

Centrality of the Word of God

Introduction/explanation:

Covenant people have always been people of the Word, who value Scripture as the only perfect rule for our faith, doctrine and conduct. We desire to know, understand and live out the truths of the Bible. Sustained and intentional effort on this priority is critical. What are some current indicators that this is a high priority for your congregation?

You may be familiar with Jay Leno's interviews on the street in which people are asked simple questions. "Who found the burning bush?" ("Uh....Nixon?") "Who was swallowed by the whale?" ("Okay, now I'm on the spot," the interviewee responds. Leno: "Jo...." Interviewee: "DiMaggio?") The respondents' answers are hilarious (and you can hear all of them on YouTube by searching 'Leno Bible'), but they're also painfully troubling for those whose ministry focuses on teaching such things. We need to take seriously the state of biblical/theological literacy levels if we are to remain true to our identity and to our heritage as a church. On a scale of 1 to 10, what do you believe is the level of biblical and theological literacy among those in your own congregation?

Statistics

- Regarding Biblical literacy, researcher and author George Barna (barna.org) reports:
 - * Fewer than half of all adults can name the four gospels.
 - * Many professing Christians cannot identify more than two or three of the disciples.
 - * 60% of Americans cannot name even five of the Ten Commandments.
 - * 12% of adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.

And yet, is this really at the heart of the problem? Or is it that as Christians we are failing to live out what we already know to be true biblically? We don't have any related statistics for that conjecture.

- YouVersion created by LifeChurch.tv is currently on more than 100 million devices all over the world. It's the #1 Bible app and it's free. People are reading, listening to, and sharing Scripture with one another regularly. [See New York Times article, *In the Beginning was the Word, Now the Word is on an App*, July 26, 2013]
- *The Covenant Book of Worship* rightly challenges us with these words: "where there is no accompanying Scripture study and little Scripture read, sung, and prayed in the weekly meeting, worship becomes anemic and starved."ⁱ And yet, a declining number of churches include the reading of Scripture every Sunday in public worship.
- Our own ECC Pulse Assessment shows that Centrality of the word is one of our weakest markers.

Two key scripture passages with a few discussion questions each

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

(Colossians 3:16 KJV)

1. What does it mean to let the word dwell in us richly? What does that look like in the lives of real people today?

2. How might we teach and admonish one another in this way? Do we do that in our church?
3. Do our leaders have sufficient familiarity with the Word of God to apply it in their own lives as well as to our life together as a church?

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. (Acts 17:11, 12 NIV)

1. What do you think it means to be of 'noble character'? According to this passage, what contributes to this character quality in the lives of those in the church?
2. How recently have we seen or heard of someone examining Scripture to see whether a particular teaching is true? What are the normal and natural ways that people in our community are taught to examine Scripture in this way?
3. Do you imagine that the Bereans were examining Scripture individually or together? In what ways do we offer opportunity to express honest questions and doubts and struggle together to understand what Scripture says and means?
4. Is our church a safe place for people to raise questions, explore doubts, and express unpopular ideas?

[Other texts to read and reflect upon: Hebrews 4:12 and Romans 15:4]

Christ point: How do we see this marker expressed in Jesus' life and ministry?

The Gospel of John introduces Jesus with these words: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5 NIV)*

Scripture indicates that Jesus' character and identity was formed in the crucible of challenging circumstances throughout his life here on earth. One example is particularly poignant. *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.' "* (Luke 4:1-4 NIV)

For Jesus, the word of God was to be continuously heard and obeyed. *As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (Luke 11:27, 28 NIV)*

Jesus often quoted Scripture (example: Jesus being tempted in the wilderness; Matthew 4) showing us how to use the words of Scripture in our own lives, through both difficult and joyful circumstances.

The key question:

Is the Word of God really “at home among us,”ⁱⁱ shaping our actions and our lives, bringing about faith and its fruits, and are we approaching the Scriptures in ways that are true to our identity as Covenant people?

Prayer (1 paragraph)

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3 NIV)

Lord, we desire to delight in and meditate on your law – your word – so that we are nurtured by it like a tree is nurtured by streams of living water. Make us to be like a stand of strong, tall trees bearing fruit for your glory and for our neighbors’ good. Amen.

Church history perspective on this marker (2 paragraphs)

When Philipp Jakob Spener presented his proposals for the renewal of the Church in 1675, his first concern was with the centrality of the word of God in the life of the congregation and of individual believers. He wrote:

Thought should be given to a more extensive use of the word of God among us. We know that by nature we have no good in us. If there is to be any good in us, it must be brought about by God. To this end the word of God is the powerful means, since faith must be enkindled through the gospel....the more at home the word of God is among us, the more we shall bring about faith and its fruits.

Prior to the invention of the printing press, people were dependent upon clergy to read, proclaim and interpret Scripture. Today, however, the printed word is available to all. It’s even available on our smart phones. With ready access to the life-giving, transformative Word of God, we have little excuse for what seems to be a declining knowledge of its content. The Church needs be continually shaped by the Scriptures.

Covenant history perspective on this marker

Since our very inception, we’ve been a people who prioritize the word of God. Our forebears typically asked the question, “Where is it written?” or “What do the Scriptures say?” Today "The Covenant Church states its view of scripture as follows: 'the holy scripture, the old and the new testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.'"ⁱⁱⁱ "The dynamic life-shaping power of the word of God has been at the heart of the Covenant Church since its founding. That life-changing word gave birth to the conventicles—the small groups that met for bible study in confidence that the word would shape the life of the believer and the believing community. It provided the motive for private devotional reading of the bible, a practice for which our forebears received the nickname “readers.” It prompted the concern

for faithful preaching, not of human opinion, but of the word of God, which has power to convict of sin and unrighteousness and kindle the desire for new life."

The Covenant Church continues to prioritize the Word of God as central to our life together. Our Covenant Resource Paper (2008), *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible*, summarizes our specific approach to and view of Scripture using these poignant words: At our best we as Covenant people read the Bible *faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, holistically* and with commitments to *grace, transformation, and mission*.

Ten suggestions to move forward in this marker

1. Discuss this question together: What would a visitor to your church perceive about the centrality of the Word of God for you as a church? What would they see and/or hear?
2. Read Scripture every Sunday (or whenever the church gathers for worship) using this as an opportunity to also equip people to learn how to find their way in the Bible.
3. Represent this priority visually in your church. (a) Scripture on display through art; (b) children's teachers holding Bible reverently and respectfully - rather than reading from curriculum
4. Teach the Bible as a means of entering relationship with God. Storyteller Chris Brown puts it well: God has given us these stories not to teach us history but to teach us about relationship. Enter the Word with an awareness of the Holy Spirit's presence as we read.
5. Set high expectations. Make biblical literacy a core competency for church members; get new members immediately into the study of God's Word. And then expect people to apply what they know (e.g., how is what I know to be true in the Bible influencing my day-to-day decisions?)
6. Deliver a strong foundation of Biblical story for people of all ages. (a) Assure that any curriculum used presents a thorough telling of the stories of God and God's people - scope and sequence – and (b) Teach a healthy approach to reading the Bible by familiarizing your congregation with the basic principles of *The Covenant Church and the Bible* (covchurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/resource-papers/ecc-and-bible/)
7. Use deliberate variety. Sing it, read it, hear it, memorize it, act it out. Learn how to pray the Scriptures. Pray Scripture over people to bless, encourage and challenge.
8. Challenge toward balance: read for distance and for depth. Invite the whole church to read and memorize Scripture together AND give space for dwelling on a few verses in greater depth. Teach spiritual disciplines that focus on Scripture (Lectio Divina, Dwelling in the Word).
9. Share stories of how the Word is impacting lives. How is it influencing people's thinking as well as their doing? What difference is it making in their lives? What new learning has changed their view of the world? What story in the Bible is currently connecting with your own story right now?
10. Discern together. As leaders, how is Scripture influencing your discernment regarding the vision and direction of your mission and ministry? For example, are you stopping in the middle of meeting to consider how Scripture informs your decisions? Are you integrating Scripture into your strategic plan?

Five to seven challenges to address

1. *Information AND Formation:* There can often be a sense that “I already know those stories” rather than seeing God’s Word as “living and active” with the power to shape and transform us throughout our lives as we enter the Word conscious of the Spirit’s presence with us . Are we living out, with the Spirit’s help, what we already know to be true?
2. *Distance AND depth:* Both are important. It’s great to challenge the congregation to read through the Bible in a year. At the same time, be sure to give value to a slower chewing-on-the-Word kind of reading. Through the Bible in a year = distance. Chewing on the Word = depth.
3. *Post-Christian Reality:* We can no longer assume that the majority of people know even the basics of the Bible. We need to help people to know why it’s important and to equip them with tools to understand what they read.
4. *Meta-narrative vs. Bible Trivia:* Understanding the overarching story of God and God’s people is so important. It is easy for churches and individuals to lose this focus and get lost in the details, trying to win the bible trivia contest and losing the larger picture.
5. *Curricular scope and sequence.* When choosing curriculum for children, pay careful attention to the breadth and depth of the biblical narrative covered. If you are tempted to use varied curriculum sources through the elementary years, do make sure you are not unintentionally leaving big gaps in the biblical narrative.
6. *Written Word AND Living Word:* Are we worshiping the book rather than the living Word that the book contains and is meant to point us toward? The Bible is the menu. Jesus is the meal.
7. *New Technologies:* Does our current technology change our connection with the Word? In what ways does the fact that we can read the Bible on our smart phones impact us? What are the benefits and what are the drawbacks?

Relationship to other markers

A solid and thorough understanding of God’s Word undergirds all other missional markers. Without that, we lose our way as individuals and as a church. Our Resource Paper, *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible*, puts it this way: “Central to the life of the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Bible reveals God and God’s intent for us and our world. By it we discover our identity and mission as individuals and as a church.” Through the Bible we are brought to new life in Christ and learn of our kingdom purpose in the world.

Relationship to the mission priorities

The Covenant’s five mission priorities – Make and Deepen Disciples; Start and Strengthen Churches; Develop Leaders; Love Mercy, Do Justice; Serve Globally – are each informed and guided by the truths in God’s Word.

Case Study

As Gideon went through the candidating process before becoming the pastor of Navigate Church, it was clear that those on the search committee were people who loved God’s Word. Questions about his own devotional life as well as his preaching told him that they were

determined to sustain a culture in which the Word of God was central in life-transforming ways for this congregation. So he began his pastoral tenure with strong expository preaching and regularly led Bible study in adult Sunday School class. But now, after ten years of ministry, the Pulse Assessment indicated more than a little dissatisfaction in this area.

Since Gideon had become its pastor, Navigate Church had grown by at least twenty percent. Most of those new to the church were new believers. Some were not yet believers but simply interested in joining this community that was making a difference in their city. The church had partnered with the local schools to provide tutoring, launched a ministry with the local prison, and opened a warming center through which they fed the homeless once each week. These ministries of compassion, mercy and justice were attracting young and older adults alike. At the same time, the adult Sunday School classes had dwindled so much that they were no longer held. The congregation was more focused on ministries out in the community.

Yet it was not clear that those joining in these ministries had much understanding of a biblical reason for doing so. They were simply energized by making a difference. Gideon's preaching had been a big draw. He was an excellent communicator, able to express the needs of the community around them convincingly enough to motivate to action.

The Pulse Assessment result, however, was making Gideon and the leadership team more than a little concerned. Would the church be able to sustain these important ministries if people were not seeing them as something connected to Scripture's mandate for the church? Had they been faithful in discerning direction for the church or had they simply gone with what they saw as glaring needs without engaging in a good process of discernment? Were they missing an opportunity to connect the people with God in ways that would nurture their spiritual growth? Were the people really engaging the Scriptures in their own personal lives? And as others were drawn toward God through this loving community of faith, would those serving have the ability to give reason for their hope and to do that with gentleness and respect, as instructed in 1 Peter 3:15? Would they be able to articulate how to enter into a relationship with Jesus? The sad truth was that most of them would not have a clue how to do this.

Guiding Questions:

1. As leaders of this congregation, what are your thoughts? How would you summarize the needs of this church?
2. Can you think of ways in which you might engage the congregation in learning the Bible while still keeping people engaged in the ministries that are drawing them to this community of faith?
3. What one or two small changes might this church make in order to get back to their focus of the centrality of the Word of God?

Coaches/expert practitioners to advance this marker

- Children and Family Ministry Coaches covchurch.org/children/coaching/
- Youth Ministry Network blogs.covchurch.org/ywupdate/ymnldescription/

- Doug Bixby and Jay Fast (Attleboro MA) have built a strong tradition of teaching God's Word through their Confirmation program
- Troy Cady (Grace Covenant, Chicago IL) uses the Godly Play approach with children and has a vision for expanding that to adults as well

Resources

- **ECC story Webcast archive link** (each marker will have its own one hour long webcast)...and until that's been developed, here's an option that's already available...

The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible - Several Covenant pastors discuss the importance of *The Centrality of the Word of God* in the context of their lives and the lives of their local churches. (covchurch.tv/the-evangelical-covenant-church-and-the-bible/)

- Three book recommendations

Eat This Book, by Eugene Peterson

Shaped by the Word: the power of scripture in spiritual formation, by Robert Mulholland

How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart

- **A few workshops, videos, etc** (+ some related ECC "member benefit" resources)

The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible - a resource paper

covchurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/resource-papers/ecc-and-bible/

Exploring God's Word - a small group curriculum based

Exploring Covenant Affirmations: session 1 Centrality of the Word of God – from a video-based curriculum for small groups (covchurch.tv/affirmations-1/)

The Journey: a discipleship/confirmation curriculum

Bible Reading Guide for children, youth and families (covchurch.org/children/parents/reading-guide/)

Bible Verses for the Heart (covchurch.org/idea-exchange/bible-verses-for-the-heart/)

GROW Seed Cards (covchurch.org/resources/my-grow-adventure/)

Rock Solid

YouVersion – (YouVersion.com) a free Bible app created by Life Covenant Church that offers a large variety of translations and multiple reading plans

Echo the Story (echo.wearesparkhouse.org/) - an imaginative way to engage in the Bible using storytelling, creative reflection, and dialogue

Community Bible Experience (biblica.com/cbe/about/)

- Songs/hymns

(368) Open My Eyes, That I May See, (530) Lord, I Have Made Your Word My Choice, (536)

Thanks to God Whose Word Was Spoken

Conclusion

Our mission as a church is meant to flow out of our relationship with God. And that relationship is nurtured through God's Word. Creating a culture in which people see the Bible as life-giving relationship with God rather than a dry old irrelevant book written long ago is essential in order to sustain the kind of transformational mission we are called to in this world.

While it's true that the Bible is not written *to* us (it was written to people living 2,000 years ago), it is written *for* us. It is intended to inform us and transform us, as individuals and as a community. Some years ago, when WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets were in fashion, one of the major curriculum publishers jokingly declared that they were thinking of naming their next curriculum series HCYDWJWDIYDKWJD? How Can You Do What Jesus Would Do If You Don't Know What Jesus Did? Good question.

ⁱ The Covenant Book of Worship, p. 9.

ⁱⁱ Covenant Affirmations, p. ???

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p.