



# Igniting Biblical Imagination in Our Congregations: Insights from the Book of Faith Initiative

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**I**gniting biblical imaginations far and wide has been one of my major goals in life for as long as I can remember. I know I share this goal with many folks. For the last six years I have had the privilege of serving as the director of the Book of Faith Initiative in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We have a number of ways to talk about the goals of the initiative—fighting biblical illiteracy, increasing biblical fluency, faithfully engaging the Bible. I can think of no better way of expressing the goals than igniting biblical imagination throughout the church. In this article, I want to share some of what we have learned the last six years in our work for the initiative. But let me begin by telling two personal stories from my earlier life.

I happen to remember vividly when my own biblical imagination was first ignited. I come from a pretty secular Jewish background. I grew up in a wonderful and loving family (who are still loving, still wonderful, and still Jewish). It was the 1950s. We were very American. I went to Sunday school and was confirmed—no

*Igniting biblical imagination works better when we tell stories than when we talk theory. Igniting biblical imagination takes time and conversation. These are but two of the insights offered here, based on the author's years of seminary teaching and church leadership.*

Shabbat school and bar and bat mitzvahs for us! I attended an Episcopal girls' school since the fifth grade. When I was in high school, a teacher offered an extra-curricular class on the Beatitudes. I took it on a dare. One class and I was hooked by the depth and the beauty and the challenge. I was blown out of the water by what Jesus said. This was not what I had imagined. A new imagination took hold, and I never looked back. Many are the times I have wished I had a recording of that class so I could figure out precisely what that teacher did that had that effect. I remember an open attitude and lots of questions. And, of course, it was not for credit.

One other personal story stands out as an experience that invited deep engagement of biblical imagination. It is a pretty long story, so bear with me. I had been teaching at Luther Seminary for ten or fifteen years. Some graduate students and faculty decided we wanted to read the Bible together just for fun, outside of the classroom! We gathered in the office of Don Juel of blessed memory. We decided to read Matthew, starting with the genealogy. We read carefully, noticing details. We noticed the five women and asked why Matthew would have included them and what they had in common. "They are all foreigners until Mary, and they all have interesting sexual pasts. They are all subject to the accusation of harlotry, but they all end up being heroines of the faith." (Nice!) We noticed in verse 17 that the genealogy is divided up by groups of fourteen. Why fourteen? "Seven's a good number; it's important." "And if you add up the letters of David's name in Hebrew, it equals fourteen." (We were pretty educated readers.) "But," someone else noticed, "the numbers don't really match. There are not fourteen names in each list." (You don't have to be a theologically educated reader to notice this—you just have to be good at arithmetic.)

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We observed all sorts of other things. But throughout the discussion we all knew that we were avoiding talking about what was really bothering us. We knew we were reading a genealogy, showing who is related to whom, tying father, and occasionally mother, to son. The genealogy in Matthew appears to prove that Jesus is the son of David, a true heir of the royal house of David, but something even more important than the numbers was not quite matching up. In verse 16, the genealogy goes to Joseph. "But Joseph is only the husband of Mary. Mary is the mother of Jesus. Joseph isn't really related to Jesus." "So how does this genealogy work? What does it prove?"

We were uncomfortable, so we worked harder with the text. We concentrated on Joseph. We noticed in verses 18–24 that Joseph, a righteous man, embraces

Mary's assumed disgrace. And then Joseph takes the child and names him. This reminded us of Pharaoh's daughter taking the child and naming him Moses. Naming there was an act of adoption. And then a light goes on all around the room. Joseph adopts Jesus. Jesus in the genealogy doesn't have a father; he's the only male who doesn't. But in the end, he does have a father, an adopted one. Jesus is the Son of David by adoption. Jesus is not David's son by blood, but he is by adoption. Are we able to accept that as legitimate, as real? What constitutes family? Who is a legitimate heir to David? Who is a legitimate heir to the promise?

Suddenly, the whole text lies open before us. Does one have to be related by blood to be part of God's family? Jesus comes for Jews and Gentiles alike! Gentiles are adopted into the family, and adoption counts. If we don't believe this about Jesus and Joseph, how can we come to believe this of Jesus and the Gentiles? Matthew turns the traditional use of genealogy on its head. He uses genealogy to include outsiders. The clue was there already with the foreign women, and it's there at the end with Joseph. Jesus was truly Son of David; we are *all* truly heirs of the promise. Wow!

#### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

I tell this story in some detail as both an illustration of and a way to point to a number of insights about igniting biblical imagination:

1. Igniting biblical imagination works better when we tell stories than when we talk theory. Jesus knew something about this! I have learned in these last years that it helps to begin by listening to stories from others, by asking, for example, "What were the best, most engaging experiences you have had with scripture? What made them engaging?"

2. Igniting biblical imagination takes time and conversation. It helps to engage in deep listening to the text and to each other. This happens best in groups. Often the greater the variety within the group, the greater the insight. A deep challenge is the lack of cultural diversity in the group we often experience in the church. Who knows what other insights might have sprung up about the first chapter of Matthew had others been present. There are always more surprises.

3. Expertise can provide insight, but it can be stifling as well. Knowing when and how to bring scholarly and theological insight is more an art than a science. It helps for a leader to be aware of what is happening, asking such questions as, "Am I opening up this conversation or shutting it down? What kind of question am I asking? Am I looking for a right answer, an observation, or a free-for-all conversation? What kind of question would be helpful for igniting biblical imagination?"

4. While it helps to know stuff, it also helps to listen. This means listening deeply to a passage, attending to details, and reading what is actually there. This means being open to the Spirit and to surprise.

5. Different folks learn in different ways. I am aware that, despite what I have said thus far, some folks learn best by contemplating alone, by listening to fine lec-

tures, by reading, or by talking to one trusted friend—which is to say that what I have learned about how to ignite biblical imagination should never be taken as a “one size fits all” prescription.

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### OBSTACLES FACING CONGREGATIONS

I have continued to learn many things through personal experience—through almost thirty years of seminary teaching and now by having led a church-wide initiative. In this latter role, I have had many conversations, both formal and informal, with parish leaders. Among other things, I regularly have asked them to list the three biggest obstacles that face their congregations as they try to commit to a deeper engagement with the Bible. Here are the eight obstacles mentioned most frequently:

1. Folks who are longtime members are deeply ashamed of what they don't know about the Bible, so they won't come to a Bible “study” lest their secret be discovered.
2. Folks are so busy with multiple demands on their lives, they feel they don't have time for one more thing, no matter how important.
3. Reading the Bible can be scary. It doesn't work like other books where you just start at the beginning and read to the end. Plus, this book is holy, so what happens when you get it wrong or, even worse, get bored or confused?
4. The Bible is just too violent! And there are truckloads of inconsistencies. We never seem to talk about this.
5. Folks have a negative history with the Bible. It has often been used more as a weapon or a source of argument than as a cradle of Christ.
6. Folks say that the Bible is just an old book anyway. How can it possibly be relevant today?
7. The media and culture seem to insist that the only way to read the Bible is literally. So folks don't want to come to a “study,” either because the church is too conservative and buys into this or the church is too liberal and doesn't teach “what the Bible says.”
8. Folks feel they need the pastor to lead any study because he or she is the expert, but the theological language used is way too confusing.

Together with these church leaders we have explored questions and practices that

help address these obstacles. The common arenas needful of discussion have been venues and types of gatherings and methods of scriptural engagement.

#### VENUES AND TYPES OF GATHERINGS: TRIED AND POSSIBLE

The traditional practice of having Bible study between services with various midweek studies has worked well for some but has often not addressed the above listed obstacles. Here are some ideas that have been shared. Renaming events as “Bible Conversations” rather than “Bible Study” helps many get past the shame. Changing the venue to homes, coffee shops, and local pubs rather than church basements can help to attract folks not open to coming to a traditional Bible study. If we want to attract and interact with young adults and children (for the sake of the adults as well as the young people), then engaging scripture in the home, in family settings, and in multigenerational gatherings is crucial. Often folks need personal invitations to join in, because bulletins and Sunday announcements are insufficient. *Hospitality is central rather than incidental to igniting biblical imagination.* Hospitality sets more than the table; it provides openness and welcome.

#### METHODS OF ENGAGING SCRIPTURES: VARIETIES OF LENSES AND QUESTIONS

At the heart of igniting biblical imagination is finding ways to engage the Bible that are inviting and personal, truthful and deep, challenging and unsettling, and spiritually alive, filled with promise and faith. One single way of reading the Bible will not do. In the Book of Faith Initiative, we have been exploring the use of four different methods or lenses or ways of asking questions. Each practice makes its own contribution to igniting biblical imagination.

##### *Devotional reading*

Devotional reading invites all of us to set aside our expertise or our lack of knowledge and invite a passage from the Bible to seep into our hearts, minds, and souls, both personally and communally. Such reading has a long history in the church, going back to *lectio divina*, a Latin phrase meaning “divine reading,” an ancient method started by the Benedictines. Though it was created for individual meditation, it has now been adapted for groups in a variety of ways by the Moravians, the Kaleidoscope Institute, Church Innovations, and many others. Devotional reading invites us to listen slowly and carefully both to the biblical text and to each other. It invites us to develop a habit with which a group becomes familiar and comfortable. Devotional reading might include such questions as: What word or phrase strikes you, and where does it take you? What images or stories or memories come to mind? What confuses or challenges you? What delights you or fills you with hope? The worst question is “What do you think?” insofar as such a question evokes the classroom, and many folks then imagine they are going to “think” wrong. With devotional reading there are no “right” answers and no experts in the room. This reality makes some scholars and pastors very nervous.

I once had a pastor tell me that he hated devotional reading because people talked so much about their own lives. But here are the strengths of beginning any conversation with the Bible with a devotional reading: All stand equal before the word. Shame and fear tend to melt away. Insights abound, often from the least expected places. Personal experience counts. And one begins by leaving room for the Spirit.

### *Historical reading*

Historical reading grows out of the understanding that our Bible is, among many other things, an ancient text, written in a different time and place by and for folks with sensibilities and experiences quite different from our own. Historical reading does not ask the question so many folks often want to ask: “What really happened?” Most often such a question cannot be answered. Rather, the basic historical question is this: “What insights from history would be helpful to know in order to hear, read, study, or understand this passage more thoroughly?” Historical questions help us to understand what stands behind a text. So when we are reading the book of Ruth, we might want to know something about Moab (Ruth was from there) or what the life of widows was like in ancient Bethlehem (both Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, were widows). Or, if we are reading a letter from Paul to the Corinthians, we might want to know something about the city of Corinth in Paul’s day so that we can better understand the original context of the letter. One of the benefits of historical reading is that folks are not able to impose their own culture and time on the Bible. Reading the Bible historically is truly a cross-cultural experience and needs the same sensibilities demanded by any such encounter.

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There are many ways history can be helpful. But it doesn’t always solve readers’ problems with the text. Sometimes it gives you really good options, so you might imagine different possibilities. For example, if we imagine Mark is writing to a Jewish community, we might hear his Gospel one way, but if he were writing to a Gentile audience, we might hear it another way. Both are possible. For the most part, when we ask historical questions, we are inviting folks to find meaning by working through analogies with their own life circumstances. For example, insofar as our life is like the lives of the people whom the prophets were addressing, their message is relevant to our lives as well. (“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy...” Amos 4:1a)

Historical questions do need an expert. Sometimes the expert is in the room. Sometimes you learn trustworthy places to go to look stuff up: study Bibles, good websites ([workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org); [enterthebible.org](http://enterthebible.org); [textweek.com](http://textweek.com)), and secondary

material. One of the deep challenges of historical reading is figuring out how to avoid the expert syndrome, the learned lecture that tends, albeit inadvertently, to undermine the very accessibility issues supported by reading devotionally. Sometimes skilled lecturers and teachers are able to engage the historical imagination of the gathered community. More often, the community is better engaged if they can figure out for themselves what historical insights they might want to know. An exercise developed by my colleague Hans Wiersma at Augsburg College works quite well. Invite readers to ponder the following question: If you were writing the notes for a study Bible for this passage, at which points would you put a note? (An updated question might be, if you were looking up this passage on the Internet, where would you want a hyperlink?) What is helpful in the exercise is the personal involvement that follows. Curiosity also feeds imagination.

### *Literary reading*

A literary reading is one in which we look at a text as a written piece of literature and we attend to the details and nuances of the text, believing that meaning can be found deeply within it. For this, you don't have to be a biblical scholar, but it does help to be a good reader. Such a reading invites folks to imagine more of a book club than a Bible study. Because many folks experience the Bible as "too holy" or "too complicated," they forget the skills they might bring to reading other literature. I was once discussing this with a group in Iowa, and a woman who was an English teacher excitedly told her pastor, "I am going to go home and lead some Bible studies. Who knew the Bible was a book!" The truth is that in the last fifty years biblical scholarship has learned a great deal from teachers of literature about how to unlock meaning through careful reading.

A literary reading invites folks to ask all manner of questions: What sort of passage am I reading (a story, a poem, a letter)? Is it prose or poetry (which leads to different sorts of follow-up questions)? What details stand out? What is repeated or emphasized? If this is a story, what is the setting (in time and place)? Setting questions can be wonderfully fun for igniting biblical imagination. If a story takes place in the wilderness, one can ask a series of questions: What wilderness experience have you had? Where else in the Bible is wilderness important? How then does wilderness work in this story?

Stories always invite us to think about the people in the stories. How do they feel? What might they be thinking? How do you "know" from the text: Who gets name, action, or speech? What do other characters or the narrator say about them? Imaginations are expanded by acting out stories, retelling them as one would to a child or stranger, drawing them, or by any number of creative activities. Doing exercises, as one might when reading historically, can help folks read in such a way that they begin to see answers to such questions. Reading with literary glasses helps to kindle all manner of biblical imagination, enabling folks to see and read with new sensitivity.

### *Lutheran theological reading*

A Lutheran theological reading brings questions to a passage rising out of particular insights from our Lutheran heritage that can help us engage the Bible anew in each time and place. The emphasis of this way of reading is to take the theological insights from our tradition and make them understandable and accessible. If one is from another denominational tradition, other questions (as well as some of the same) might arise. If more than one denomination is represented in the room, things can be even more interesting.

In the case of Lutherans, can we, for example, invite folks to talk about law and gospel in helpful ways? A pastor once shared that he thought law and gospel make better verbs than nouns. So one can ask: How has this passage lawed you? That is, has engaging this passage made you aware of the needs of your neighbors or has it convicted you of your own sin? Or how has this passage gossiped you? That is, has engaging this passage given you a real experience of God's forgiveness and grace? Do you hear that Christ is there for you?

Can we bring home distinctions between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross in such a way that that these ideas are comprehensible, relevant, and personal, so they help form biblical imagination rather than undermine it? Can we talk about showing forth Christ by asking folks how a passage has brought them to Jesus and Jesus to them?

Asking such questions helps ignite a whole new level of biblical imagination. Meaning is not found only in the text (as in literary reading) or behind the text (as in historical reading). *The meaning of scripture is found in the encounter with the word.* Such questions have no right or wrong answers, but they can lead to fruitful and deep conversation. We are really back to devotional questions, but now with God and faith front and center.

These four ways of reading and asking questions are not intended to be systematic or exclusionary. Other lenses, such as biblical storytelling and creative use of art and music, can certainly spark imagination (witness everything from Bach cantatas to children's Sunday school plays). In any case, imagination is ignited both by engaging in a variety of ways of reading and by becoming aware of what sorts of questions one is asking.

I end with one final lesson that I have learned: It helps to pray. I am fond of inviting folks to open scripture and join the conversation with the following:

May we come prayerfully, asking that the Holy Spirit might guide our study and that Christ might be among us.

May we come to the Bible humbly, asking for the gift of faith and ever mindful of our own capacity for sin and self-deceit.\*

\*Martin Luther said, "The Holy Scriptures require a humble reader who shows reverence and fear toward the Word of God and constantly says, 'Teach me, teach me, teach me!' The Spirit resists the proud." Martin Luther, "The Study of the Bible Demands Humility" (1540), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 54, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 378.



May we come mindfully, bringing to our study the gifts of reason, the tools of scholarship, and the insights of others.

May we come attentively, reading scripture carefully and closely.

May we come in the context of a faithful community, letting our own stories interact with the stories of the Bible.

May we come expectantly, listening for the voice of God working through the text to inspire, shape, and enliven us individually and as a community of faith.

Igniting biblical imagination remains a central calling of the church, worthy of constant conversation and innovation. The invitation to be part of the conversation is open to all. ⊕

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