

A BIBLE READING METHOD (Sometimes called 'A Hermeneutical Circle')

John Simmonds, who died in 2019, was a long-standing member of the Council of St Mark's Centre for Radical Christianity, and at one time lead on Continuing Development in Ministry for the Methodist Church. He wrote two books for the *Together in Hope* Series, in which CRC was a partner, *Walk the Jesus Walk* and *Jesus then and now*. In this short article offers a method of reading the Bible which is particularly suitable for using in groups.

Introduction to the method

This is a way of studying Bible passages which:

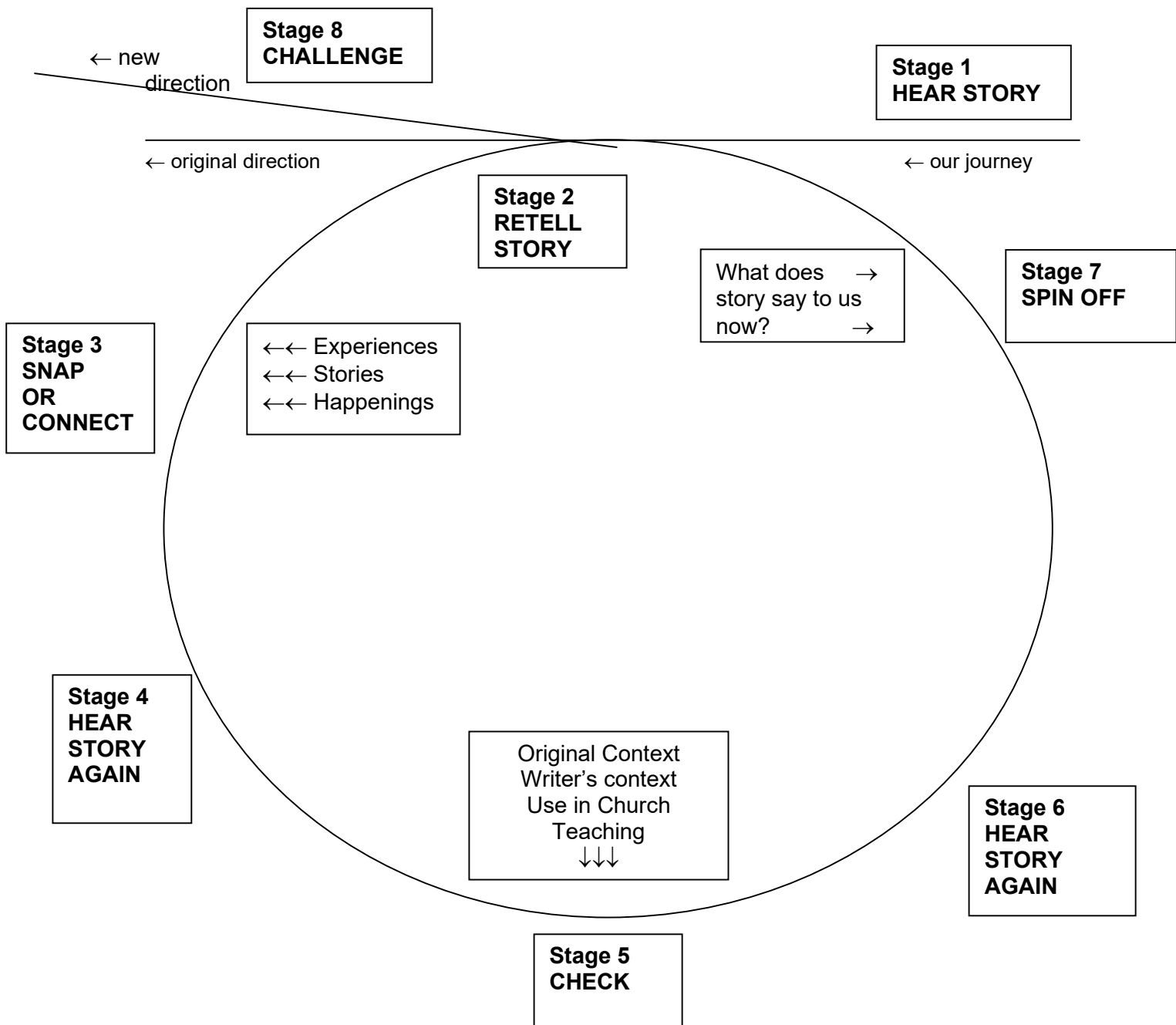
1. provides a context for *shared* study and a *shared* response.
2. takes the listener's or reader's *experience and context* seriously, i.e. it starts from where people are
3. takes account of the *original context* of the Bible passage, i.e. it takes account of what was happening when the story was written
4. looks for a *practical response* in the listener or reader i.e. it provides an opportunity for people to engage in some kind of action.

Stages in the method

1. People **HEAR** a Bible passage (usually a section of narrative or a parable) as it is *read* out aloud. This allows for both readers and listeners to hear.
2. It is a good idea, then, for the story to be **RETOLD** by the group so that everyone grasps its main features.
3. Group members are then invited to '**SNAP**' or '**CONNECT**' with the passage, i.e. to recall experiences, stories, happenings which remind them of (or resonate with) features of the Bible passage. Ideally, these will be experiences from their own life. If not, they could be items from the news, soap operas, books, films, etc. Make a list of these 'similar' experiences. The aim of this exercise is to help people to identify with at least something in the Bible passage.
4. Next, the passage should be **READ AGAIN**. Afterwards, people can be asked whether, In the light of the SNAP/CONNECT exercise, the story has taken on any new meanings.
5. Next comes a chance to **CHECK** out the story, by looking at its historical context. At this point the group members *and* group leader can feed in any interesting information, which illuminates the passage. This could be done by getting people to look up the story in different translations and commentaries.
6. Next, the passage can be **READ AGAIN**. Afterwards, people can be asked whether, after the CHECK, the story has now taken on any new meanings.
7. Now, look for a **SPIN OFF**. Ask, 'What is the challenge in this story for me / us?' At this point it is important to refer back *both* to stage 2 ('SNAP or CONNECT') *and* Stage 4 ('CHECK').
8. Finally, ask people if they are prepared to accept the **CHALLENGE** for themselves as individuals or as a group, so that they actually change their ways in the light of the Bible reading.

See the diagram for a diagrammatic presentation of the method. If the diagram is drawn during the group session, it is better that it is built up stage by stage as the session proceeds.

DIAGRAM FOR HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE BIBLE STUDY METHOD



Summary

- Stage 1** HEAR a Bible story
- Stage 2** RETELL story
- Stage 3** 'SNAP' or 'CONNECT' with everyday experiences or stories
- Stage 4** HEAR Bible passage again
- Stage 5** CHECK out story with contextual information
- Stage 6** HEAR Bible passage again
- Stage 7** 'SPIN OFF' for everyday life today
- Stage 8** Any CHALLENGE we might accept for ourselves

Example of how the hermeneutical circle might work in a small group

The Parable of the Two Sons (Prodigal Son): Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

First ask if any members of the group know any interesting background information to these passages for feeding in at Stage 5. Don't articulate them yet but hold them in readiness. Only feed in the pointers A to E if none of the ideas there have been identified.

Stage 1, Read the passage. A member/members of the group reads the passage slowly.

Stage 2, Retell the passage. The group makes the passage 'their own' by retelling it in their own words. How this is done will depend on the size of the group.

Stage 3, Snap or Connect with everyday stories or experiences. The members of the group share with each other stories and/or experiences that resonate with the parable. Make a list of these 'similar' experiences. The aim of this exercise is to help people to identify with at least something in the Bible passage.

Stage 4, Hear the passage again. Perhaps do this by ascribing different characters in the narrative to different members of the group. At the end, ask whether the parable has taken on any new meanings as a result of the process so far.

Stage 5, Check out the story with contextual information.

Some pointers:

- 1 Remember that, in the early days, the early Christians were still centred in *Jewish* communities. By the time Luke wrote both his Gospel and his other book, The Acts of the Apostles, the followers of Jesus were challenging the exclusivity of Jewish tradition and teaching. This focussed especially on whether people of non-Jewish ('Gentile') background should enjoy the benefits of the new faith without first submitting to Jewish rites and expectations. This whole crisis is explored by Luke in Acts, especially in the long story of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10.
- 2 Because the early Jewish Christians were steeped in the Jewish Scriptures (roughly speaking, what we know as the 'Old Testament'), they were very familiar with instructions about how family life should be managed and especially how children should be brought up. 'Honour your father and mother' was central to Jewish life.
- 3 Note this passage from Deuteronomy 21: 18-21, which the people would know well:

When a man has a son who is disobedient and out of control, and will not obey his father or his mother, or pay attention when they punish him, then his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of the town at the town gate.

They shall say to the elders the town, 'This son of ours is disobedient and out of control; he will not obey us, he is a wastrel and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death, and you will thereby rid yourselves of this wickedness All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.

Look at the parallels and difference between this way of carrying on and the parable in Luke.

- 4 Note also that, in the Jewish lectionary, a passage from the Jewish sage, Ben Sirach, writer of Ecclesiasticus (33:19-23) was read alongside Deut.21. It says, effectively, that if you don't want your rebellious children to be stoned, then on no account tell them

what you are going to do with your money until you are on your death bed. Then they will be faithful to you!

As long as you live, give no one power over yourself - son or wife, brother or friend.

Do not give your property to another, in case you change your mind and want it back.

It is better for your children to ask from you than for you to be dependent on them.

Whatever you are doing, keep the upper hand,....

Let your life run its full course, and then, at the hour of death, distribute your estate.

- 5 So, by bringing points C and D (above) together, we have the raw materials for Luke's parable. Ben Sirach told the wise father not to part with his money till his sons could spend it without hurting him (i.e. after he was dead!), and Moses told the parents to hand over their boy to the village elders and have him stoned; but Luke knew of the 'foolishness' of God who has put himself in our hands, and given us the inheritance to enjoy now; and who runs and falls on our necks in joy and forgiveness even before our confessions are said!

Note that this is a parable of *two* sons. Note especially that the father assures the grumbling older son that he is *always with him* and *'everything I have is yours'*. Luke is probably addressing both Jewish and Gentile Christians and assuring them that God embraces them all. It may be also a pastoral message that the new Israel (in the Christian community) must shake off the old ways of punishment and embrace the new way of forgiveness. They must copy the Father, who does not seek respect for himself but gives respect to others.

At the end, ask if the information makes a difference to people's appreciation of the parable.

Stage 6, Hear the parable again.

Stage 7, Spin off for everyday life today. Let the group make whatever connections it can between the parable, the use of the cycle, and their everyday experience/the world they live in.

Stage 8, Identify any **Challenges** which the group or individuals identify. Gently probe about how these are to be met.