

Companions on a Similar Journey: A Look at Other Systems for Daily Bible Reading

By Mark W. Stamm, O.S.L.

United Methodism serves as a "bridge church" between the modern liturgical movement, the Frontier Tradition, and contemporary evangelicalism. Nowhere was this seen more clearly than in the publication of *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), which reflected the ecumenical consensus on Word and Table, yet also included Gospel hymns and choruses from the charismatic movement. To this date, no denominational publication exceeds the scope of its inclusiveness- As such, it is a quintessentially Methodist document.

This desire to include as much as possible stands in the tradition of the Anglican *via media*, or "middle way." John Wesley called such an impulse a "Catholic Spirit." In the sermon by that name, he asked kindred spirits to join his project. The exact form of their work did not matter. He wrote,

I dare not. . . presume to impose my mode of worship on any other. I believe it is truly primitive and apostolical. But my belief is no rule for another. I ask not therefore of him with whom I would unite in love, 'Are you of my Church? Of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of church government and allow the same church officers with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God?. . . Let all these things stand by: we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season. My only question at present is this, 'Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?'¹

Such cooperation was not without limits, however. Wesley reminded his reader, . . . a catholic spirit is not *speculative latitudinarianism*. It is not an indifference to all opinions . . . A man of a truly catholic spirit has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christianity.²

Wesley addressed those who believe and practice within the classical boundaries of the Christian faith,³ saying, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand."⁴

This essay is written as an expression of such a Catholic spirit. We look to the methods whereby some other Christians have exercised their vocation to daily reflection on the Bible. This essay is written from a Methodist perspective simply because, as embodied persons, each of us occupies a particular place on the ecumenical map. It is hoped that persons from other Christian communions will see some of their concerns reflected in these Methodist particularities. With that caveat in mind, we will describe

three systems with Methodist roots: *The Upper Room*, perhaps the world's most popular devotional resource; *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* by Reuben Job and Norman Shawchuck; and the *Disciple Bible* study. We will note the positive emphases in each, noting ways their concerns intersect with our own. As Wesley would urge us to do, we will look past differences in form to the substance of the matter.

THE UPPER ROOM

The Upper Room is published in 64 editions and 44 languages, including Meitei, Tagalog, and Thai, not to mention English and Spanish.⁵ As such, it is one of the most widely used devotional guides in Protestantism. It is marked by its simplicity and accessibility as well as its warm hearted piety.

For each day of the calendar year, *The Upper Room* provides a one page devotional exercise which follows a familiar pattern. A theme is stated such as "God is love." A short Bible reading is appointed, followed by a theme verse which may or may not be drawn from the reading. Then comes a short reflection, often in the form of a personal testimony. For instance, in the July 31, 1996 entry, Kellsye M. Finnic writes,

In the convalescent home in which I am now living, my room is on the second floor. I am high enough to have a good view of the top of the tall trees that I can see from my window. They are a constant joy to me as their leaves rustle in the breeze or their branches sway in the boisterous wind . . .⁶

She follows this observation by describing God's work in the changing of both the temporal seasons and the seasons of a human life: "God has a plan for the life of each of us, too,"⁷ Following the reflection comes a short prayer and a "thought for the day," each based on that day's theme. Finally, there is a "prayer focus" which suggests an arena for extemporaneous prayers. In Ms. Finnie's entry, persons were asked to pray for "those in extended recovery."⁸ Other themes for July, 1996 included "Youth in church camps," "those who work with the poor and marginalized," and "those learning to pray."⁹

The Upper Room devotional guide is part of a venerable pietistic tradition. One finds similarities with the Moravian *Daily Texts* which that church began publishing in 1731, less than a decade before John Wesley paid his visit. One can assume that Wesley encountered their use. In its current recension, *Daily Texts* provides two verses each day, a "watch-word" drawn by lot from the Hebrew Scriptures and a "doctrinal text" taken from the New Testament.¹⁰ Coupled with each text is a hymn verse. Count Zinzendorf called these "collects."¹¹ The exercise ends with a short prayer. *Daily Texts* does not have written reflections like one finds in *The Upper Room*, but the hymns suggest a similar type of experiential connection with the Scripture. E. Stanley Jones published a number of books which follow a format similar to that found in *The Upper Room*.¹² Again, the form is well known.

Persons schooled in the rhythms of the daily office may notice weaknesses in *The Upper Room*. Unlike most forms of the daily office, *The Upper Room* devotionals are

meant to be prayed individually, not corporately, although that may be a moot point. More often than not, the daily office is prayed privately, as The Order of Saint Luke rubrics readily admit.¹³ Moreover, some families indeed use *The Upper Room* for their corporate devotions. A more significant weakness in *The Upper Room* is the thematic methodology used for choosing its scripture readings. For instance, on consecutive days in August 1996, one finds readings from James 5, Matthew 7, and Jeremiah 7, followed by Genesis 50.¹⁴ There is nothing here of that classical Reformation methodology, the "in course" reading of the Bible. One might assume that biblical passages are merely jumping off points for the discussion of various spiritual "themes" and not the ancient canonical conversation that generates such themes and judges them. Reflections on such daily themes can descend into an annoying didacticism. One might prefer silence.

Its weaknesses notwithstanding, one must acknowledge the persistent power of *The Upper Room*. Why do so many find it helpful and significant? There may be any number of reasons, but three come to mind. First of all, it is written for busy people — people with jobs and families, people who lead Scout Troops and coach Little League teams, people who sing in the church's choirs and serve on its committees. One can complete an *Upper Room* devotional period in about ten minutes, as much time as most people have to offer. Second, *Upper Room* contributors include a number of laypersons; thus it avoids clericalism and addresses a number of concerns held by the laity. Finally, its testimonial format is quintessentially Methodist! Ever since John Wesley reported "I felt my heart strangely warmed..,"¹⁵ we have wanted to hear how God is at work in the lives of our fellow Christians. When someone like Gloria Lastiri tells us about her cancer diagnosis and her tears, Methodists listen. When she says "Looking back, I saw that my weeping did not mean I was less a disciple,"¹⁶ we are encouraged. When she says, "With the help of Jesus and chemotherapy treatments, I am free of cancer today,"¹⁷ we rejoice and glorify God along with her. Indeed, the language of testimony is the Methodist heart language, and *The Upper Room* speaks it every day. At their best, these testimonials help us notice the grace of God at work in our own lives.

Those who follow the more objective, classical patterns of the daily office can learn something from this testimonial power of *The Upper Room* and Methodism in general. We might remember that the early Methodist societies sometimes gathered to hear testimonial letters. With that in mind, we should also remember that the Order's liturgies for Evening and Morning Prayer provide a place where one may offer "Readings for Meditation and Reflection."¹⁸ Traditionally, such readings have come from the saints and doctors of the church, and that is a wise, consensual practice. Nevertheless, the occasional use of contemporary testimonial writings would be entirely appropriate, especially in Methodist gatherings. Such a usage would express a distinctive evangelical piety without violating the catholic integrity of the daily office.

A GUIDE TO PRAYER FOR MINISTERS AND OTHER SERVANTS

A second *Upper Room* publication provides opportunity for a more extensive devotional pattern. *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* (1983) by Reuben Job and Norman Shawchuck, is a one year system that grew out of their

"covenant to provide support and to call for accountability of each other in (their) lives and ministries."¹⁹ It is a daily office system in its own right, complete with its own lectionary. As with *The Upper Room* daily devotional, *A Guide* differs from most classical daily office systems in that it is designed for private use and not for corporate prayer. It would be difficult, although not impossible, to use Job and Shawchuck's *Guide* for common prayer.

As noted, *A Guide* is a daily office system in its own right. Indeed, the authors use the term "daily office" to describe it.²⁰ The ordinary pattern proceeds as follows:

- I. Invocation
- II. Psalm
- III. Daily Scripture Readings
- IV. Readings for Reflection
- V. Prayers: for the church, for others, for myself.
- VI. Reflection: silent and written
- VII. Hymn
- VIII. Benediction²¹

A theme related to the church year is provided for each week. For instance, "The Lord is Coming" is used for the first week of Advent," and "The Cost of Discipleship" is used for the week which includes the second Sunday in Lent.²³ The propers change each week, along with the theme. They are appointed for the invocation, Psalm, hymn, and benediction. Thus, for instance, the same Psalm is used each day throughout the week. Readings for Sundays follow the Common Lectionary.²⁴ Scripture readings for the weekdays follow the stated theme as do the "Readings for Reflection." Enough "Readings for Reflection" are provided that one could use a different reading each day throughout the year.

A prayerful use of the Scriptures stands at the heart of this system. One prays the appointed Psalm each day of the week, which encourages an ever deepening reflection on it. Job and Shawchuck suggest that one read two Bible passages each day, using one of the Sunday lectionary lessons along with the reading appointed for that particular week day. Thus, on Monday of the first week in Advent, Year A, one might read Isaiah 2:1-5 (one of the Sunday readings) along with Matthew 3 (appointed for Monday in all years).²⁵ Use of the Sunday Lectionary readings during the week anticipates Hoyt Hickman's "Daily Lectionary Based on the Revised Common Lectionary," but the similarity ends there. While Hickman's system employs a *lectio continua* methodology, filling in "the gaps"²⁶ not covered by the Sunday texts, *A Guide* does not follow this system of continuous reading. Thus, in that same first week of Advent, one follows Matthew 3 on Monday with Colossians 1 on Tuesday, John 18 on Wednesday, Isaiah 43 on Thursday, and so on.²⁷ Again, Job and Shawchuck lay aside *lectio continuo*, that basic Reformed way of reading the Scriptures. Nevertheless, ample Scripture reading is part of their system, and their encouragement of silence is commendable. It allows space for *the Spirit* to interpret Scripture.

Indeed, silence is one of the outstanding features of the Job-Shawchuck system. Along with many other Christians, Methodists struggle to learn the discipline of keeping silence. Their "Readings for Reflection" are well chosen and provide important reflections on the biblical lessons. They may be used profitably within the Order of Saint Luke offices. One might hope for more material from the apostolic fathers and less from twentieth century authors. In view of the fact, however, that the authors chose materials with which they were familiar, the twentieth century emphasis is not surprising.

The volume introduction, entitled "How to Use This Book" is perhaps the most helpful piece in *A Guide*, as Job and Shawchuck provide a well conceived theology for the use of Scripture within the daily office. They defend the use of the entire Psalter, including the imprecatory Psalms. They wrote,

Those who first heard the Psalms knew there were real lions, tigers and serpents "out there," and the tents they called home were slim protection from such enemies.

But what about us? Are our lives free of "arrows" and "terrors" and "enemies" which threaten to destroy us? No, the "enemies" are just as many and as deadly, but they are now "in here," inside us ... enemies such as the lust for power, laziness, spiritual boredom, worry, fear, unrelenting anger . . .

Spiritual growth requires that we do battle, not that we pretend the enemy is not there.²⁸

They remind persons to linger over the scriptures, recording insights, perhaps using the same passage or verses several days running.²⁹ In doing so, they provide a helpful reminder to those who emphasize the reading of large portions of Scripture at the daily office. That is, there will be no prize awarded for the one who reads the most Scripture. Spiritual engagement with the text is every bit as important as reading a large volume of scripture. At various points in one's spiritual journey, one might profit from an extended meditation on nothing more than a verse or two. Job and Shawchuck offer that permission.

DISCIPLE BIBLE STUDY

The church has always known, however, that meditation on particular verses or pericopes reaches its greatest depth when founded on an acquaintance with the whole Bible. According to a growing number of mainline leaders, the widespread lack of basic biblical knowledge constitutes a major weakness in the contemporary church. Bishop Richard Wilke sounded such an alarm in his 1986 book *And Are We Yet Alive?:*

We have taken so seriously scientific analysis of the Scriptures, using higher and lower criticism, historical and contextual understanding, that we have often forgotten to hear what God is trying to say to us. .. We listen to God speak to us

as we read, pray, and think within the Scriptures. Without the authority of the Bible, we have no authority at all.³⁰

Wilke insisted that renewal of the church depends on a sustained commitment to Bible study and teaching. He reminded his reader that "every revival of faith has come about through a rediscovery of the voice of the Spirit in the Scriptures."³¹ This conviction led Wilke and others to develop the *Disciple* Bible study program. *Disciple* addresses two related problems: First, the problem of "biblical illiteracy" in the church, and second, the dwindling ranks of well-formed leader-disciples. The agenda is expressed in the program's subtitle, "Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study."

Disciple uses a volume approach to the study of Scripture. In 34 weeks of study, participants will read about 70% of the Bible. Although the lessons are given thematic titles, such as "The Called People" (for week four)³² and "The People with a King" (for week nine),³³ in most cases these themes emerge naturally from the unfolding biblical narrative. Much of the reading is done in course. For instance, in week four, students read Genesis chapters 12 through 50, skipping only three chapters (34,38, and 46).³⁴ In week nine, most of First and Second Samuel is read, along with the Solomon narrative from First Kings.³⁵

On an average day, the *Disciple* "office" takes about forty minutes. One observes a short period of prayer which includes use of a Psalm text and extempore intercessions, but the bulk of one's time is taken up in Bible reading and reflection. Although the daily prayer, reading, and reflection is done individually, each student is part of a group of persons walking the same journey. Thus, one finds the corporate/individual dynamic that many persons experience as they observe the daily office. That is, one prays alone, mindful of others who are doing the same task at a similar time. The *Disciple* group, normally consisting of about twelve persons, becomes an important part of one's life. One can hardly read the biblical texts without thinking about how one's sisters and brothers will respond to them.

The weekly group meeting functions something like a Wesleyan class meeting. While each group has one or more leaders, the ultimate success of the group is determined by each person's willingness to take his/her task of reading and reflection seriously. Thus, in good Wesleyan fashion, the group meeting provides an arena of accountability. In addition, it also makes one focus on Christian *behavior*. Each session culminates in a discussion of "The Marks of Discipleship," in which participants ponder the implications of God's Word for daily living. Insisting that the study of Scripture informs practical Christianity is a hallmark of the class meeting methodology and Wesleyan Christianity in general. In his fine work on the early Methodist class meeting and its modern expressions, David Lowes Watson has insisted that emphasis on one's emotional state was not the primary concern of the early class meetings, nor should it be a major part of them today.³⁶ This emphasis on defining a specific Christian ethic sets *Disciple* groups and Covenant Discipleship groups apart from the various types of modern "support" groups.³⁷

As the group meeting reflects the concerns of classical Methodism, so the daily sessions reflect the concerns of Thomas Cranmer's Bible office described earlier in this volume. In his introduction to the BCP penned in the mid-sixteenth century, Cranmer wrote,

(the ancient fathers) so ordered (the daily office) that all the whole Bible, or the greatest part thereof, should be read over once in the year, intending thereby that the clergy, and especially such as were ministers of the congregation, should, by often reading and meditation of God's Word, be stirred up to godliness themselves, and be more able to exhort other by wholesome doctrine, and to confute them that were adversaries to the truth.³⁸

Generally speaking, Cranmer's office consisted in the reflective, corporate reading of Holy Scripture. He and his church believed that such a consistent discipline would lead to a commonwealth of the virtuous. *Disciple* holds the same vision. Thus, we have come full circle. As Cranmer sought to form a biblically literate clergy and laity in the sixteenth century, so the *Disciple* study seeks to do the same in the twenty-first. This desire for a biblically formed membership (clergy and laity) is never far from the church's consciousness, and that is cause for rejoicing.

As this essay has indicated, persons have found many ways to make a daily engagement with the Scriptures. Within the Order of Saint Luke, we prefer to hear Scripture within a doxological context of corporate praise and prayer. Nevertheless, we find much in common with the systems described in the preceding pages. To their adherents, and to all who seek to hear the Word of God and obey it we say, "Is your heart right with ours? Then, lend us your hand."³⁹

ENDNOTES

1. John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," 1750, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 2, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1985), 86-87.
2. *Ibid.*, 92-93.
3. Exactly where Wesley placed those boundaries is not altogether clear. Indeed, Wesley offered some strange concessions in this sermon. When discussing the sacraments, he said, "My sentiment is that I ought not to forbid water wherein persons may be baptized, and that I ought to eat bread and drink wine as a memorial of my dying Master. However, if you are not convinced of this, act according to the light you have..." (See "Catholic Spirit," 90) Most would assert that baptism and the eucharist are included in the "main branches of Christianity" he described as obligatory. (In another sermon, Wesley insisted on the "duty of constant communion." How can the eucharist be both optional and required? Such contradictions in Wesley's thought continue to puzzle the church.) Unfortunately, a tendency to accept too much is one of the unavoidable risks of life as a bridge church.

4. Ibid., 82. In using this phrase, Wesley was quoting Jehu's words to Jonadab as found 2 Kings 10: 15, King James Version.
5. See title page of *The Upper Room* Volume 62, number 3 July-August, 1996).
6. *The Upper Room*, 62:3 (July-August, 1996), 34.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 22 (July 19), 24 (July 21), 31 (July 28).
10. *Moravian Daily Texts, 1995* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: The International Board of Publications and Communications, Moravian Church, 1995), iv.
11. Ibid., iii.
12. See, for example, *Victorious Living* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1936), *The Way* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), *The Path to Power and Peace* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949).
13. See the preface in *The Daily Office, A Book of Hours for Daily Prayer, Volume 4-A* (Ordinary Time), Dwight W. Vogel, O.S.L., editor and compiler (Akron, Ohio: Order of Saint Luke Publications, 1997), ii.
14. See *The Upper Room*, Volume 62:3 (July-August, 1996), 44-47.
15. John Wesley, Journal, May 24, 1738, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 18, Journals and Diaries I (1735-1738) edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenreiter, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).
16. *Upper Room*, 38.
17. Ibid.
18. See *The Book of Offices and Services*, pp. 20, 26.
19. Reuben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Upper Room, 1983), 1.
20. Ibid., 8,10.
21. Ibid., 14.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 112.

24. Common Lectionary was the version of the ecumenical lectionary in use when *A Guide* was published. This earlier version does not include the in course reading of the Old Testament during the Summer-Fall weeks of Ordinary Time. One could use the current version, i.e. Revised Common Lectionary, without compromising Job and Shawchuck's system.
25. Job and Shawchuck, 14.
26. Hoyt Hickman, "Introduction: A Daily Lectionary Based on the Revised Common Lectionary," in *The Daily Lectionary, A Guide for Using the Scriptures within the Daily Office* (The Daily Office, Volume 6) edited by Mark W. Stamm and Hoyt L. Hickman (Akron, Ohio: Order of Saint Luke Publications, 2001), 9.
27. *A Guide*, 14.
28. *Ibid.*, 5-6.
29. *Ibid.*, 7.
30. Richard B. Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive?, The Future of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986), 88.
31. *Ibid.*, 89.
32. Richard B. Wilke, Julia K. Wilke, *Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study*, Study Manual (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986, 1993), 26.
33. *Ibid.*, 64.
34. *Ibid.*, 27. Genesis 34 is the account of Shechem's defiling of Dinah. Chapter 38 is the story of Tamar and Judah. Chapter 46 of Genesis is primarily genealogical.
35. *Ibid.*, 65.
36. See David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville, Tennessee: Discipleship Resources, 1992), 63-65.
37. David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville, Tennessee: Discipleship Resources, 1989), 79-80. Watson insists that any serious group of Christians must develop a "checklist" of virtues specific to their time and place.
38. *The Book of Common Prayer 1559, The Elizabethan Prayer Book*, edited by John E. Booty (Washington, D.C.: Folger Books, 1976), 14.
39. See John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," 82.