



Practices to Bring Us Closer to God – Formational Reading

Did you learn to read and study the Bible the same way you learned to read and study in school, college, the newspaper, on the job, and when searching the Internet? This method of taking in lots of information is called "informational reading." Characteristics include reading as quickly as we can, trying to absorb all that is before us, and reciting back what we've learned and mastered. Our schools and colleges thrive on this kind of reading, as students are taught to memorize and spew forth this information during testing procedures.

This is the kind of reading I did years ago when I was writing the teachers' Bible background sections for Bible-based, Sunday school curricula – for children, youth, and adult classes. Years later in seminary I learned this is called hermeneutics. Informational reading of scripture is a very important part of learning as much as we can about the Bible: who wrote it, when it was written, where it was written, why it was written, and to whom it was written. The "Big Five." Informational reading provides valuable material for teaching and preaching. And many people use informational Bible-study for proving arguments in apologetics.

While I had already begun the process of leading people to put themselves into scripture stories, and into exploring and practicing some of the spiritual disciplines from the classic Christian writers, I soon discovered a book that introduced an exciting new way to read scripture: *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*. The author, M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., advocated reading, 'sitting with,' and pondering smaller portions of scripture so that the reader might meet God in a particular text. Unlike those quick Bible-reading plans that encourage people to 'speed read' through the Bible in 6 months or a year, Mulholland's formational reading concentrates on letting God's Word (scripture) shape who we are and who God is calling us to be. This waiting for God's presence works especially well with the Gospels and Acts.

Whereas in informational reading of scriptures we are trying to master the text, in formational reading of scripture we are seeking to let the text master us. That means we must approach the scripture passage with an openness of mind and without preconceived notions. We have to be ready to receive what God would have us hear, see, and learn from the text. We need to be willing to be a servant of the Word. Often, in order to do this, we have to wait before the text. We may even need to spend a whole week on one particular Bible story.

The attitude we have as we approach formational reading of scripture correlates almost directly with the results we will experience. A humble, detached (not insisting on ownership), receptive, and loving approach will bear the greatest fruit in this endeavor. I have found that even when I am reading a passage on which I have written, taught, and preached – perhaps many times – something nearly always "jumps off the page" at me. It's one of those "Aha!" times. Epiphany moments in our lives.

We must, also, be open to Mystery, those things of God which we cannot explain – no matter how hard we try. There are passages which we will never quite understand in this lifetime, so perhaps we need to quit arguing about what they mean.

When we read scripture passages in a formational way, we no longer are the subject, which

we often are when we're reading for information, e.g., 'How will this help me get a better grade, a better job, teach a better Sunday school class, or preach a greater sermon?' Rather, all of a sudden, the Word is the subject, and we have become the object. And, often, we find it helpful to discern who we are in the text, and why.

Mulholland shares an example of this when he spent a couple of weeks working through the story of Moses and the Egyptian pharaoh. Mulholland struggled daily with what God was trying to tell him through the text (receiving a Word from God). After several days of reading about the plagues, and asking for God's direction, Mulholland finally received God's answer: "You are Pharaoh!" Wow! As Mulholland continued to struggle with this particular Word, he finally realized that God was saying that God had endowed him with many spiritual gifts. But Mulholland had 'enslaved' God's gifts to his own ways of sharing them. When we sit with a text like this, reading it formatonally, we learn new things about ourselves and our relationship with God and others.

One column in a newspaper, or even a 90-minute workshop, will never do justice to Mulholland's ideas about formational reading of scripture. His book, however, is still available for those who would like to learn more about being formed by scripture.

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