

# Reading Scripture for Good News that Crosses Barriers of Race/Ethnicity, Class, and Culture

BOB EKBLAD

*Executive Director, Tierra Nueva and the People's Seminary  
Burlington, Washington*

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Reading Scripture in multicultural settings requires an awareness of racial/ethnic, cultural, social class, and theological assumptions. This essay identifies common pitfalls to individual and group discovery of good news in Scripture, and presents effective pedagogies and communication strategies to facilitate transformational encounters with God in diverse settings. The essay concludes with a tried and tested step-by-step dramatic reenactment of John 8:1–11.

A big challenge for people engaged in ministry today is how to read and enter into fruitful dialogue with Scripture effectively across barriers such as race/ethnicity, social class, language, and culture. When the Bible is read in a community with a deliberate expectation of hearing a word of encouragement, finding relief from troubles, and knowing or experiencing God's transforming love in a more immediate way, personal and social change will follow. When we deliberately read Scripture with people from diverse backgrounds who would not normally gather together, reconciliation, unity, joint mission, and spiritual renewal can result—transforming individuals, faith communities, and society itself. This is especially true when we intentionally include people on the margins of society: the outcasts, the sinners, and the excluded.

North America's urban centers today often include first-generation immigrants from hundreds of nations and myriads of ethnicities. My community of 100,000+ inhabitants in Skagit County, Washington, an hour north of Seattle, is typical of many rural North American counties. Skagit County is home to three distinct Native American reservations. Twenty percent of the population are immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Farm workers from Mexico who labor in the agricultural industry speak five distinct languages. The county is also home to former-immigrant communities from Sweden, Norway, Holland, Japan, the Philippines, and more recent arrivals from Korea and Russia. If missional engagement is to go beyond direct service, social justice, legal advocacy, or solidarity to include proclamation, leading Bible studies, or teaching, ministers need approaches to the Bible that are both accessible and offer concrete relief from immediate troubles. Searching the Scriptures with people from diverse cultures and social backgrounds is tremendously rich and challenging—and an

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invitation to rediscovering the heart of the gospel message as we see it afresh through the eyes of the Other.<sup>1</sup>

Learning to read Scripture multiculturally requires a growing awareness on a number of fronts: 1) an awareness of the facilitator's own cultural and theological assumptions, and how they affect interpretation and their connection with the people across racial/cultural lines; 2) identifying racial/ethnic, cultural, and class assumptions as well as images of God presented by others; 3) an awareness of pitfalls to hearing Good News and to effective pedagogies and communications strategies; 4) an expectation to hear in a fresh way the Good News of God's embodied and transforming love; 5) a growing discernment in being led by God's Spirit, humility, and boldness in exercising the gifts of the Spirit; and 6) learning to implement effective pedagogies and communications strategies. After briefly surveying the first two points, I will focus on points 3–6, ending with an example of a multicultural Bible study.

### AWARENESS OF THE FACILITATOR'S OWN CULTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

There are a number of fine books on cross-cultural reading of Scripture<sup>2</sup> and a vast body of literature specific to subcultures, languages, and ethnicities, including approaches to telling stories from Scripture to illiterate people from oral cultures.<sup>3</sup> Those who regularly engage in multicultural ministry that includes reading the Bible will almost inevitably become aware of their own cultural and theological assumptions, and how these can hinder or facilitate transformational reading.<sup>4</sup> For thirty years, I have ministered multiculturally, pursuing a gospel that has a potency to change lives and mobilize people. My own presence as a Caucasian American makes me a foreigner in many of the settings where I minister—whether among peasants in villages and homes in rural Honduras or Mozambique, Mexican farm workers in migrant labor camps in Washington State, or with inmates in Skagit County Jail or in other countries.<sup>5</sup> How can people's negative impressions against me, as well as Scripture and God, be effectively shifted?

Creating a safe space for people to share openly their problems and thoughts about a

<sup>1</sup> See "Reading With: A Call to Conversion," in Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003), 15–45.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker, Marleen Kook, and Daniel Schipani, *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004); Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993); "Reading With": *An Exploration of the Interface between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible* (ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1996); Musa W. Dube Shomanah, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001); R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Paul F. Koehler, *Telling God's Stories with Power: Biblical Storytelling in Oral Cultures* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2010). Also see online: "Simply the Story," n.p., <http://www.simplythestory.org/oralbiblestories/>. Accessed April 7, 2011; "Orality Strategies," n.p., [http://www.oralistategies.org/strategy\\_detail.cfm?StrategyID=1](http://www.oralistategies.org/strategy_detail.cfm?StrategyID=1). Accessed April 7, 2011; "Biblical Storytelling Resource Directory," n.p., [http://www.missionaryresources.com/story\\_telling.html](http://www.missionaryresources.com/story_telling.html). Accessed April 7, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See chs. 2–3 in Bob Ekblad, *A New Christian Manifesto: Pledging Allegiance to the Kingdom of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 11–51. For a comprehensive treatment on social location and biblical interpretation, see Frenando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Reading from this Place, vol. 1; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995); and idem, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Reading from this Place, vol. 2; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See Bob Ekblad, "Journeying with Moses toward True Solidarity: Shifting Social and Narrative Locations of the Oppressed and their Liberators in Exodus 2–3," in *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities* (ed. Gerald O. West; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 87–102.

biblical text is the highest priority, and requires great care and deliberation. Leaders must have a non-judgmental posture marked by humility, curiosity, and openness to people, and must be able to mediate discussion firmly and sensitively so that the most vulnerable people in the group feel safe. We want people to feel free to share their impressions and discoveries in as uncensored a way as possible. We want to perceive accurately how people from a particular ethnicity, subculture, or social class tend to view themselves, God, and the world. In addition, people will often hide their true thoughts, the "hidden transcript," presenting only what fits in with the "official transcript."<sup>6</sup> Discerning whether the text supports people's interpretations can both challenge our habitual readings and invite us to clarify the deepest meaning of the text. Careful listening to people and comparison with the text will also help us discern the negative images of God that may underlie people's interpretations of what the text seems to say in its own right.

### **IDENTIFYING RACIAL, CULTURAL, AND CLASS ASSUMPTIONS AND IMAGES OF GOD PRESENTED BY OTHERS IN THE READING GROUP**

I have previously identified a number of common characteristics of what I refer to as "street" or "dominant" theology,<sup>7</sup> although there are variations of this from one culture to another and exceptions from exposure to other theologies or an awareness of positive experiences of God. In dominant theology, God is generally viewed as an all-powerful sovereign in control of the universe, who allows or deliberately sends natural disasters, sickness, trauma, death, calamities, and other difficulties to punish or correct disobedient or otherwise unworthy subjects. A low anthropology usually accompanies images of God that emphasize holiness and distance from sinners. This theology becomes visible when people describe God as putting them in jail, or in other ways negatively controlling their destiny, or "taking" their loved ones through death. In contrast, their successes are often attributed to luck, hard work, or good karma (or its equivalents). A common assumption is that troubles can be prevented through right religious practices, avoiding prohibited behaviors, and obeying the rules required of them by church leaders or revealed through Scripture. New immigrant groups often find refuge in legalism, returning to established traditional beliefs and religious practices in response to perceived threats by the host country to their children and family. Inmates and people in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions are also prone to putting themselves under the law in order to keep in line and bargain for ongoing help from God—which coincides with actual needs to keep promises with partners, to comply with the drug court, or to fulfill terms of probation. Others on the margins give up completely on com-

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<sup>6</sup> West, *Academy of the Poor*, 94–102.

<sup>7</sup> Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 26–28, 72–74.

plying with perceived divine (and civil) requirements due to repeated failures at what they perceive as getting on God's "good side."

For many people, negative images of God originate in core experiences of the human father and mother who abandoned or rejected them, who punished or abused them, who were impossible to please and controlling, or who were permissive and negligent. Images of God continue to be re-enforced or challenged by negative or positive experiences with the church, other Christians, or authority figures. Ministry workers must be keenly aware of the images of God they and their faith communities portray—deliberately or inadvertently—and of ways in which they affirm and reinforce liberating images of God and challenge oppressive images in order to dismantle and replace them.

Conversion begins when we are met by a God revealed as one who knows and respects us just as we are. Facilitating this conversion involves identifying and breaking agreement with imaginary images of God and self that demobilize us. This process includes progressive differentiation of these images, from false notions of otherness and identity to increasingly truer perceptions. This happens through deliberate confrontation of negative theology and, most importantly, through experiences of authentic encounter with Jesus, who frees us to be ourselves.

### **AWARENESS OF PITFALLS TO HEARING GOOD NEWS AND EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGIES AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES**

Pitfalls to liberating interpretation of Scripture must be identified and directly confronted by the Bible study facilitator.<sup>8</sup> There are a number of pitfalls that keep religious insiders in a broad range of reading communities from experiencing the burning heart that mobilizes people toward the excluded. These pitfalls must be identified and consciously remedied if people are to move beyond alienating ways of reading Scripture.

1. *Domestication of God and Scripture resulting from isolationism* is one of the most destructive pitfalls inhibiting a liberating reading of the Bible. Biblical interpretation is never neutral. The Bible is locked up by theologies we absorb from our subcultures, whether or not we grow up in the church. Hidden or consciously embraced theological assumptions and other presuppositions influence us to interpret automatically along traditional lines. Left unchallenged, these assumptions tempt us to look for evidence in the Bible that supports our ideas.

Multicultural Bible study leaders must recognize that their reading partners may suffer

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<sup>8</sup> Ekblad, *Reading the Bible*, 89–90.

from the opposite problem: perceiving Scripture and the church as foreign and removed from their lives. People often associate the Bible with archaic translations like the King James Version (or its equivalent in other languages); long, religious-sounding prayers; and complicated messages. Multicultural Bible study will be most effective when we use quality but contemporary translations; avoid religious jargon and complicated theological language; avoid long passages of Scripture; and use clear, simple examples from the lives of the reading community.

2. *The pitfall of moralism* is the common human tendency to come to biblical texts, unconsciously or consciously, looking for any information about what God might want us to do or think in order to win or maintain God's favor or immediate help. Desiring to please God is not the problem; rather, it is the orientation toward performance and perfectionism. Whenever action is empowered by false assumptions about God and salvation, obedience to rules or other demands becomes prioritized over the Good News of God's gracious, unconditional love toward us. Many Bible readers are confused by OT texts that emphasize obeying prescribed laws or NT texts such as "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48; cf. Matt 5:17–20; 1 John 3:6–10). Confusion and fear of God's wrath or rejection snatch away the joy and relief from truly understanding the message that "... by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works..." (Eph 2:8–9a; cf. Titus 3:7; 1 Tim 1:12–16; Acts 15:11; Rom 5: 6–11; 8:1–4). The pitfall of moralism is visible in descriptions of the Christian life that are marked by "dos" and "don'ts," and divisions between those who belong and the excluded. Moralism's effect on reading Scripture is visible in the rich young man's question to Jesus: "... what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matt 19:16). His words articulate the insecurity of many people about their standing before God and their questions when they come to the Bible. Jesus' call for the young man to sell everything and give it to the poor could be interpreted as designed to frustrate the young man's self-sufficiency and pride, revealing to him that he is unable to save himself through rigorous obedience, and that he needs to accept God's free gift of grace.

3. *The pitfalls of heroism and exemplarism* are related to moralism. These are visible when we search the Bible for heroes and other model characters included in Scripture whom we think we should emulate. While there are calls to follow the example of different biblical personalities (Jesus, in John 13:15 and 1 Pet 2:21; Paul, in Phil 3:17; Timothy, in 1 Tim 4:12; and the saints, in Heb 11), heroism can blind us to the unheroic nature of many biblical characters (e.g., Jacob, Joseph, Judah, David, and Peter).

As Bible study facilitators increasingly experience God's grace and love for themselves and become more confident of finding Good News in Scripture, their awareness of these pitfalls will increase, and they will more effectively steer clear of them in personal and multicultural settings.

## **AN EXPECTATION TO HEAR THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S EMBODIED AND TRANSFORMING LOVE**

Continual rediscovery of the Good News of God's love in different biblical texts with diverse groups increases our confidence in the authority and transformational power of God's Word. At the same time, there are many biblical texts that confuse and frustrate untrained readers by appearing to support negative images of God that are not good news for people, and are found in dominant theology. The detailed purity codes and other laws of Leviticus and Numbers confuse people who have been drawn to Jesus by a message of forgiveness and inclusive love. God's fiery judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19; of Korah and others in Num 16; the brutal conquest of the inhabitants of Jericho, Ai, and other Canaanite cities in Joshua; and oracles announcing God's judgment in the prophetic literature all trigger people's fears that the God of the OT is not trustworthy, and that the Jesus of the Gospels is overshadowed by a punishing, fear-inspiring Father.

The following assumptions inform my practice of reading Old and New Testament texts for Good News.

### **Reading with Jesus as Our Rabbi**

The gospel writers present Jesus as an exemplary reader of Scripture and communicator of Good News. Facilitators who affirm faith in Christ need to read clearly and unashamedly the Old and New Testaments as witnessing to Jesus as God's most complete revelation—the world's Savior—and with the Holy Spirit as guide. The Gospels show us how Jesus himself read Scripture and drew from it to minister to people. I will look at this in more detail below.

1. *Jesus preaches and teaches with a heart of compassion and action-oriented love for the poor, the outcast, and sinners.* The first eleven chapters of Matthew show Jesus launching his ministry at the margins in Galilee by preaching repentance and the kingdom of heaven (4:17); calling ordinary fishermen to follow (4:18–22); healing and delivering the masses of their sicknesses and evil spirits (4:23–25); touching lepers (8:1–4); casting out demons from the most violent offenders (8:28–34); forgiving and healing a paralytic (9:1–8); and befriending and calling tax-

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collectors as his disciples (9:9–13). “Go and learn what this means,” Jesus admonishes the Pharisees who critique him for eating with tax-collectors and sinners: “I desire compassion and not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matt 9:13, NASB). Jesus is judged by religious insiders as a friend of tax-collector and sinners (Matt 11:19), and presented as having compassion on the harassed and helpless crowds (Matt 9:35–36). Jesus gives authority to his disciples to announce the kingdom, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons (10:1, 7–8).

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus ministers in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring Good News to the poor. In Jesus’ first public sermon in this Gospel, he turns to Isa 61:1–3 and reads aloud this Scripture to inaugurate his ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Jesus’ highest priority is ministry to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed.

2. *Jesus models and teaches humility, poverty of spirit, and meekness before God and others as essential for proclaiming and entering the Kingdom of God.* Jesus begins the Beatitudes with “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5: 3, 5). Jesus elevates children as exemplary, teaching that unless we become like children, we can never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3). He worships his Father, saying, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will” (Matt 11:25–26; cf. Luke 10:21).

3. *Jesus interprets the OT as witnessing to himself as Israel’s and the world’s Messiah Savior.* New Testament writers consistently present Jesus as Israel’s Messiah Savior who conquers the Evil One and subjugates the powers through his earthly life and his death on the cross. Believing that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah, and that his life and death saves us, must orient Christians in our interpretation of the OT and in our strategies for resisting evil in our world. Without this radical return to and full appropriation of this early confession, believers will be confused over the means for and divided in the practice of biblical interpretation.

We see in the transfiguration narrative that Jesus’ teaching and person trumps the Law and the Prophets. At the transfiguration, Moses, representing the Torah, and Elijah, representing the Prophets, appear with Jesus, but Jesus alone is transfigured. God the Father elevates his son Jesus over the Scriptures: “This is my beloved son, listen to him.”

Jesus is our Rabbi/teacher who shows us how Scripture refers to his special way of saving/liberating. On the road to Emmaus, the resurrected Christ comes alongside his

bewildered disciples, teaching them how to read Scripture.

And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures. (Luke 24:27, NASB)

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures . . . and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:45, 47)

According to Acts 18:28 (NASB), the Apostle Paul “powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.” The first preaching of the apostles highlights Jesus’ identity as both Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36).

4. *Jesus is presented in the NT as the OT Lord come in the flesh.* Jesus reveals the Father. In contrast to negative images of God presented above, NT writers depict Jesus as God’s most complete self-revelation who brings full clarity.

In these last days God has spoken to us in his Son, . . . and he is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his nature. (Heb 1:2–3, NASB)

He has rescued us from the power of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (Col 1:13–15)

The ancient confession “Jesus is Lord” is a direct identification between the Lord (*kurios* is the Greek translation of the divine name YHWH in Hebrew, translated in English Bibles as Lord, Jehovah, Yahweh). John the Baptist prepares the way of the Lord (*kurios*)—Jesus himself (Matt 3:3, 13–17; Mark 1:1–3, 9–11).

In the Gospel of John, there is a clear articulation that Jesus is himself God. God’s unexpected otherness is revealed in Jesus. In the prologue, the *logos* is identified as present with God at the beginning and as actually being God (John 1). Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus is identified with the Father (John 14:8–14) and the Holy Spirit.

John’s Gospel identifies Jesus as the Word of God present at the beginning, fully God, through whom all things came into being (John 1:1–3). Jesus is the Word made flesh who dwells among us, “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). John’s statement that “No one has ever seen God. The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known” (John 1:18, NASB) leaves no doubt that the revelation of God in Jesus trumps all other revelations. Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus is identified with the Father

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(John 14:8–14) and presents the Holy Spirit as partner, advocate/comforter/guide in God's ongoing presence and support of believers (14:16–18; 15:26–27; 16:5–15).

5. *Jesus exercises the gifts of the Spirit.* Jesus affirms that the Holy Spirit came upon him at his baptism, empowering him to minister from that point on (Luke 4:21). If Jesus needs the Holy Spirit upon him and the anointing to preach Good News to the poor, then so do we.

Jesus' contemporaries were astounded by his teaching, noting that he taught with authority (Luke 4:32; Mark 1:22). Jesus received his authority at baptism. In baptism, we, too, die and are raised as sons and daughters of God (Rom 6:1–11). The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus and comes upon us. The Father's favor is given freely, by grace, completely apart from our performance. "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Mark 1:11, NASB) says the Father over Jesus, before he had done anything in ministry. Knowing who we are as daughters and sons of God and receiving the Holy Spirit are the basis of empowerment for preaching Good News. Peter identified Jesus' baptism as the moment when God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power for his ministry.

*You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him.* (Acts 10:38 [NASB], italics added)

6. *Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to guide future disciples in every aspect of their lives and ministries.* The Holy Spirit is a guide who brings to memory the teachings of Jesus, who is our Rabbi/teacher (John 14:16–17).

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears; and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–14)

In Matthew's Gospel, John the Baptist presents Jesus as the one coming to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire.

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matt 3:11)

Jesus tells his disciples that their empowerment to preach and teach in his name will

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come after he sends the Holy Spirit to them.

And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49)

We see this happening at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes upon the believers who are gathered together. When the Holy Spirit comes, they begin to speak in tongues. It is clear from Acts 2:11 that these “tongues” enabled listeners from many different language groups to hear “of the mighty deeds of God” communicated personally to each of them. The Holy Spirit inspired Peter to interpret the believers’ supernatural communication regarding God’s mighty deeds as an example of the gift of prophesy and a fulfillment of Joel 2:28–29:

“In the last days it will be,” God declares, “that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out My Spirit; and they shall prophesy.” (Acts 2:17–18)

The Holy Spirit empowers ordinary people, including the young and old, and male and female slaves, to become spokespersons for God. Anyone engaged in the careful study of Scripture in preparation for preaching, teaching, writing, or for personal devotion needs to remember that the Holy Spirit speaks through the most ordinary and illiterate people in supernatural ways. This can happen only through immersion (baptism) in the Holy Spirit, when we receive the anointing, over and over again.

We need the anointing to teach us how to minister, as 1 John 2:27 rightly emphasizes:

As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.

### **GROWING DISCERNMENT IN BEING LED BY GOD’S SPIRIT, HUMILITY, AND BOLDNESS IN EXERCISING THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT**

Spiritual gifts are essential if we are effectively to interpret Scripture and communicate Good News. Through our immersion in the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit are released in us. Words of knowledge and wisdom, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues (1 Cor 12:8–10), and other gifts (*charismata*) are important for interpreting Scripture and announcing Good

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News. A recent trip involving multicultural Bible study in a French jail as well as Spanish-English gatherings in Skagit County Jail each flesh out what this can look like.

In February 2011, I visited a French jail in Clermont-Ferrand in the Massif Central mountain range, three hours south of Paris. Jean-Paul, a young Pentecostal pastor who does one-on-one visits with inmates, had invited me. He also has started a house church for people on the margins. He had never led a group Bible study in the jail and wanted me to help him get one going. Guards escorted us down narrow stone corridors through thick wooden doors with huge medieval-type keyholes and giant black iron hinges. The men who had signed up to attend were led into a small multi-purpose room one at a time by burly guards. We ended up with eight to nine men from France, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. Among them were Muslims, Catholics, and people from non-religious backgrounds.

Jean-Paul opened in prayer, and I introduced myself and told them about our ministry to inmates in Skagit County. We read the story of Jesus' call of Matthew the tax-collector. The men were surprised to hear that Jesus followed Matthew to his house, that he ate with this tax-collector as a friend, and that he sent away the law-enforcers with the instruction to learn what it means to have compassion. These men did not seem to have ever heard that Jesus is a friend of sinners. They were especially moved to hear that Jesus comes to heal the afflicted.

"Is there someone here who was stabbed in the back and you're still feeling pain?" I asked, launching out on a faint impression. "Yeah, I am," said a North African man. He was open to receiving prayer and said the pain went away immediately. Jean-Paul and I prayed for several others who claimed immediate relief from back and knee problems. I was deeply moved to see these men touched by Jesus' real presence to heal. Since then, Jean-Paul has written to me to say that his first Bible study after I left went really well, and that the Muslim man was healed of a back problem.

Upon returning to work with Tierra Nueva the following week, I went with my colleague Ryan to Skagit County Jail for our Sunday Bible studies for inmates in B-Pod. In the midst of short reflections on Scripture, we prayed for a man with restless-leg syndrome and another man with a broken hand.

On Thursday night, another colleague, Chris, and I did four back-to-back Bible studies. I was surprised when one of the groups declared proudly that they were "the God-pod," and that they had been meeting regularly for prayer and Bible study. "So when did that

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start?" I asked. An older Caucasian man answered confidently: "It was after two of us who suffered from back problems found that our backs weren't hurting anymore, even with these uncomfortable beds, after you guys prayed for us a few weeks back. That kind of started things off for us, I guess," he said happily.

Chris and I met again with the groups in B-Pod a week later. I invited the men to put out their hands to receive God's love, and we prayed for Jesus to pour out his Holy Spirit on us all. I then invited the men to put their hands where they needed prayer. Most placed their hands on their hearts.

Then I received an impression of the forehead of one of the men hitting and shattering the windshield of his car, leaving him mentally confused. I asked if anyone had been in a head-on collision and gone through the windshield. The man at whom I was looking said, "Yeah, I have. I went through the windshield and was thrown from my truck going 85 m.p.h.—was all covered with blood." I prayed that this man would be freed from the trauma he had experienced since the accident. After I sat down, one of the inmates told me that this was the man who had the broken hand for whom we had prayed—and that two days later, it was completely healed. Jesus' special care was really starting to sink in for him. The man with the restless leg syndrome then told everyone that since receiving prayer the week before, his legs were almost completely better.

While I am fully aware that healing is only one dimension of Jesus' ministry, I am also deeply moved to see the impact upon these beaten-up men of experiencing God's love in such tangible ways.

## LEARNING TO IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGIES AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

The Bible must be read and interpreted in deliberate rapport with our lives, communities, nation, and larger global community. The interface between the reading and study of Scripture and contemporary reading of our contexts requires deliberate work and creativity.<sup>9</sup> The following suggestions merely point the way towards a workable methodology.<sup>10</sup>

First, choose whether you plan to a) begin with a chosen Scripture, b) begin with a particular question or people's current struggles, or c) start with an impression God has given you regarding people's immediate need for comfort or healing. In order to know what would be Good News to your group, you must first become aware of the particular struggles fac-

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<sup>9</sup> See Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell, *The Word on the Streets: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), and West, *The Academy of the Poor*, for helpful discussion regarding hermeneutical issues related to reading Scripture.

<sup>10</sup> See Ekblad, *Reading the Bible*, 6.

ing the individuals or the community you are called to serve. What are the forces that prey on people?

We see from the Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching and preaching that he often launched into Scripture in response to needs he perceived or confrontations with religious authorities. Often Jesus acts first, then goes to Scripture to interpret his actions. There is no single method in Jesus' use of Scripture. Every encounter with his disciples, individuals, crowds, or religious leaders is unique, demonstrating Jesus' freedom to be guided by the Holy Spirit and his use of the gift of prophesy and "word of knowledge."<sup>11</sup> Here are just a few examples of Jesus' use of Scripture that can help orient us in our own:

- Jesus draws from Scripture in Mark 2:23–28 to defend himself and his disciples against adversity. When the Pharisees judge him and his disciples for harvesting and eating grain on the Sabbath, he draws from the Prophets, defending himself using the story of David and his men's eating of consecrated bread in 1 Sam 21:1–6.
- When the Pharisees and scribes critique Jesus and his disciples in Mark 7:1–8 for not washing their hands, Jesus draws from Isaiah 29:13 (LXX) to rebuke them for placing human tradition over revelation.
- In Matt 9:9–13, Jesus cites Hos 6:6 to defend his care and compassion for sinners and others on the margins.
- Jesus uses Scripture to confirm his teachings about future events. In Matt 10:34–36, Jesus draws from Mic 7:6 to show that disciples can expect division to come from following him. In Mark 13:24–37, Jesus cites several texts from Daniel, applying them to his second coming.
- In Matt 11:2–11, Jesus interprets his healings as the fulfillment of prophesy (Isa 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 61:1) regarding the coming Messiah.
- In John 6, Jesus interprets his multiplication of the loaves and his offer of his own body and blood by drawing from the story of the giving of manna in Exod 16 and the Passover in Exod 12.

Knowing which message is needed for each person or situation requires revelation and spiritual discernment. Receiving words from God for particular situations is at the heart of the prophetic calling and gifting. Isaiah 50:4–5 describes how a prophet receives contextually appropriate messages:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a disciple, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he awakens—wakens my ear to hear as a

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<sup>11</sup> See Mark Stibbe's treatment of the spiritual gift that Paul calls the "word of knowledge." Stibbe defines it as new revelation based on fresh appropriation of Scripture in *Know Your Spiritual Gifts: Practicing the Presents of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 36–53.

disciple. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards. (NASB)

Faithful interpretation of Scripture begins with discernment of the needs that God wants to address. Prayer and dialogue with the community will help greatly in this discernment process. If you plan to come to a group with a prayer ministry, begin with point C below; if approaching with a text or issue already chosen, begin at point B below, before determining the question at point A.

A. Begin with a question that evokes the contemporary context and burning issue(s) of the people with whom you read. Sample questions include:

What struggles, trials, temptations, challenges are you [or the other with whom you read] facing?

What are the external forces that are tempting or oppressing you? What are the obstacles to God's call on your life or another's life?

B. Look for a Scripture text that may speak into the life situation or sickness that you discern as the one that needs to be addressed. How do you determine which text for what situation?

*Ask yourself:* What is the heart of the matter in the text? What is the deeper meaning?

Attempt to prioritize the issues addressed in the text in your preparation for the Bible study or sermon. This will become clearer with careful exegesis following the steps below.

Knowledge of Scripture is important. The more you know the Bible, the more prepared you will be to choose an appropriate text.

C. Consider beginning with an impression from the Holy Spirit regarding a condition that God wants to heal, or a trauma or an immediate life crisis that God wants to address through prayer.

While a primary objective of Scripture study is to hear God's voice, another critical objective is for people to discover their own ability to do so, so that they, too, can communicate. Bible study leaders, teachers, and preachers should seek to engage people's participation in discovering God's revelation to their community through Scripture study.

Bible study should be dialogical and accessible. The facilitator should seek to empower ordinary readers to read and interpret for themselves. This often requires careful establishing

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of ground rules so that less-empowered people feel safe and free to share. Introductory remarks are usually important to present background information and help set the course for people to hear good news. Strong leadership and a willingness to intervene are often necessary so that the study is not hijacked by people who are proponents of traditional ways of reading that reinforce negative images of God. Since most readers around the world do not have access to research libraries, Bible study facilitators and preachers should share insights that minimally educated, ordinary readers can discover through limited training.

### BIBLE STUDY ON JOHN 8:1-11

Many stories can be acted out in ways that make visible the opposition between Jesus and his opponents. The story of Jesus' dealings with the woman caught in adultery and her accusers in John 8 makes for a powerful biblio-drama. The process outlined below is one I have used in various multicultural settings.

1. *Ask the group for volunteers to act as Jesus, the scribes, the Pharisees, the woman caught in adultery, and the man with whom she was caught in the act of adultery.* This must be handled with sensitivity. In an all-male Bible study, the facilitator may need to use either lighthearted humor or great seriousness when it comes to asking someone to volunteer to be the woman, and especially the woman's partner. One way to avoid tensions here is not to request that someone volunteer to be the man with whom the woman was committing adultery.

2. *Invite the person playing Jesus to stand, and with the others to form a circle around her or him.* Invite someone to read John 8:1-2. Then, ask the group: "Where was Jesus, and what was he doing here at the beginning of this story?"

3. *Ask the individual playing the woman caught in adultery and her partner (if there is someone willing to play this role) to move outside the circle.* If you are outside and there are trees, have them go behind a tree. If you are inside, have them go behind some chairs, a column, or somewhere where they are visible but partially hidden. Those playing these parts may head off sheepishly as people laugh and tease.

4. *Ask someone to read John 8:3-4a.* Tell those who have volunteered to act as scribes and Pharisees to prepare themselves to act out this verse, but to wait for instructions to apprehend the person playing the woman.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he

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sat down and began to teach them. And the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and making her stand before all of them, they said to him . . .

5. *Ask people: "Who are some of the people or groups that you see as contemporary equivalents of the woman caught in adultery—who are accused of sinful behavior?"* People in poorer countries mention thieves, people who commit adultery, and the poor. In Mozambique, nobody mentioned people living with AIDS. Since I was aware that these people are particularly shunned, I brought this up, asking a group of pastors whether people dying of AIDS in their communities might be contemporary equivalents of the woman caught in adultery. Many of the pastors nodded slowly and looked down.

6. *Ask those acting as scribes and Pharisees to bring the one portraying the woman caught in adultery into the circle before Jesus.* You could say, "Let's see how Jesus deals with her." Four to eight people playing scribes and Pharisees stride off, grabbing the adulterer under the arms and nearly dragging her into the center of the circle before the person acting as Jesus. The person playing the woman's partner is left alone, a visible reminder that will be taken up soon in the Bible study.

7. *Ask one of the people playing the scribes or Pharisees to read the accusations in John 8:4–6.*

"Teacher, this woman has been caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. (NASB)

8. *Ask the group whether they know if the scribes and Pharisees are right regarding the Law of Moses.* People unfamiliar with the Bible are often unsure how to answer this question.

9. *Ask someone to read aloud Deut 22:22.*

If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

Then, ask again whether they know if the scribes and Pharisees are right regarding the Law of Moses. Ask: "Do the scribes and Pharisees seem to be rightly enforcing this law?" Someone usually observes that the scribes and Pharisees' enforcement was unjust, as only the woman was singled out. The law states that both the man and the woman are to be stoned. People will look outside the circle to the lone man playing the woman's partner.

10. *Ask the group whether selective enforcement of religious or civil laws only happened in the first century, or if it continues today and where.* Participants in poorer countries or inmates in American

jails are sensitive to selective enforcement, racial profiling, and the reality that people accused of crimes who can afford expensive attorneys get more favorable results in the courts. Everyone can clearly see the injustice of the selective enforcement by the scribes and Pharisees. Another possible question is: "Are the rich and powerful treated the same as the poor by the authorities?" or "Are men treated differently than women when it comes to judgments against adultery or other behaviors?"

11. *Invite the person playing the woman's partner back into the circle.* Ask everyone now within the circle to reach down and pick up an imaginary rock and hold it over their heads, ready to stone the woman in the center of the circle before Jesus. The group facilitator needs to be sure that everyone lifts an imaginary rock over their heads, and that the person playing the woman is standing in the middle of the circle before the person playing Jesus.

12. *Interview the person playing the woman and the people about their feelings.* Ask the person playing the woman: "What are you feeling right now?" Common responses are "fear," "shame," "aloneness," "terror," and "guilt." The accused can often feel people's eyes on them. Ask the other participants: "Are there times when you feel eyes of accusation directed against you? When do you feel this? What does it feel like?" These questions help people identify with the accused in ways that prepare them to hear Good News themselves from Jesus as the Bible study unfolds.

13. *Keep the momentum of the drama going and shift to the next topic of discussion by telling everyone to lift high their rocks and get ready to stone the woman.* Ask those encircling the woman: "How does it feel when you prepare to stone someone?" or "How does it feel to be enforcers of the laws in the Bible?" "Powerful," "righteous," "justified" are common responses. People often mention feeling united with others against a scapegoat or common enemy.

14. *Ask the group:* "So how does Jesus deal with the scribes and Pharisees who feel compelled to enforce this Old Testament law?" Then, have someone read John 8:6:

Jesus bent down, and wrote with his finger on the ground.

Make sure the person playing Jesus stoops down before the person playing the woman, who remains standing in the middle, and begins to write on the ground.

15. *Invite the people to note what happens when Jesus stoops down.* Observe with everyone how their eyes move from the accused to look at Jesus' hand and what he is writing.

16. *Ask the accused if he or she feels any different as the accusers' gaze turns away from him or her.*

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The person usually mentions feeling relieved to be out of the spotlight. Jesus' first act of advocacy on behalf of the woman caught in adultery is to free her from the gaze of the accusers, shifting their condemning gaze onto a word not yet perceived. Jesus himself is looking down at the ground, focused on whatever he is writing with his finger, and is refusing the role of the accuser.

17. *Have someone read the first part of John 8:7.* Then, have the person playing Jesus act out and speak the next action and words.

A narrator reads:

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up, and said to them. . . .

The person playing Jesus stands and says to the accusers:

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

The person playing Jesus then stoops down and writes on the ground again.

18. *Ask those playing the scribes and Pharisees and onlookers to observe again what is happening with their eyes* when Jesus says to let the one "who is without sin be the first to throw a stone."

People usually observe that Jesus' statement causes them to look away from Jesus and away from the woman to their own lives. By acting out this story, everyone can clearly see that Jesus takes people's eyes off the woman onto himself.

The facilitator can point out here that at the beginning of the story, we are all told that the woman is brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees in order "to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him" (John 8:6). When they persist in questioning him, they are looking at him. When he stands up, all eyes are on him, and when he stoops down, once more their eyes follow him before turning onto their own hearts. People can see that when Jesus moves from squatting to standing, he exercises power and authority. Yet he does this by asking them a question that invites self-reflection, causing everyone to look at their own lives. Note that Jesus' stooping down and writing show his refusal to take the role of the accuser.

The facilitator can ask the person playing the woman how he or she is feeling at this point. The person undoubtedly will feel much better.

19. *Have someone read John 8:9, inviting people to sit, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest participants.*

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When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

People will lower their imaginary stones and step away from the circle.

20. *Invite someone to read the first line of John 8:10:*

Jesus straightened up and said to her . . .

Have the person playing Jesus and the woman enact and read aloud Jesus' words to the woman and her response in John 8:10b–11.

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

21. *Invite people to gather around closer for some final observations and a response.* Note that Jesus' question invites the woman to see for herself that she is free from the entrapment of the accusers. Jesus exercises his power and authority as one standing before her, not to condemn but to free her. At the same time, he calls her to a new life without sin.

Ask people how they were feeling while holding their hands over their heads all that time with imaginary stones. Talk about the heaviness of carrying around judgments against other people. Invite the Holy Spirit to bring to mind any stones or judgments that people are still holding, and which the Spirit is inviting them to drop before Jesus.

Use a whiteboard or blank newsprint paper to write two columns that place the theology of the scribes and Pharisees side by side with Jesus' theology. Ask the group two questions: "If you only knew God through the words and actions of the scribes and Pharisees, what would God be like?" and "If you only knew God through Jesus' words and actions what would God be like?" In the column for the theology of the Scribes/Pharisees, people describe the images of God that this would portray: watching, catching, accusing, judging, condemning, punishing, hard-hearted, rules more important than people, unfriendly, on the side of the righteous, and so forth. In the column for Jesus' theology, people put words to describe these images of God such as defending, available/present, protecting, convicting, confrontational, merciful, kind, forgiving, on the side of sinners/outcasts, and more.

We conclude by drawing a line with chalk across the carpet (or a line in the dirt with a stick), continuing from the line on the white board separating the theology of the scribes and Pharisees from that of Jesus. I invite people to stand and place themselves on the side

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of the line with the scribes and Pharisees. I pray that the Holy Spirit will bring conviction to us regarding ways in which we agree with the theology of the scribes and Pharisees. I invite people to confess or acknowledge verbally their unhealthy agreements before breaking away from these agreements verbally or silently in their hearts. At this point, I formulate a prayer and invite others to join in as they are able, or quietly to themselves, to acknowledge how they see themselves embodying the practices and thinking of the scribes and Pharisees. I lead people to take a further step of actually turning away from unhealthy beliefs and practices; this brings greater definition and resolve into the response. People renounce attitudes and actions in the minutes that follow.

I also pray that the Holy Spirit will bring to mind anything into which God is now calling people. I invite people to speak out what they are feeling drawn by Jesus to do. Some express their attraction to Jesus and their desire to be like him, especially because he defends the woman and does not condemn her. This Bible study often inspires people to ministries of advocacy and of outreach to people who feel excluded from church and society. I sometimes end in prayer for those who feel called to advocate or in some other way accompany people on the margins.

I then invite people who are feeling drawn away from the dominant theology that was made visible in the drama by the accusing and judgmental scribes and Pharisees to move into Jesus' way of grace and defense, and physically step over the line to the side of the whiteboard, where we have listed Jesus' way of life. My students eagerly join me as we step over the line. One woman says she feels like dancing. There is freedom in the air. In Mozambique, the drums and guitars were out, and dancing and worship abounded. Jesus' advocacy for the accused before the powers that shame and condemn is desperately needed and is welcomed when made present.

In conclusion, reading Scripture for Good News that crosses barriers of race/ethnicity, social class, and culture requires awareness and great sensitivity to other people, the details of the biblical text, the Holy Spirit, and one's own place in the mix. At times, it feels like I have miraculously "gotten away with" a Bible study in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Yet, when people are humble and hungry for good news, multicultural Bible studies can feel effortless and even fun. Reading Scripture in ways that bring people's lives and their problems into a direct encounter with God inspires hope and awakens faith. Multicultural Bible studies are unique opportunities to draw closer to people who are very different from you and each other—and to experience God, whose Holy Spirit loves to connect and reconcile, liberate, heal, and call into fullness of life.

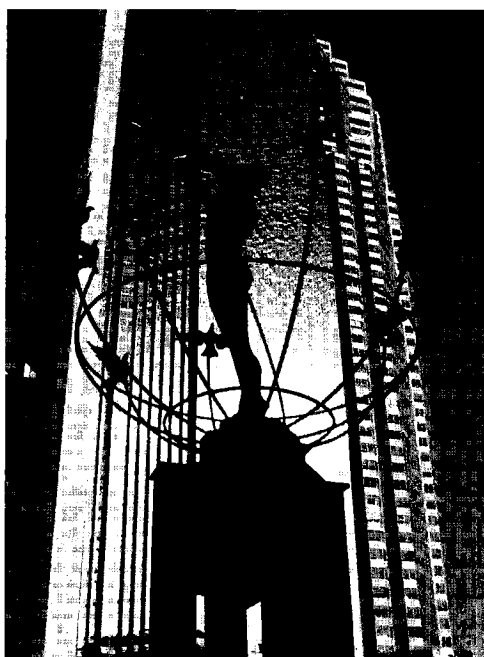
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## CONTRIBUTORS

BOB EKBLAD is director of *Tierra Nueva* and *The People's Seminary* in Burlington, Washington. A minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), he holds a Th.D. in Old Testament (L'Institut Protestant de Théologie, Montpellier, France) and is committed to empowering and equipping the body of Christ for effective ministry to people on the margins of society: the poor, rejected, broken, and oppressed. Ekblad is also part-time Associate Professor of Old Testament at Mars Hill Graduate School and Lecturer in Old Testament at Westminster Theological Centre in the United Kingdom. His growing itinerant ministry has taken him to the U.K., France, Honduras, Mozambique, South Africa, Korea, Philippines, Canada, as well as around the United States. He has written *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Westminster John Knox, 2005) and *A New Christian Manifesto: Pledging Allegiance to the Kingdom of God* (Westminster John Knox, 2008). Ekblad is married to Gracie, who is associate director of *Tierra Nueva* and a minister in the PCUSA. They also minister together at their home-based retreat center, *New Earth Refuge*, and have three children, ages 20, 18, and 16.

URIAH Y. KIM is professor of Hebrew Bible at Hartford Seminary and editor of *Reviews in Religion & Theology*. He received his Ph.D. from Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Kim has published a book on King Josiah, *Decolonizing Josiah* (Sheffield Phoenix, 2006) and a book on King David, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story* (Sheffield Phoenix, 2008); the topics in both books are examined from an Asian-American postcolonial perspective. He is currently writing a book on Judges (Sheffield Phoenix) and doing research on a commentary on 1–2 Chronicles for the *Wisdom Commentary Series* (Liturgical Press). Kim is a member of Asylum Hill Congregational Church, Hartford, Connecticut.

FRANCISCO LOZADA, JR. is the Charles Fischer Catholic Associate Professor of New Testament and Latino/a Church Studies at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. He received his Ph.D. in New Testament and Early Christianity from Vanderbilt University. Lozada is co-editor with Thomas Thatcher of *New Currents Through John: A Global Perspective* (SBL Publications, 2006) and has published several recent essays in the area of Latino/a



Monument to Multiculturalism, Francesco Perilli, bronze sculpture, 1985. Location: Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Photo credit: Laszlo Podor. Copyright ©Laszlo Podor.

biblical hermeneutics. His teaching and research interests include New Testament studies, contemporary biblical interpretation, and Latino/a studies. Lozada is former president of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States, former co-chair of the Johannine Literature Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, and is a member of the SBL Council and the Program Committee. He is currently working on several co-edited volumes on Latino/a biblical interpretation through *Semeia Studies* (SBL). Lozada is married with two children.

RAQUEL A. ST. CLAIR is the first woman to serve as the Executive Minister of the historic Saint James African Methodist Episcopal Church in Newark, New Jersey. In addition to her administrative responsibilities, she leads *Sunday Worship* in South Orange, a contemporary worship experience held in a local performing arts center. St. Clair received her Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from Princeton Theological Seminary. Her academic interests include the Gospel of Mark, African American biblical interpretation, womanist theology and biblical interpretation, and homiletics. Her most recent book is *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Fortress, 2008).