

Seeking Truth Together: The Yale Bible Study Series

By Ray Waddle

The Congregational Church of New Canaan, Connecticut, faced a problem familiar to thousands of other twenty-first century congregations: how do we teach the Bible so it becomes more central to our lives?

For years, the search for an answer took New Canaan into the wilderness. Leaders of the 1,750-member church organized marquee-name lecture series. They tested curriculum materials created by various denominations.

Yet nothing quite delivered the staying power needed to connect laypeople to the life and drama of the ancient text. Something was missing.

“A dozen years ago, few in the mainline were giving enough attention to Bible study,” says Skip Masback, the church’s senior minister and a member of the Yale Divinity School Board of Advisors.

“The mainline was letting it go. But if the mainline doesn’t do robust Bible study, then people who do want it will migrate somewhere else.”

A decades-long trend of mainline church ambivalence toward Scripture fueled an American religious drama—generations of mainline church turbulence marked by protracted debate about politics, war, sex, secularism, and the authority of Scripture. Along the way, many churches lost confidence in the relevance of the Bible’s story, its witness, its truth.

“But now the pendulum is swinging back,” Masback says.

Last year, New Canaan church members discovered something old and invented something new. They discovered the power of small-group dynamics, a communal model as old as the apostolic age. They gathered laypeople willing to trust each other and talk together about life-and-faith issues. Not least, they found a way to present biblical expertise in a compelling, practical format. They called on Masback’s old school—YDS—for help.

The church arranged to tape a series of Bible conversations between YDS Dean Harold Attridge and YDS professor emeritus David Bartlett, capturing

their give-and-take discussions, usually in fifteen-minute segments, on DVD. The church sponsored the cost and distributed the discs to the small study groups (up to a dozen people each), which committed to meeting regularly for eight weeks.

The first series featured the Gospel of John. Volunteers assembled big binder notebooks of support materials for anyone who wanted them—notes by the two professors, bibliographies, copies of articles on relevant themes. Momentum surged. About 110 people have joined in, creating their own small groups.

Initial popularity led to a second Attridge-Bartlett taped conversation, this time on First Corinthians. Luke’s gospel is in the planning stages for later this year, then Romans.

New Canaan had found a way to bridge two worlds that so often move in wary mutual isolation—academic expertise and lay attention.

“We were hungry for the information and didn’t know how to get it,” says Lynne Bolton, a laywoman at New Canaan who helped shape the series. “We wanted to get a bird’s-eye view of these two minds at work. We wanted to listen in on two highly literate experts talking. And they were willing to discuss terms in ways laypeople could understand.”

Bolton is a former White House communications specialist and also an actor with Broadway stage experience. She knows something about stagecraft, production values, and public communication.

“I knew this content is interesting, and there had to be a way to show that,” she says. “We wanted to see an unfolding conversation.”

Bolton’s epiphany about such a study series happened in 2006. That’s when she got her first exposure to a seminary-style handling of biblical is-

sues by attending a YDS summer course, the dean's class on John's gospel.

Soon enough, Attridge and Bartlett were paired for the series.

"These two scholars are friends," Bolton says. "We saw how good they were together, how intrigued they were with each other's opinions." (Bartlett is now professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia. At YDS Attridge is also Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament.)

"An important part of learning about the possible meanings of a text of Scripture emerges through dialogue with friends who may have a slightly or radically different 'take' on the text," Attridge says. "One of the things I try to do in teaching the Bible is to encourage that kind of dialogue. David and I, in our presentations for New Canaan, try to model what that dialogue might be like."

All agree New Canaan's success with the YDS Bible Study is aided by a strong community-building dimension.

Masback joined the New Canaan staff fourteen years ago and soon initiated his own Bible-teaching strategies. Eventually, though, he witnessed the power of small-group chemistry.

"The small-group model seemed to be the perfect forum for relational connection and working through issues of life and faith," he says.

"There's a sense of walking together. They come to hear the experts, but they come back for each other. It invites adult conversation about things that count."

Groups organize themselves around friendships or common interests. A businesspersons circle meets early Monday mornings. A young mothers

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group meets Wednesdays. Groups assemble in homes or in church classrooms. The studies are lay-led; no experts preside. Participants find their own comfort level of involvement. Some do all the reading prep, others very little.

One week last March, a Wednesday night group was discussing First Corinthians, the passage where Paul said women should "keep silent in church."

In a group of seven people, someone mused, "If that passage wasn't in there, how would history be different?"

The conversation turned to the role of women in other denominations, Protestant and Catholic, and

The Meaning of Resurrection:

a conversation adapted
from the YDS Bible Study Series:

HARRY ATTRIDGE: So, David, we turn to First Corinthians 15, where Paul is dealing with issues connected with the resurrection.

DAVID BARTLETT: I'm glad we're having this conversation because I've wrestled with this for as long as I've wrestled with New Testament texts. I'm clearer on what he thinks the solution is than what he thinks the issue is. The solution is to insist on the reality of Jesus' resurrection as being central to Christian faith and to insist that following Jesus, believers will also be raised. What's he worried about? My impression is—and I really want your response to this—this is a group of people who believes in Jesus' resurrection, but for whatever reasons they're not convinced that they, too, will be raised at the last day. It seems the point of his argument is not so much to convince them that Jesus is raised as to convince them that because they believe Jesus is raised, they then need to believe in the general resurrection, or they can't make sense of the claim that Jesus is raised.

ATTRIDGE: I think that's right. The way I've tried to imagine what's going on in the minds of the Corinthians is to look forward into the second century and to look back to the first century BCE. We know in the second century there were some people who were denying the physical character of the resurrection. They're probably coming out of a Greco-Roman philosophical milieu that emphasizes the immortality of the soul. So it may be that these Corinthians believe in the resurrection of Christ, but interpret it in that way. Another indication can be found in the Wisdom of Solomon, a text written in Jewish circles probably in Alexandria, probably first century BCE, that talks about the souls of the just being in the hands of God and therefore they don't have to worry. There you see the language of Greco-Roman culture being taken over in a Jewish environment affirming some sort of immortality but not so much the resurrection of the body. I think that's what Paul is trying to counter.

BARTLETT: Disembodied Christianity is one of his big concerns from beginning to end: Our hope is not that we escape from our bodies but that our bodies be raised as Jesus has been raised. Then we get his almost oxymoronic claim that we'll be raised not as physical bodies but as spiritual bodies. I've puzzled

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about that a lot, and I think I'm clearer on its pastoral implications than its philosophical rootings. The pastoral implications have to do with the claim that when the dead are raised it's still we who are raised. It's not some spiritual emanation from ourselves or some reductive essence but the real Harry Attridge who will be raised, the real David Bartlett who will be raised. Somehow, just as Christ has been glorified, so we will participate in some richer glory in that day coming.

ATTRIDGE: This is another case where Paul seems to address both sides of a debate and tries to affirm something on both sides to bring them together. Later on (verse 50), he'll say "flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God." This seems to reaffirm the position he's already criticized—the Corinthians who deny the objective reality of future resurrection. So how does he do that and at the same time emphasize the body? Through a reflection (verse 35 ff.) on what kind of bodies there might be. I think he does two things. He uses the metaphor of a seed being sown and the plant that grows up from the seed looks very different from the seed. Then he turns to science or philosophy and says there are different kinds of bodies—earthly and heavenly bodies. He's calling on notions from Aristotelian cosmology, widespread in the Hellenistic world, that there are different elements—the familiar four, earth, air, fire, water, but also another kind, the substance of the stars, the ether, what later in the Renaissance would be called the quintessence, the fifth essence. So if stars are made out of this ethereal substance that looks a lot like the spirit that pervades all things, that, Paul says, is more like what our bodies will be. It's a different kind of body from what we experience in this sub-lunar sphere, but it is nonetheless an objective body.

BARTLETT: With that in mind, let's reflect back on the rest of the letter and see how often he says: God has made us as bodies, as embodied persons. So sex counts, and how you treat your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ counts, because this is not only part of God's creation but part of God's redemptive plan. What God intends to redeem is not that little spiritual part of you that can simply be immune from bodily concerns, but the real you, which is body.

in Islam and other cultures. Near the end, a female participant declared, "Where is agape in this passage, or was Paul having a bad day?"

Masback needs no convincing about the power of Bible study. He came to Christian ministry at age forty-three after a busy career as a Washington, D.C., trial lawyer and Democratic Party insider.

In those years, however, he was an indifferent churchgoer who worked hard to ascend the success ladder but often at the cost of family time and spiritual identity. By 1987, he reached a point of crisis: he was struggling through bouts of uncontrollable weeping, triggered by despair.

He turned to Scripture, desperately thumbing through it in search of relief. The angel's words early in Luke that announce Jesus' birth—"Fear not"—surprised him as a breakthrough to hope. Soon after, so did a mystical encounter with Jesus. So did reading Romans 7 on the commuter train one morning, when he saw Paul's tortured words, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

"I realized Paul was truer to life than the Enlightenment account of life," Masback recalls. "Unfettered rationalism is not the path to reason. So I realized I'm not smarter than that book. We don't stand over Scripture. We stand under it."

A furious faith quest deepened, and Masback's search eventually brought him to YDS, where he received an M.Div. degree in 1994.

"The Yale school of thought says Scripture is not just information, it's a shaping mechanism for the way you see the world," he says.

"Being Christian means living in a daily engagement with Scripture that shapes the way you see. So, our Bible study here is not just, 'Hey, the Puritans used to read Scripture so we ought to.' We are laying a foundation. A conversation about homosexuality or some other controversy will be different after people encounter Bible study. The vision of life learned in John they are doing in a group. The issues confronted by Paul they are doing in a group. They're getting scriptural lenses for knowing how to do church.

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Ray Waddle is editor of Reflections.