

## IV. Building Retreat Around Four Means of Grace

### Page No.

Centering Retreat on the Christ-like God of the Bible	IV-1
A Diagram Guide for Retreat Preparation	IV-13

## **SOME WAYS OF CENTERING RETREAT ON THE CHRIST-LIKE GOD OF THE BIBLE**

by Bill Vamos

As I begin this presentation I'm going to acknowledge that some of what you will be hearing is familiar information to the theologues in our midst. You have heard Bible and Homiletics professors say some of the things I will be saying. I include them here because I am aware of how easy it is for us to shortcut the primary principles of Spiritual Leadership.

Many of today's church people expect their clergy to walk in front of them as ever-present leaders, follow their wanderings as faithful supporters, and stand in the midst of them clarifying what is happening in an insane world. At the same time, they are expected to be fearless prophets, compassionate pastors, and fastidious administrators. Also, they must be community service organizers, as well as profound and entertaining preachers, and teachers. Add the "Walk-on-Water" syndrome which infects many of us professional ministers, and you have a formula for perpetual confusion, if not Burn Out.

My hope is that this presentation will help us recognize Biblical spirituality as the integrating center of life and leadership. I dare to believe that deepening our commitment to praying and Scripture will help each of us to discern which of the requests that people make of us can be delegated to others, assigned to a later time, or answered with that

gracious holy healing phrase, “No thank you”

I’m concentrating on a basic Biblical principle of retreat leadership for a second reason. On retreat, we must tell the truth about God, as well as attempt to inspire people to commune with God and each other.

Charles Merrell Smith, in his satire, How to Become a Bishop without Being Religious, wrote: “Don’t bother preaching from the Bible. If you want to fill your pews, the Reader’s digest is your best bet. All you have to do is make them laugh. Make them cry. Make them feel religious.”

One can fall into a similar pit while leading retreat. So, I’m going to focus this presentation on some basic Biblical guidelines.

In doing so, I need to make a confession. Early in the ministry of the Center for Christian Growth, I used the Scripture as though it was a hammer pounding in spiritual nails which I had fashioned out of my own experience. I thought, surely its okay to use the Bible to help others grow in Christ on my model.

As volunteers became involved in leading retreat, I noticed that a number of them focused more carefully on the Bible in their retreat content. But I persisted in my utilitarian approach to Scripture. I said, “God, if my ways of praying and being alone with you inspire me so much, surely You will lead me to something in the Bible that will authenticate my experience, so I can give Biblical retreat presentations.”

I knew better, but it seemed so much more efficient and exciting my way. Besides, it really worked. The retreats genuinely inspired people. Then came the evaluations that said, “The retreat experience is meaningful, but we need more Scripture to lead us. There is too much emphasis on the retreat leader’s personal experience.”

At first I took exception, telling myself that I was already working a heavily overloaded schedule as our embryonic Center was developing. I assured myself that the Bible is meaningless without personal illustrations.

For a while I hid behind that obvious truth, until I began to realize how urgent it is for people to hear God’s story and how we are a part of that story. This happened over a period of time as we periodically assessed the impact of our Center on people’s lives and on church programs.

How could I have missed it? If retreat is to be authentic and lasting, we need to focus it on God coming to us in Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Otherwise, people might misunderstand and attach their retreat experience to the personalities of the retreat leaders. Besides, the Bible can be available to people throughout their lives, but our time on retreat is limited.

In order to continue this perspective we have centered this Leadership Equipping Event on the Christ-like God in Scripture. I asked all of us prepare ourselves by praying Scripture, and I also asked

myself the question: “How do we focus retreat leadership on the Bible? Does the Bible itself have answers to this question?”

One answer is that Jesus centered His life and leadership in Scripture. Jesus prayed the Psalms, having learned them by heart. Jesus taught from the Scriptures. And Jesus viewed himself as the fulfillment of Scripture. I’m going to place my emphasis on this latter perspective.

As we observe in Luke 4, following Jesus’ encounter with TI, there is no question about the intimate connection between Jesus and the sacred book of his people.

In the Gospel of John, Chapter 5, verses 39 and 46, we hear Jesus say:

“You search Scripture because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify in my behalf... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” (John 5:39 & 46 NRSV)

As we pray with the incarnate God through the Bible, Holy Spirit enables us to know our compassionate Lord living among us and within us and our world.

Please turn to the diagram on Page IV-13 in Section IV. (A Diagram Guide for Retreat Preparation.)

The Christ-like God in Scripture is the center of all retreat preparation.

We prepare by opening the windows and doors of our lives so that Christ-like God in Scripture can take form in us through Holy Spirit, like the Sun (Son) bathing us with light and warmth. We do this in two ways:

1. Through our lives. As the diagram shows in the second circle, we make diligent use of the means of grace ourselves, e.g., the four essentials which the Center for Christian growth nurtures. Someone has said that many Christians are like half-filled cups trying to overflow. We need to be overflowing cups, so that our retreat participants can know Christ in us and in each other, as they pray with Scripture and share with one another.
2. Christ-like God in Scripture permeates retreat through our leadership. Three months prior to a retreat, we hold a Planning Meeting, in person or by conference call, with four to eight representatives of the group being served. As the third circle indicates, our purpose is to gather information about the groups' experience, needs, and goals, as we begin to do our work with Scripture. Usually the Planning Meeting participants offer information quite freely, such as the approximate number of married and single persons in the church, the predominant age groupings, and the like. We also learn whether

the church has Bible study groups and prayer groups, which church programs they are proud of, and those they'd rather not talk about. We elicit information about the sociological problems with which the community is struggling, and whether their church's theology is conservative, liberal, or neo-octopus. (I dislike stereotypes, so I usually ask for definitions.) Often we hear that a split is developing in the congregation over an issue or personalities. With this information we are able to prayerfully discern portions of Scriptures on which to base the content, and where to place the primary Biblical emphasis.

The diagram identifies all of the retreat elements on the outside of the third circle. We include as many of the Spiritual Formation opportunities as possible, depending on the length of the retreat. But the Planning Meeting will reveal those areas where we need to give the primary attention.

For example, in some Planning Meetings, the church representatives will say, "We need mutual support most. Our people really don't know one another." The retreat leaders will start with that need, as they prepare with Scripture, and build the retreat agenda.

Other church spokespersons will tell us that their fellow members have many fellowship and small group opportunities. But their people are hungry for

personal and group prayer. The leaders then work with that need as priority one in their Biblical preparation and agenda building. Having three months between planning and implementing retreat gives us ample time to seek God's guidance.

Of course we have had to learn not to keep "reinventing the wheel," trying to create every retreat from scratch. We have developed retreat agendas, mutual support content, and presentations which are basic and usually can be adapted to various church and seminary situations. At the same time, this basic approach frees us to design specialized retreats when needed on themes like "Self Care for Caretakers," "The Spirituality of Humor," "Spiritual Growth for Community Ministry," etc.

One guideline summarizes our Center's learning as we root retreat in the Bible: Let your leadership flow from your own Biblical praying and living.

How do we accomplish this? I'm going to give some suggestions for spiritual formation in our lives and reflect on way in which they flow into spirituality leadership.

1. Be gentle with yourself. Start wherever you can. God will lead you one step at a time. Keep developing your own style of praying with Scripture. I'm sharing what we have learned from the Center's ministry. Use whatever will work for you. Many of you have been communing with God through a regular time with Scripture for several years. On the other



hand, if praying with the Bible is new to you, begin with a daily devotional book that illuminates the Bible for you. I have placed several of these on the Resource Table, and you may have others that you want to suggest to the rest of us. If you preach on a regular basis and work from the Lectionary Readings, try letting those readings be the basis for your own spiritual renewal as you pray with those Scriptures. Perhaps you could also list the Scripture reading for the following week in their Sunday Worship Bulletin, so the members of the congregation can also be praying with those passages.

2. Be alert to the many stories in Scripture and recognize the whole Bible as God's story of finding lost children and bringing them home. As you pray, ask how your life story fits into God's story, and share those connections in retreat when appropriate. During retreat, focus your presentations on Bible stories, wherever possible, and invite your participants to share how their stories connect with Scripture. Richard Jensen, in his book, Thinking in Story, tells us that we now are living in a post literate age in which the mass media have conditioned people to receive communication through stories.

3. Let the Scriptures speak to you before you talk to God through the Scriptures. As you pray, it is very easy to read a passage of Scripture and translate it into your own situation before finding out what the Biblical author intended. I remember some painful moments of truth when I realized that several of my silver tongued presentation ideas had actually been running in a different direction than the Biblical authors had in mind. I don't mean to discourage creativity. I believe that retreat leaders need to record every creative idea that comes to us. When the fire of inspiration flames, we'd better be ready, if all we have is a pencil stub and a napkin. But let's be careful to use only what fits that part of the Biblical drama which we are considering for a particular retreat. Our files can safely guard our creative seeds until the Scriptures are ready to harvest them.

One way to pray and lead in a Biblically faithful manner is to apply what Urban Holmes calls the "Speculative" or "Mind-illuminating Method" of praying with Scripture. Use a Bible commentary to get some basic answers: to whom was the particular author writing? what was going on in their world at the time? what message about the Christ-like God was the author communicating, and how is it related to God's story, or seeking and waiting for

prodigal people? Then as you pray, mentally apply the passage to your situation, your story, and your needs.

Follow this same pattern when choosing passages for leading retreat. There are some recommended commentaries on the Resource Table. You may want to suggest others. One word of caution: on retreat please don't spend most of your time tilling about the roots of Biblical prayer. You may choose to invite your retreatants to munch on the roots a little bit, but your retreatants will thank you if you offer them the fruit of your labors. As one layman said, "I get tired of my pastor treating me as though I am a Corinthian."

In my presentation of Jesus and TI, I first uncovered the seeds that Luke saw Jesus planting in that event, and then I grew them into fruit for your consumption.

4. Pray and lead Scripture in a way that also touches your heart, and cradles and releases your emotions. Combine the speculative, thinking approach to Scripture with what Urban Holmes calls the affective method. Include ways of prayer that also illuminate your feelings. In other words, as you pray and lead with Scripture, let the left hemisphere of your brain, the cataloging, analyzing, organizing part of you, join with your right brain, the artistic, poetic, mystical element in

your life. Walter Wink, in his book, Transforming Bible Study, says that, out of the tension between the left and right brain, our creativity erupts. This is also true of our praying with the Bible. Out of the confluence of thinking and feeling with Scripture, God transforms us, so that we actually pray and live the Biblical stories ourselves.

For example, after getting in touch with the historical and literary background of a passage, read it as though its intent is to bring living water to your parched spirit and our desert world. The classical description for this method of Biblical prayer Lectio Divina - reading with God.

Read slowly, tenderly. Let yourself taste the words and digest them carefully. Pause from time to time so that God can fill your emptiness and energize your compassion. If you are given to images, you can embellish classical Lectio Divina by picturing yourself in the passage. Imagine yourself walking or sitting with the Biblical actors and actresses in their town or home, or on their highway or farm. Lectio Divina is hearing the Christ-like God shouting, whispering, and breathing alongside of us, as we read Scripture, and inviting us to be healed.

As we partake of this Divine sustenance, we can find several practical ways to invite

our retreat participants to do the same. We have included in this handbook several suggestions for praying effectively with the bible, for us in both our lives and our leadership.

1. Turn to Page VII-25, Suggestions For First Period of Prayer in Quiet Solitude. (note only the first period; and/or Page VII-26, Other Options.)
2. Now look at Page VII-31: Dialogues With Christ.
3. Turn to Page VII-30, Journaling on Luke 14, "Questions and Methods of Journaling." Although these questions and methods are for writing in a spiritual journal, journaling itself is a form of prayer. Start with #3 and observe how each suggestion could become a way of praying effectively.

Sometimes we can find resources that combine both speculative and affective approaches to praying with Scripture. Two of the books listed in the Bibliography in Section IX of this handbook are worth mentioning: Like Trees that Grow Beside a Stream, by Donald E. Collins; and Devotional Classics, Edited by James Foster and Donald Bryant Smith

A DIAGRAM GUIDE FOR RETREAT PREPARATION

