

Gospel-Sharing

Why are there four different ways of Gospel-sharing?

By Rev Dr Oswald Hirmer

Limits of the Seven Steps

The purpose of the Seven Steps method is to become quiet in the soul and to listen to God's Word. The method makes it possible for people to expose themselves to the presence of the Risen Lord, without getting absorbed by the intellectual exercises too quickly.

Through the personal sharing of the self, the relationship of trust in the group grows. The members of the group support each other and strengthen each other in the faith, which is in accordance with accepted Pauline tradition (Compare Rom 1:11-12 and Rom 15:2; Eph 4:12; Col 3:16) The danger is that the Seven Steps method does not extend the participants beyond the purely personal level and that the group becomes too self-centered. This is why we also need other methods to fathom the treasures of the Holy Scriptures. Among these are not only the following three further Gospel-sharing methods, but also Biblical exegesis. The explanation of these different methods of Gospel-sharing is presented in workshop style in Lumko programme no. 20.

Group Response

In this process of Gospel-sharing, there is no personal interchange about certain words which have touched the individual in a special way. Rather, the participants ask themselves which problems or situations in their locality are reflected in this particular Biblical text. They try to see this situation with the eyes of God and thus in a special way use their prophetic gift.

Look-Listen-Love

This method of Gospel-sharing does not begin with the Scriptures, but with the personal experience of the participants. The group asks itself how God sees a particular situation in the life of the participants, and what God's will is.

Life-Bible-Notes

The starting point in this method of Gospel-sharing is a burning social situation.

Why these different methods?

As already mentioned earlier, the hidden treasures of the biblical message cannot be discovered by using one method only. We were inspired by the vision of Micah who talks about three circles in our relationship with God: "Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God" (Mi 6:8)

In other words, there is a personal relationship with God. But we are also part of a family and of the immediate neighbourhood. Further, we are part of the greater social, economic and political structure.

Some books containing different Bible methods concentrate in fact only on our personal conversion to God. Our relationship with neighbours and concern for social issues follow then as a kind of moral application.

However, we wanted the Christians to discover for themselves the whole dimension of the biblical message including the social one. For this reason we developed the four different Gospel-sharing methods. Small Christian Communities are advised to use all of them, although the Seven Step method remains the basic one whereas the other three should be used occasionally.

The theological basis of the way in which we use Scripture in our Gospel sharing methods

The way in which we use Scripture in Gospel sharing has its theological justification in the theology of the Word. This theological foundation of Gospel sharing already becomes clear in the first step of the different Gospel sharing methods. The participants are asked to invite Jesus very personally and warmly in a spontaneous prayer, like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus or Mary and Martha would have done. This shows that the group understands itself as a group of believers recognising the presence of the Risen Lord in their midst. In this circle of disciples the Holy Scriptures take on a completely different meaning than for example in a theological discussion.

Briefly: In Gospel-sharing, we understand the words of the Holy Scriptures as quasi-sacramental signs of the presence of Christ.

The participants of Gospel-sharing do not come together to talk 'about' Jesus, or to discuss the original meaning of the biblical text, as important as this is at other times. Rather, they gather in order to have communion with a living person who loves and accepts them. The promise "Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them" (Mt 18:20), becomes a reality.

The real presence of Christ in a Gospel-sharing group is just as real as that in the Eucharist. It is the same theological concept as our understanding of the Liturgy of the Word at the eucharistic celebration. There, too, we welcome and acclaim Jesus with the Alleluia before he speaks to us in the Gospel. When the Gospel has been proclaimed we do not thank the reader saying "Thank you, dear reader", but we acclaim again the Risen Lord in our midst, saying, "Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ".

In the text of Vatican Council II we read:

"The Church has always revered the Holy Scriptures as the Body of the Lord Himself. Jesus is present in His Word, because He Himself speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in Church" (DV, 21 and SC, 7)

"Church" here does not mean the building. Rather, it means the 'Kyriakoi', the people who belong to the Kyrios and are gathered in His Name.

When, therefore, the participants of a Gospel-sharing group repeat a certain word from a text in an attitude of prayer, they are given the opportunity to rest in the presence of Jesus, to let Him look at them and touch them. "Today this Scripture, which you have just heard, is fulfilled". This is how it happened in Nazareth (Lk 4:21)

In Gospel-sharing then, the most important thing is not whether all the participants have grasped the exegetical meaning of a text or not. Even if the actual text is 'wrongly' understood in the strict sense, it may be right in the context of the whole Bible which has as its basic message: "I am your God; I am with you; I love you".

Gospel-sharing becomes a pastoral event in which a new way of being Church can develop

The way in which we use Scripture in our Gospel-sharing methods- a new vision of Church is evolving and put into practice.

In a Gospel-sharing group, a church becomes real in which the 'true equality' and the 'joint dignity' of all believers takes on concrete form (compare with Lumen Gentium 32). Each participant is taken seriously as a 'bearer of the Holy Spirit', is allowed to lead the group, has direct access to God, and can judge personal and social situations of daily life in the light of the Gospel. In this way, the participants, as the baptised, are given the opportunity to practise their 'priestly, prophetic and kingly office' (compare with Lumen Gentium 31).

If we do not see Gospel-sharing as separate from other forms of proclamation in the Church (the sermon, catechism, Bible study, liturgy, etc), we do not need to be afraid of heretical teaching. We read: "but you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth" (1Jn 2:20-27)

A Leadership Style Free of Domination

Gospel-sharing also expresses a leadership style free of domination. The task of the leader is to retreat into the background in order to let the group flourish. Experience has shown that full-time church workers and professionals in the church have difficulty being good facilitators in Gospel-sharing groups. This is because a facilitator need only announce the steps at the right time and should not lecture or do that which other members of the group can do too.

For example, a good facilitator will not read the Biblical text him/herself or make the first contribution in the individual steps. If questions are asked, the facilitator (even if he/she has studied theology) will not regard him/herself as the 'seat of wisdom', but will direct the questions back to the group. The facilitator will only add to or summarise thoughts. If no expert is present, the group may later consult a theologian.

The task of the non-dominating facilitator nevertheless remains significant. Without him/her either nothing happens or there is chaos. Lao Tse says that the best leader he about whom the people say after wards: "We have done it ourselves". Jesus says it in these words: "If anyone wants to be the first, that person must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mk 9:35).

If Gospel-sharing is successful, it becomes a pastoral event, where in embryonic form a new and relevant Church of brothers and sisters becomes visible and begins to grow. It becomes an experience of living communion between Jesus Christ and His disciples, between God's message and the world.

This theological conception of Gospel-sharing may be the reason why it has found entry into so many countries of the world.

Gospel-sharing and Orthodoxy

The objection is raised, "How can 'simple' people find light in the Scriptures if they have no theological knowledge? A sound exegesis must come first before Scripture can yield sound spiritual food for daily life".

Another objection to Gospel-sharing is the fear of heresy. What would happen, we are asked, if a member of a group were to come to a heretical interpretation of the Text? To put the question in a more positive, yet no less challenging way, how can a biblical text be applied to life if the original meaning is not understood?

To tackle the second question first, Gospel-sharing is an alternative way of using the Scriptures. We have seen how the text becomes a sacramental sign for those who reflect upon it. It becomes a means for a first hand encounter with Christ. Even if the text is 'wrongly' understood in the strict exegetical sense, it may be right in the context of the whole Bible which has as its basic message: "I am your God; I am with you; I love you". This is similar to a person using the wrong grammar to communicate the right message. It can be argued that Scripture itself has sometimes re-interpreted biblical texts. For instance, Mark 4 (the allegorical explanation of the sower), Galatians 14:24 (Sarah and Hagar) and John 6 (reinterpretation of the Last Supper).

Even Liturgical texts re-interpret biblical passages without following the strict exegetical meaning. This we observe, for instance, in the choice of the first readings on Sundays. They are chosen in order to correspond to the main theme of the Gospel (compare with DV 67).

We see, then, that even if the original meaning of the author is not understood, the person reflecting prayerfully on the Word can still be touched personally by God and receive His message of love. This is somewhat similar to a person using grammar incorrectly to communicate the message. "I love to you", says the young man, struggling with English, to his friend; she does not miss the message!

People who gather in Gospel-sharing groups, then, can be confident of being addressed by God without their needing to understand the text fully. God still speaks His Words of love to them even if they interpret the text wrongly in the exegetical sense. What is

important is that Jesus himself is accepted in the text. It is for this reason that we respond to the proclamation of the Gospel at Mass not by thanking the reader, but by saying: "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ". (Many members of Gospel-sharing groups actually use this or a similar phrase as a response to a sharing by one of the members. They are thus recognising God Speaking to them through each other).

To return to the original question of what happens if one member of the group comes to a really heretical interpretation of the text. In this case we trust the other members of the group to give guidance according to the 'sense of the faithful'. A difficult problem can be presented to an expert later. In our experience we have never come across a serious problem in this matter.

We need to remember that Gospel-sharing is not the only way of dealing with Scripture in the parish. There are homilies, catechetical classes, Bible Study groups, etc. All of these exercise their corrective influence on the community. The Vatican Council II teaches us that the whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the Holy One (1Jn 2:20-27 cannot err in matters of belief (Lumen Gentium 12). In other words, Gospel-sharing must be seen within the context of the whole life of the Christian community.

Conclusion

Searching for ways to give 'access to Sacred Scripture' to the Christian faithful (DV 22) we were guided by the following principles:

- 1) Trust in God's Spirit living in all believers
- 2) Find a Bible method which can be used by the ordinary Christians themselves without the presence of a theological expert.
- 3) Our belief in Christ's resurrection and his promise to stay with those who gather in his name: this is the foundation of Gospel-sharing where the words of Scripture become quasi-sacramental signs of Christ's presence.
- 4) Make Scripture the inspiring force of all pastoral activities and not only a spiritual introduction to them or only a spiritual exercise for individuals.



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