

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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In Good Company: Becoming Faithful Readers and Doers of Scripture The Shape of Scripture: God's Drama of Salvation

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Scripture is one of God's gifts to the church. Scripture is connected to God's deepest desires for us. Through an ongoing engagement with Scripture we learn the ways God is working to bring those desires to fruition in us and in the world. The working out of these desires over time can be called God's drama of salvation. Becoming faithful readers and doers of Scripture requires that we be able both to discern the movements of that drama and to understand how to inhabit our role in that drama.

Note: The Center for Parish Development's annual convocation in July 2009 focused on the theme "Becoming Faithful Readers and Doers of Scripture." Stephen Fowl, this year's resource leader, challenged and stimulated participants through four presentations: (1) God's Drama of Salvation, (2) Inhabiting God's Drama of Salvation, (3) Communal Hearing and Reading, and (4) A Common Life Worthy of the Gospel. Surrounded by communal worship and study of the book of Philippians, participants began to encounter a way of engaging Scripture that both forms and empowers missional congregations. For those who were unable to attend, the staff of the Center invited Stephen to share the substance of his presentations with all readers of the *Center Letter*. Thus, beginning with this issue, the *Center Letters* will explore the four aspects of Stephen's contribution. Each *Center Letter* will include Bible study so that you may invite others in your congregation into the adventure of becoming a good company of faithful readers and doers of Scripture.

The Shape of Scripture. Whether you have been reading the Bible for a long time or just beginning, thinking about the *shape* of Scripture may seem strange. Just looking at the table of contents of your Bible is enough to indicate the great variety of texts within the covers of this book. Each of these books on its own rewards the time and effort invested by attentive, prayerful readers. Even so, the more one engages the individual pieces of Scripture the more one is faced with the question, "How do all of the books of the Bible hang together?"

Is there some sort of overall framework that can help communities of believers grasp a common story line that unites the individual books of the Bible? When we talk about the shape of Scripture we are talking about just such a framework within which Christians might fit the diverse writings that comprise the Bible. The shape of Scripture is a way of talking about how all of the different books of the Bible hang together.

You might well wonder: is such a framework really necessary? A good way to begin answering this question is by situating Scripture as a whole into an account of what God is doing in the world from creation through to redemption. That is, we will consider Scripture's relationship to our salvation and to God's desires for the world.

Scripture and Salvation. It is a fundamental precept of Christianity that God has given Scripture to the church as a key part of God's plan to bring us to salvation. What does such a claim mean? First we need to think a bit about what Christians mean by "salvation." This may be a thorny topic for any congregation. There are a variety of ways in which Christians, even people within the same congregation might talk about salvation. Moreover, various Christian groups have their own distinctive terms and phrases when it comes to speaking about salvation. What is said here should not contradict those terms and phrases. Thus, one might want to

say *more* than we will say here, or to say it in a different way, but Christians are committed to at least this much.

For all Christians salvation is a gift from God that is connected to the ultimate ends or purposes for which God created us. Whatever else and however else Christians speak of these matters, they all affirm that God created us for communion, fellowship, and friendship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and with each other. We are, so to speak, created for life with God, to become part of the Trinitarian family. If this is why we were created, then salvation involves being brought to that goal for which God created us.

It is also true that because of our sin we cannot reach this goal on our own. If we are to reach it, we will need God's help. God's help is revealed to us decisively in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we learn all of this through the witness of Scripture. There we read and hear of the scope and nature of God's desires for us, the extent to which our sin frustrates those desires, Christ's decisive intervention on our behalf, and the ways we are to live together in the light of that intervention.

Christians recognize that Scripture is one of the gifts God gives us to fulfill God's desire to bring us to salvation. As we read, engage and ultimately embody the words of Scripture, God brings us to our proper end or goal in Christ. In this respect, Scripture is an instrument of God's will to save us. Along these same lines, Saint Augustine in the fifth century called Scripture the vehicle which carries us to our true home along the road created by Christ.

Discovering God's Drama. Scripture is unique among God's gifts in that it *both* plays a role in God's plan of reconciling all things in Christ (2 Cor 5:19) *and* it is the place where that plan is authoritatively and dramatically revealed. We Christians find ourselves in a happily circular situation regarding our involvement with Scripture and our lives with

God. A discerning understanding of God's plan of salvation enables Christians to read and embody Scripture in ways that allow God to draw us into our proper place in that plan. We might think of this as being given a part in a drama and provided with a script from the director. Rightly inhabiting our place in God's drama of salvation enables us to perceive the movements of that drama more clearly. This enables us to understand Scripture better. A better, deeper understanding of Scripture draws us into ever deeper friendship with God and with others. So it goes until this drama is brought to its conclusion. Knowing the contours and movements of God's drama of salvation will help us both to understand Scripture better and to take our place in that drama more fully.

Alternative Frameworks. There are other frameworks for appropriating Scripture. Some of these ways are problematic. They present the drama of salvation in ways that ignore or deform important aspects of Christianity. For example, some early readers of Scripture found an account of two Gods, the God of the Jews and the divine character, Jesus. Indeed, they believed that the passion accounts indicated that God and Jesus were enemies. They assimilated those two gods into the vast variety of gods characteristic of Greco-Roman polytheism. Once this happened it was fairly easy to absorb and transform Christian views into the dominant philosophical and cultural viewpoints of the day. Christianity became one more form of philosophical speculation; certainly not something one might die for.

In the second century these readers of Scripture were known as Gnostics and represented a very powerful challenge to the Christian faith. Although we may not be tempted by this particular heresy it is often easy for Christians to interpret Scripture in such a way that they end up assimilating it into one of the dominant philosophies or ideologies of their day, whether it be nationalism or consumerism or forms of New Age spirituality. The only way to counter this way of reading Scripture is to have a coherent framework that maintains the substance and integrity of Christianity.

Becoming Wise Readers. It is important to note that there are many ways of presenting this drama that are appropriate and yet different from what will be explored in this and subsequent *Center Letters*. The best way to discern the difference between what is appropriate and inappropriate is to become proficient readers and doers of Scripture.

In other words, simply studying the Bible is not sufficient for becoming wise readers. First, we need a framework in order to properly discern the movements of God's drama. Secondly, beyond reading Scripture, the movements of God's drama of salvation work their way into our lives through attentive participation in worship, the singing of hymns, and prayerful engagement with the world. The better we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Scripture, the better we will be able to evaluate different ways of presenting the scope or framework of Scripture.

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BIBLE STUDY

Guidance. Even the first Christians struggled to understand how Jesus fit into their understanding of Scripture (for them, the Old Testament). It was only after the resurrection that Christ "opened their minds to understand the scripture" (Lk. 24:45.) Guided by the Spirit, they developed a new framework for engaging Scripture. Thus they were able to see old and familiar verses in new and life-changing ways.

Read Acts 8:26-40

1. Describe the Ethiopian's situation.
2. What does he ask of Philip? What does Philip do?
3. What is the connection between the OT text and Jesus?
4. How does the Ethiopian react to Philip? What happens?
5. Can you recount a time when someone opened up a passage of Scripture for you?

Early Christians maintained that the Old Testament is an integral part of Christian Scripture. Thus, they needed a framework to bring together two seemingly incompatible affirmations: there is only one God and Jesus is God.

Read John 1:1-5; Phil. 2:6-11; Heb. 1:1-4.

1. What claims are made about Jesus?
2. How is Jesus related to the one true God?
3. How do these texts aid in developing a framework?

The Beginning. After the flurry of creation, God rested on the seventh day. Unlike the other six days, it never ends. This day marks not only the close of God's creative activity but also the purpose for which God creates. In the garden God and human beings shared a right relationship, one of unbroken community and communication. This relationship of restful peace or *shalom* is intended to shape all of life.

Read Genesis 1:1-2:24

1. Creation is repeatedly declared "good." What does this tell us about God? About creation?
2. What is different about the 7th day?
3. What does the relationship between God and the first humans tell us about God's deepest desires for humans?
4. What do we learn from this text about the shape of God's drama of salvation?

The End is the Beginning

The peaceable *shalom* for which God created humans and all of creation does not last very long. Yet God's desires do not change. One of the fullest accounts of the fulfillment of God's purpose comes at the end of Revelation. What begins in the garden is completed in a city, the New Jerusalem. The intimacy between God and humans is restored.

Read Isa. 2:1-4; Isa. 65:17-25; Rev. 21:22:5

1. Describe the characteristics of a world where God's desires for humans are brought to fruition.
2. How are relationships renewed or transformed?
3. How do these texts relate to your deepest desires?
4. What can we learn about the grand scope of God's drama from these texts?