



Study Guide

Learning the Music of Biblical Dialogue

Early in the morning it is usually very quiet at my home. At that time it's easy for me to hear the running water of my neighbor's fountain. At least I think it's a fountain. I've never actually seen it, and most of the time I don't hear it. The noise of that water is always there, but I just get used to it and it disappears, or its sound gets lost in the other sounds and activities of my life as the world wakes up and starts to move faster and faster.

Biblical dialogue is a bit like the sound of my neighbor's water fountain. It's always there. Whether I hear it or not, it's going on somewhere, pretty much continually. Most of the time I don't hear it; I'm not even aware of it. But when I stop and listen, when I focus on the sound, it's almost like music.

This study has focused on a part of the people of God and their scripture, the Bible. The music of biblical dialogue is created by the interaction between them. Sometimes the music has a lot of dissonance. Sometimes there are solos where particular instruments and people have special roles. But the music goes on, like the music in my neighbor's yard.

What would it be like if we, as individuals, as parish families, even as larger bodies within the church, could all learn to hear the music of biblical dialogue better? What if we could

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learn to relate that music to a world that so often tries to drown it out? What if we could even learn to read the music and to participate more fully in the making of the music? Answering these questions in positive ways is to live into the promise and the hope of biblical dialogue—a promise and a hope given to us gracefully by the One who sustains each of us and all our communities of faith.

Prerequisites

What do we need to hear the music of biblical dialogue? Simply put, we need a *consciousness* that such dialogue is going on all around us. Yes, you can hear it as you think on a biblical lesson read on a Sunday morning or a sermon that challenges you to put a biblical teaching into the mix of faithful living today. But the music of biblical dialogue is going on in lots of places besides the church. It's going on in debates over the pertinence of the Gnostic gospels. It's going on in study groups and countless other conversations about *The Da Vinci Code*. It's going on in the religious and civil debates over same-sex unions. It's going on, or it should be going on, in the decisions made about whether to build a new parking lot for the parish or expand the soup kitchen program for the homeless.

Another need, closely related to being conscious and aware of places where the old and the new, the text and the community, the biblical and contemporary issues are meeting and interacting, is *sensitivity*. In one way, I suppose, sensitivity is almost graceful, for it cannot be planned, programmed, or predicted. It may come in the middle of a television program, or while reading the newspaper, or during a conversation with a friend, or while taking a walk. It can come in the middle of a crowd or in places like my home in the early morning, when all is quiet. But somehow, some way, folks become sensitive to biblical analogues, to particular teachings of the Bible, to the ways in which Jesus taught, to the verse of a psalm and the ways any and all of these relate to what's going on in our lives.

But consciousness and sensitivity alone won't allow us to hear the music of biblical dialogue. We must also have *knowledge* of the Bible and, above all, a *willingness to learn*. Both of these prerequisites are centered and grounded in a community

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of faith, the church, and its educational mission. I am optimistic enough to believe that there are churches all over the world that teach and preach the Bible in a myriad of ways, convincing their members of the import and the life-creating and sustaining functions made possible through a dialogue with the Word. I am also pessimistic enough to believe that this teaching and preaching, as a fundamental part of the church's mission, needs much more serious attention than it often gets. Without it we will not give ourselves the knowledge and willingness to learn so important for hearing the music of biblical dialogue and for engaging in the community's task of making that dialogue a critical praxis.



A TEMPLATE FOR COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

The dialogue between text and community, between old and new, is essential for contemporary biblical (church) communities. It can occur in the context of Bible study, conversations about important issues in the life of the parish, in those special "spaces" created for honest sharing of opinions and perspectives by all. But the kind of dialogue that created and sustained the ancient biblical communities and their subsequently normative writings for us was more than study, conversation, and a special space. This kind of dialogue requires an openness to change, a willingness to grow by listening to the other, whether that other is a member of our community or of a different biblical and/or church tradition.

To be open to personal change and transformation might well require something like what Parker Palmer has referred to in his book *A Hidden Wholeness* as a "circle of trust." While this openness is important for each of us, the template for dialogue described here is for a group, not an individual. It is assumed that individuals must feel safe with whatever processes accompany the dialogue. They must believe they will be heard and respected.

This template and the brief commentary that accompanies it are intended to provide a resource for parishes and other

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groups as they address significant and pressing issues in a way that opens them to hearing, fighting with, and acting upon a full, and diverse, range of biblical voices.

Template

I. Defining the Problem and the Goals

1. Issue

2. Context

3. Resources

4. Participants

5. Goals and Outcomes

II. Study and Process

III. Dialogues

IV. Evaluation and Next Steps

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USING THE TEMPLATE

This template is intended to be illustrative and suggestive. You will inevitably adapt and move beyond it. Hopefully, however, this template will help you move toward more conscious and intentional ways of engaging in biblical dialogue as a critical praxis for your community of faith.

There are at least four components in a successful dialogue between text and community in a church setting. Like any significant endeavor, serious time must be spent on determining exactly the contours of the issue and the purpose of the dialogue. This will usually be accompanied by study and other preparation. The dialogue itself and an assessment complete this process.



I. DEFINING THE PROBLEM AND GOALS

1. Issue

In assuring a good dialogue between text and community, determining the issue, is, ironically, perhaps as difficult a task as any. One thing is almost always true: *the issue is not found in the Bible or in the subsequent tradition*. Rather, the issue that prompts need for a dialogue is found in today's life and challenges. So, for example, how we read or interpret the Bible (literally, figuratively, metaphorically) is never the presenting issue. Instead, contemporary questions of gender role or sexuality or stewardship of facilities might raise the questions and even allow conflicted ways of interpreting the Bible to surface.

2. Context

Besides all the obvious parts of context (denominational infrastructure, community, and so on), be sure to include an analy-

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sis of the issue itself as a part of this. For example, is the issue divisive in this community? Where? Knowing the answers to these kinds of questions will allow better preparation for subsequent dialogue.

3. Resources

In addition to the Bible and specific authoritative traditions of your community, what other resources are available? Experts? Other materials?

4. Participants

Who needs to be here? Does anyone outside the immediate community need to be present? Who makes decisions? Who has power and authority? Who will be affected? Who are the stakeholders for this particular issue?

5. Goals and Outcomes

What is the timeframe for this process? What will be different? How will you know when you've accomplished your goals? How will you determine if it's been worth the cost?



II. STUDY AND PROCESS

Even after determining what you want to do, it is often necessary to do a fair amount of study and thinking about the issue before beginning the dialogue. Here is where study of all sides of the issue might be helpful. The use of experts and special knowledge from outside the community is especially welcome and pertinent at this stage. Decisions are not being made, nor are positions being taken. Rather, information is being gathered and digested in preparation for a dialogue. It is during this stage that the specific process (or perhaps processes) to be used for the dialogue is chosen.

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III. DIALOGUES

The ways in which any particular community engages in dialogue are so particular to its own context and needs that no specific suggestions will be made here. There are, however, two general results that may hopefully occur from any such dialogue that are worthy of mention. First, whatever process is chosen, it should be nonconfrontational, honest, and straightforward. Second, dialogue between the Bible and tradition, between voices in the Bible itself and between community members should all occur. (See chapter 6 for a series of questions to be asked, which will hopefully assure that the diversity of the Bible informs this dialogue.)



IV. EVALUATION AND NEXT STEPS

Many different questions could and should be asked after this process is finished. Were there winners and losers? Was the presence of the “other” there? Did we hear the voice of the other even if he/she/it was not there (for example, through the voices of Bible and tradition)? Did our goals and outcomes get achieved? Where will we go from here? What will be different next time? How is all of this communicated to the larger body of which we are a part?