

Session two – A church based on the Bible

The Bible is very important for every kind of Christian church. But our own particular church traditions were shaped out of a time when there was a great renewal of interest in the Bible. Through a time called the Reformation (which stretched over a long period from the end of the fifteenth century to the end of the seventeenth) some Christians began again to study the Bible texts in their original languages (Greek and Hebrew) and to make new discoveries about them. Some also argued, at a time when literacy was expanding, that everyone should be able to read the Bible in his or her own language and so translations began to be made. Some feared that 'ignorant' people reading the Bible would lead to no good and wanted to protect the Bible from being misinterpreted, but our particular forebears were firmly on the side of opening it up to everyone. At the same time they wanted ministers to be well educated in the things of God so that they could help people understand the Bible. Even at the beginning of the development of the printing press printed Bibles in local languages became available in many homes and churches amazingly quickly. Bibles, Psalm books and commentaries were highly valued amongst the church communities from which we have come, although they remained controversial in some countries and in some time-periods for quite a while.

With this emphasis on reading and seeking to understand the Bible goes the strong principle that the 'highest authority' for our believing and living is 'God's Word in the Bible'. Notice that the Statement does not simply say that 'the Bible' is the authority, but 'God's Word in the Bible'. Jesus, described in John's Gospel as 'the Word made flesh' is the supreme authority. We believe that reading and interpreting the Bible is not necessarily straightforward, that God speaks to us as we interpret and that we need the help of the Holy Spirit. It is this reading under the Holy Spirit that we believe offers our surest hope of working out what is God's will for us. We know, from looking back over history, that faithful people have not always read with wisdom and insight (we see with sadness how some Reformed Christians in South Africa believed that the Bible taught them authoritatively that apartheid was God's will). So we do not assume that we can read without having to work and pray as we do so. But we trust that it is reading the Bible in a prayerful spirit and with God's help, above all else, that will help us to work out what we should believe and do. We would listen to what other Christians have said and still say as well. We would listen hard for the witness of our own experience and to what our own thinking and puzzling suggest – but God's Word in the Bible is the first source of wisdom for us and we would turn to it first.

What would it be like not to have your own copy of the Bible, but to depend on memory (your own and others)? Work together as a group at remembering a Bible story. See if you can put together the parable of the Prodigal Son from your corporate memory. Remember the shape of the story, as many particular phrases as possible, and what you can about the context and any kind of interpretation given in the Bible. Then look up the parable (Luke 15:11-32) – Reflect on the exercise, on why you remembered what you did, and how this story might have been remembered and then written down by the early Christians. Move on to talk about the parable. What part has it played in your own Christian life? What does it mean? Does it remind you of any other stories in the Bible? Does it remind you of any other stories anywhere else? How does it connect with the central story of the Gospels, of Jesus who died on the cross and who rose again?

Questions for discussion

- What are your earliest memories of reading the Bible or of hearing Bible stories?
- Are there any bits of the Bible you really struggle with? If so, what helps you in your struggle?
- If you have a difficult decision to make, in what ways might reading the Bible help you?
- Do you have any suggestions for how the Bible might become more central to the life of your local church?
- If you could add a book to the Bible what would it be? (If you could take a book away which might you choose?) – you might like to compare your answers!
- What can be said in favour of keeping the Bible just as it is? (the gory bits, the sublime poetry ...)