?

At the outset, it is important to celebrate our Maker who has made us diverse. It is yet another aspect of His creativity which is so rich and generous and colourful! For many students, a more structured information-gathering study with discussion and application will be most helpful in learning God's ways and will. After all, they are adept at using their brains to analyse and scrutinise. They are eager to discover new beliefs, struggle with challenging concepts and come to conclusions. This article is simply an exploration of other valid ways to engage in Scripture.

Biographies

The Old Testament has some brilliant biographies which put flesh and bone on God's vision for a covenantal relationship with Him. In what follows, the invitation is to inhabit the biblical account using a variety of activities. Most of these suggestions involve reading a chunk of the story to provide the necessary background and then facilitating groups to work

together to produce something on which they can later reflect:

Press Briefings with King David

Putting aside that these are largely a product of our democratic imperative for accountability(!), could a portion of the story of King David be chosen each session with a view to creating news briefings? There are military, leadership, spiritual and integrity issues to be explored. Different people in a group can work on the questions, the answers, the implications. Finally, they stage a press briefing with the material they have discussed.

A Blog for Esther

How might Esther's plight and prayers be blogged in 10 lines for each chapter as the story unfolds? Imagine being a young lonely girl in a Middle Eastern royal palace tucked away from view, but with insight of impending genocide. A hundred kilometres out of her comfort zone, how might this lonely woman express in an anonymous blog what is happening in her and to her? Writing is essentially a solitary exercise, but may help some to connect with God's sovereign providence amid acute distress, and give fuel for discussion as each student describes what transpires.

Jonah in Cartoon

Could some of the outrageous humour as well as the grace of God found in the life of Jonah come alive in a fresh way through watching a cartoon?

Introducing a 25-minute film can be a way of enjoying the whole story before unravelling its place in the canon of Scripture.³ This provocative story will generate plenty of reactions.

Coaching for King Solomon

Why is it that the wisest of kings seems so bad at following his own advice? It is both curious and true to life, and goes right to the hub of our response to Scripture: our need for repentance and dependence of the Holy Spirit to live faithfully. Groups might compare themes in Solomon's teaching (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) and life (1 Kings) – on money and power, study and learning, relationships and words. This could be produced either as cushion cover wisdom ("this is what he said", perhaps using illustrations, if there are artists and calligraphers) and newspaper headlines ("this is what he did"). Alternatively, it could be detailed on a flow chart which would show the discrepancies. Some students might be the coaches, brought in to guide and challenge Solomon.

An Analysis of Nehemiah's Project Management

Could you do a CV for Nehemiah and see how it might match the description of the job to rebuild the wall? How about a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis on the building project from chapters 3 and 4? The book has the appearance of a report-cum-

prayer journal: might students be encouraged to journal their work activities with prayers for a week or two? Perhaps they can then share how that attentiveness and reflection has affected them.

WhatsApp for Ruth

Set the scene, read the story, and then students produce a WhatsApp conversation between Ruth and Orpah as one returns to her family and the other settles in a new land and commits to Yahweh. It could be done in episodes as the story evolves.

Other Types of Bible Literature

Alongside these Old Testament biographies, there are other types of literature in both Old and New Testament that can be explored in ways which reflect their genre.

Parables

Take a New Testament parable and tell it in a contemporary setting. Choose a theme – the kingdom of God, prayer, being ready, riches and poverty, lost things – and let groups work on separate parables.

Conversations

If there are texts with direct speech, why not give students the role of different characters and a narrator when you read the text? Let the biblical author's craft be enjoyed through the different voices.

Role play can be used as a way of entering into the emotions,

predicaments and decisions of Bible characters. These are real people who were as baffled and mistaken, surprised and challenged as we are. By entering into their relationships and observations, we can position ourselves vis-à-vis Jesus. For external processors, it is often in speaking out that understanding can come, and new possibilities visualised. There are hundreds of possibilities:

- Mary's discussion with Joseph about her pregnancy,
- The conversation between James and John and their father Zebedee when they announced they were going to "fish for people",
- What the young boy who shared his picnic with the thousands said to his mother when she asked, "Did you enjoy your lunch?"
- How Zacchaeus explained his change of policy to his bank manager,
- The exchange between Paul and Barnabas when they disagreed over John Mark, and their subsequent reconciliation,
- Philip's supper time chat with his daughters on returning from his encounter with the Ethiopian.

Tableaus

Stories, whether parables or real events in the Bible, can also come to life with individuals each choosing a character and positioning themselves as 4 or 5 statue like

stills or “photos” to tell the story. The audience close their eyes between “takes” for “curtains down” and “curtains up” as in a theatre. Characters then reflect on what it felt like to be carried through a roof and forgiven by Jesus or caught in a storm, to be the older brother of the prodigal, or the one who was given a job in the vineyard at the end of the day.⁴

Pictionary

Some texts are full of visual imagery and metaphors which cry out to be observed or described or drawn. If you are talking about Jeremiah 18, show a pot or a picture of a potter at work. If you are reading about the sower, bring some seeds and plants. Get students to sketch the images in Isaiah 40: valleys and mountains, grass and flowers, a shepherd and flock, a drop in a bucket, grasshoppers, stars, eagles... Even for those who do not imagine themselves artistic, drawing and colouring can give space to let the text and its truths sink in more deeply.

Letters

Letters may be increasingly a thing of the past, but following a reading of Philemon or 2/3 John or the letters in Revelation 2-3, could Christian students take time to compose a letter of encouragement? Considering the way epistles usually address particular situations, what are the issues facing a friend or their church? This might be especially significant for students preparing to return home.

Prayer

In prayer, we enter God’s heart and engage with His Word.

How better to bring someone closer to Jesus than to pray Scripture? We might suggest they:

- Pray with their eyes open, walking round the countryside or looking out a window and praying Psalm 104 or Psalm 8.
- Sing the songs in Revelation which have been put to modern tunes – or even compose some new melodies.
- Praise God together and plead with Him through a psalm, perhaps antiphonally in a group.
- Use laments as they watch news of earthquakes or tsunamis or war.
- Speak out prayers of repentance from David, or Solomon or Nehemiah to accompany film clips on financial greed or environmental devastation.
- Choose a one line prayer to repeat, enabling them to focus and leading to silent prayer? It could be from a psalm (“I love you, O Lord, my strength”) or a gospel (“Lord have mercy on me, a sinner”) or a prayer of Paul (“be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God”) or John (“Come, Lord Jesus”).

In Conclusion

All these are simply practical ideas and resources which may serve to help students of varying personalities and learning styles to meet the

Living Word in the written word. For any readers of this article who are used to more text-based ways of Bible engagement, this type of oral hermeneutic may be a challenge. However, if you dare to experiment, you may be pleasantly surprised!

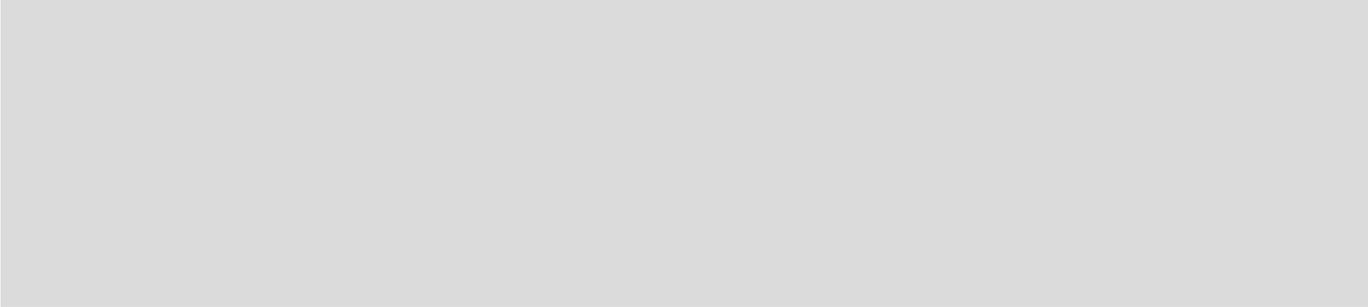
The role of a gentle facilitator is vital in unpacking the experience that participants relate: “Why did you choose to be this character? Why do you think she acted this way? Where was Jesus? How did it feel to enter the scene? What do you think this story or proverb or report is saying to you, to us?” We can trust the Holy Spirit to illuminate His Word and to make that vital connection between the ancient Bible text and an unchanging God who speaks to us today through each other and through all of our senses. What could be more wonderful than to overhear our students say to their friends and family, “We have seen the Lord!”

1. Not her real name.

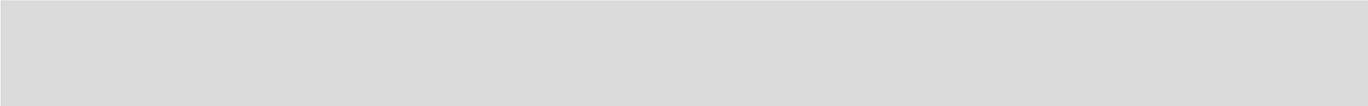
2. Lighthouse Everything Skit (www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyheJ480LYA)

3. Testament Collection, the Bible in Animation, 2005, Diamond Entertainment Corp.

4. Idea from Olive Fleming Drane, Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples, BRF 2002



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