

An examination of personal devotional life, focussing on attitudes to the Bible, before and after embarking on academic biblical study.

This project aimed to examine the personal devotional time of Common Awards students (ordinands, trainee Readers and independents), especially their use of the Bible in this context, and to explore how it might be affected by their participation in introductory study of both Testaments. Students reported on their personal spiritual practices both as they began, and after they completed, level 4 studies on the Bible; this was captured through a qualitative research project consisting of before-and-after online, anonymous surveys with both closed and open-ended questions. A small sample of those who completed the surveys were also interviewed, using semi-structured questions.

The context

This project was run within [SWMTC](#), from September 2017, with students studying TMM1012 (Intro OT), followed by TMM1011 (Intro NT); the surveys each attracted twenty participants (out of a possible 27 for survey 1 and 24 for survey 2) although only fifteen students took part in both. The ages ranged from the 30s to 60s; in both surveys, fourteen were over 50, and thirteen were female. Eight independent students took part in each survey and the rest comprised roughly 50:50 ordinands and Readers. Most students were in their first-year of academic study and about half of them described their time commitments (both paid and unpaid) as full-time. The majority had some experience of higher education but less than half had any prior formal education in theology: three were second year of students (who had not previously done biblical studies), two had completed a [Foundations in Christian Ministry](#) course, and three had trained and operated for some time as Readers.

From the dozen who volunteered to be interviewed, eight were chosen to include a representative sample of male and female, ordinand, Reader and independent students from both dioceses of Exeter and Truro. They were all interviewed both before and after completion of the biblical study modules.

Before biblical study began.

Devotional time

The majority of survey respondents reported setting time aside for devotions every day, with just three saying it was 'every 3 or 4 days'. Between 15 and 19 of them ranked private prayer, reading the Bible alone and meditating on it, together with personal reflection, as 'very important'. They all employed Bible study aids of some kind but fewer than half ranked them as 'very important' with regard to their spiritual

growth. Fasting was not at all important to nearly half of them and no-one ranked it as more than 'fairly important'.

Interviewees reported varied patterns of devotional activity; while some operated with periods of time focussed on God throughout the day, most tried to carve out a specific time, perhaps first or last thing in the day, or while travelling to work. A couple mentioned journaling and all said that reading the Bible featured in their devotional time.

Biblical engagement during devotions

Survey respondents

Most of the survey respondents used the Bible in their devotions 'always' or 'frequently', with around half employing a study Bible and/or commentaries and/or daily Bible notes to help them engage with it. A couple commented that they found these aids especially helpful in engaging with parts of the Bible that were more difficult to understand; with regard to these passages, over half said they would try to explore such difficulties in the texts outside their devotional time, while six indicated that they preferred to investigate problem passages then and there.

Psalms and Gospels were most often used devotionally; Leviticus and several other OT books, particularly those including 'chronologies or ritual law' were among those 'too difficult to use in devotional Bible reading'. Three said they followed the lectionary or a yearly pattern and eight had read or listened to the whole Bible, in canonical or chronological order. Three-quarters of them had tried memorising Bible verses; they all felt confident that they could outline narrative accounts from the NT, but fewer felt the same about OT stories such as the exile, or David and Bathsheba.

There was no evidence of significant differences in response between genders or correlating with prior experience of study

Interviewees

Among those interviewed, most said they were very familiar with the Bible and had read it through several times. Comparing their results with the whole contingent suggested a possible tendency for those who were most confident in their use of the Bible to have been more likely to volunteer for interview.

When asked what they expected to gain from using the Bible in their devotions, the responses all implied that they felt God communicates through the Bible: to get a sense of calling, for the 'big picture', to find out what life is about and what my focus should be, to hear God speak into a situation, to find guidance. In addition to use of the Gospels and Psalms, Paul's letters, Genesis, Deuteronomy and Ecclesiastes were mentioned as texts for devotional use.

Interviewees described their relationship with the Bible in terms of 'love': it was 'like a drug ... I miss it if I don't read it', 'an old friend', 'precious', 'sacred', 'living'. Alongside this, however, some acknowledged that they found it challenging and a few described it as 'inconsistent' with some parts very difficult to explain to other people.

After biblical study

More and wider reading; understanding, confidence and openness

Most survey respondents indicated that their devotional practices had not changed over the course of their studies, except with regard to the question concerning how often they generally read and studied the Bible: 15 of the 20 reported they spent more time on it and only five said it was unchanged.

Around three-quarters said they had been inspired to make devotional use of parts of the Bible they had previously avoided or found difficult in the past, especially the Old Testament. The number who had read or listened to the whole Bible all the way through went up from 8/20 to 12/20. Those who were very or fairly confident in their own understanding of, and familiarity with, the Bible went up from five out of twenty to eighteen. The majority, if not all, felt that their confidence had increased.

In an open question, the effects of study upon their use of the Bible in devotions was described in terms such as 'more historical context and more depth of understanding of what the writers were aiming to do': 'This is not an "academic" exercise, but rather a devotional one, in that reading and contemplation flows naturally from one area to another without being stilted as had happened prior to this period of study'. The majority (17/20) reported a change in their engagement with the Bible generally; while this was occasionally reported in potentially negative, or neutral terms ('perceptions challenged at some points'; 'less naïve and more questioning') most of these seemed positive in tone and/or content, speaking of strengthening or deepening their relationship with the Bible, of increased understanding and/or confidence and questioning of the texts 'in a healthy way!'.

Similarly, in the interviews, most spoke positively of the effects of the year's biblical study on the ways in which they related to the Bible. For example, one spoke of an 'enormous desire to spend much more time reading it and absorbing it'. Another highlighted the value, for devotional life, of the 'greater sense of the meta-story of salvation, that greater sense of interpretation and looking at the context in which people are writing, why they're writing, who they're writing to, the literary side of what we see in the Bible'. Some noted that study had resulted in them having a broader sense of the possible readings of a text: from now on they 'will always look at a text from maybe one of three different approaches rather than one narrowly focussed close exegesis'. Another noted the appreciation 'that people approach the Bible differently'; 'before I'd embarked on really comprehensive study I would approach

texts and books with a lot more preconceptions so, e.g. I know what the sermon on the mount is about, ... whereas now I'm more likely to take a step back and say, "OK, it is about that but it's also about this, or could also be about that".

A distinction between devotional and academic

Alongside the positive, albeit challenging effects of biblical study, a few voices raised the question of the relationship between academic study and devotional encounter with God through the texts. One survey respondent noted that 'I may have an enhanced theological understanding of the text I am reading but this does not necessarily aid my use for devotional purposes'; this raises the question of how critical study might nourish devotional use of the Bible. This question had been anticipated in the survey design; one question asked for 'suggestions for ways in which your biblical studies this year could have better supported your devotional use of the Bible'. Responses included more cross-referencing to personal spirituality and prayer during teaching sessions, and the provision of devotional reading round the topics being discussed.

A possible tension between academic and devotional readings of the texts was discussed by a couple of interviewees, one of whom had raised the issue at the beginning of the project: 'there seems to me to be a way that God communicates through his word by, if you like, highlighting something in his word that really speaks into the situation... maybe isn't the same as the situation it was written for ... originally... but it's still relevant and feels like it's from God'. This idea was amplified by another student, speaking at the end of the project: 'you see different perspectives, what was written, when it was written, why it was written, but there still seems to be a transcending message that leaps over and above that and I don't want to get to the stage where that transcendence is pulled into a solely academic understanding because I think it reduces it'.

Summary

This small project's findings suggest that academic biblical study can have a positive effect upon devotional biblical engagement for Common Awards students. This is expressed in terms of greater familiarity with and understanding of the texts and of the range of their possible interpretations within the church, and of greater confidence in the scriptures.

The question of a distinction between devotional and academic reading suggests that it would be valuable, within CA teaching of biblical modules at level 4, to make more explicit links between biblical studies and wider Christian spiritual explorations of the texts. It may also be of value to explore how devotional readings might be both valued and evaluated.

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