

Cultivating an Interpretive Community for the Present and the Future

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“If people can’t see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed” (Proverbs 29:18, MSG).

Pastoral ministry in a local congregation is becoming increasingly complex. Tod Bolsinger compared the challenge of pastoral leadership to Lewis and Clark’s search for a waterway to the Pacific Ocean only to find themselves confronted with the Rocky Mountains where their canoes could not cross.¹ He rightfully addressed leading in a cultural context that was not expected by naming the pressures and pitfalls of uncharted territory. Since he wrote his book in 2015, the challenges have only increased. Polarization over the 2016 presidential election, the outbreak of COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, the murder of George Floyd, the January 6 attack on the Capitol, and the 2024 presidential election all illustrate a deep divide among those who claim to follow Jesus. The challenges of pastoral leadership have only increased in speed and intensity.

As leadership teams and pastoral staffs attempted to lead during monumental change, congregants began to question who they were and what they believed amid the tumult. “Deconstruction,” a term coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, has found its footing in the present church.² Recently, a flurry of books has been written about

¹ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 24–28.

² Jon Bloom, “What Does ‘Deconstruction’ Even Mean?” *Desiring God*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-deconstruction-even-mean>.

deconstruction, which the communities we have been called to lead are reading. Many of these books are raising further questions that continue the deconstruction journey.³ Deconstruction also includes the legion of voices on social media where every question, comment, and perspective is laid bare for others to challenge.

In 2019, 3,000 churches were planted and 4,500 closed.⁴ The average church size in 2020 was down to sixty-five from 137 in 2000.⁵ In 2007, when Americans were asked to check a box indicating their religious affiliation, 16 percent checked “none.” That number grew to 28 percent in 2024. Of these “nones” 69 percent are under the age of fifty and 63 percent are white.⁶ Churches and denominations in the West that were growing and thriving in their past began to see an exodus of members resulting in financial strains. Pastoral staff layoffs, a noticeable decrease of individuals responding to a call toward pastoral ministry, the bleed of younger generations from institutional faith, and the restructuring of leadership dominate many discussions within churches, denominations, and theological seminaries. What are pastors and leaders supposed to do to navigate these rocky mountains? Where is our vision? Are we aware of what God is doing?

Cultivating an Interpretive Community

My doctoral research and work at Fuller Theological Seminary began out of my anxiety around being a lead pastor for the first time. I had served in ministry for years in youth, associate, and interim roles but never in

³ Brian McLaren has published two recent books that illustrate this: *Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned* (St. Martin's Essentials, 2024), and *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart* (St. Martin's Essentials, 2024). On this same topic Brian Zahnd published *When Everything's on Fire: Faith Forged from the Ashes* (InterVarsity Press, 2021). While some view deconstruction as primarily a white Christian construct, examples of authors of color deconstructing their faith from white supremacy include Cole Arthur Riley's *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (Convergent Books, 2023), Lisa Sharon Harper's *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World—and How to Repair It All* (Brazos Press, 2022), and Esau McCaulley's *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2020).

⁴ Scott Neuman, “The Faithful See Both Crisis and Opportunity as a Church,” NPR WBEZ, May 17, 2023, <https://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/news/npr/1175452002/the-faithful-see-both-crisis-and-opportunity-as-churches-close-across-the-country>.

⁵ Neuman, 2023.

⁶ Jason DeRose, “Religious ‘Nones’ Are Now the Largest Single Group in the US,” NPR WBEZ, Chicago, January 24, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/24/1226371734/religious-nones-are-now-the-largest-single-group-in-the-u-s>.

the lead role. I was anxious because I knew, on some level, that there was an expectation that I would *lead* the congregation, which I always found interesting. In Scripture we read that Jesus was and is the *head* of the congregation (which he is building), and I was curious as to why and how we did not function in that way. The hierarchal leadership structure functioned with the lead pastor working with the leadership team to create a vision and strategy for the future with a well-crafted mission statement and then convincing the congregation that it was God's leading, exuding confidence that God would be with us in our strategic plan. Believing in the priesthood of all believers, I realized that our framework may be excluding input and vision from the entire body. Like trying to create strategy from the top floor of the tower of Babel, leadership teams and pastors may be far away from the experiences of those on the streets and, even worse, may not have a paradigm of listening and discerning what the Spirit of God is saying to a specific congregation. As a pastor and leader, I wanted to consider how the full congregation could discern together what the Spirit of God is attempting to speak to our context.

Stop, Look, Listen

When I was young, I distinctly remember being taught that when I approached a railroad crossing, I needed to stop, look, and listen. Whether I was walking or driving across the tracks, I needed to stop and look both ways. I needed to listen for the sound of an approaching train. Cultivating an interpretative community requires the slow process of stopping whenever a decision is needing to be made, looking to the past, and listening to how the community perceives their past and present. This practice will take significantly more time than a monthly leadership team meeting. Yet this is the process of discerning together what the Lord may be asking communities of faith to embark upon, especially in times of upheaval. If one does not stop, look, and listen, the consequences may be dire with even the best of intentions. An interpretive community is one where there is intentionality around stopping, looking, and listening collectively to God and to one another.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus taught about his kingdom while inviting his followers to have practical experiences of his kingdom paradigm. In Matthew 13:13–15 Jesus describes people as being able to physically see and hear but failing to understand his teaching or connecting it to practical experiences. Whether a willful ignorance of refusing to see or hear, or whether one has never considered how the Spirit of God may be moving in our decision making, Jesus's question asking if we are seeing

and hearing is imperative. The paradigm of an interpretive community is one where there is a desire, longing, and intentionality of seeing and hearing what Jesus is presently saying and presently doing.

Stop

Pastors and leaders are fully aware that budgeting, personnel, and programming decisions all have a timeline. The pressure to barrel ahead, believing that God has called us into specific positions of leadership, is real. Stopping does not imply doing nothing. Stopping is pausing the decision-making process to gather more information for pastors and leadership teams to discern what may emerge from the information gathered. This is crucial work for a better present and a hopeful future. While decisions can be large or small, the practice of pausing to gather information prior to making decisions is key to creating an interpretive community looking to the Spirit of God to speak, lead, and guide.⁷

The warning for spiritual leaders and teachers unable to discern the movement of God's Spirit in their communities is dire. We see this tension in the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus, a spiritual leader responsible for determining correct interpretations of the law of Moses to Israel, came to Jesus to ask him questions about his teachings. Jesus's question in 3:10 is imperative for all spiritual leaders discerning the work of the Spirit of God: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" In other words, Nicodemus, as a leader and teacher of Israel, are you not able to discern what the Spirit is doing and saying? Jesus insists Nicodemus be "born again" to more effectively discern the movement of God's Spirit.

John 3 is typically used to call unrepentant sinners to receive Jesus into their lives. However, that does not consider the context of this passage. Jesus never asked a sinner to be "born again." He did not ask the woman caught in adultery or unclean Samaritans or tax collectors to be born again. Jesus asks many people to follow him, but he reserved the term "born again" for someone in spiritual leadership. This was an invitation for Nicodemus to interpret what God was doing in his midst through the life, teaching, and active presence of the living

Word, Jesus himself. Pneumatology, from the Greek words πνεῦμα (*pneuma*, spirit) and λόγος (*logos*, teaching), includes the study of the

⁷ In his book *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Alban Institute, 2004) Mark Lau Branson introduced a paradigm of "interpretive leadership" where leaders seek to understand what is going on and why is it happening.

person and work of the Holy Spirit. In his dialogue, Jesus is attempting to educate Nicodemus about the Holy Spirit. An interpretive community seeks to discern the voice and work of the Spirit in their present by looking back at how the Spirit worked in their past. Such a community can move forward in the direction in which God's Spirit is inviting them.

Another leader of Israel in Scripture who failed to interpret a present moment by engaging how God had worked in the past was the apostle Paul. In Philippians 3:5–6 and elsewhere, Paul describes himself as a Pharisee of Pharisees. In his leadership position, the former Saul's interpretation of this troubling new Jesus movement led him to murder early believers. Rather than pausing, like Nicodemus, to engage Jesus and his movement and interpret what was happening by engaging their history with God, Saul perceived the movement as a threat. The resurrected Jesus does not tell Saul to be "born again" but rather that he was kicking against the goads. This is a warning to those in positions of spiritual leadership who, in their own understanding, may be kicking against what the Spirit of God is attempting to reveal to said leadership. Both Nicodemus and Saul were spiritual leaders of Israel and were invited by Jesus to pause and discern. Neither one was interpreting what God's Spirit was doing through the life and teachings of Jesus.

Nicodemus was challenged individually by Jesus to perceive the movement of God's Spirit. While this was clearly a personal directive, communities of faith are also invited to consider this paradigm collectively. A biblical example is the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 when the Spirit of God was poured out on uncircumcised gentiles. The community of faith needed to discern not only what God had done but how their faith community would respond. Should they require the whole law of Moses or not? In that present moment, they reached into their history to attempt to understand how God's Spirit may now be at work. In verse 10, Peter refers to their "ancestors" and how God had not put a heavy yoke on them and, therefore, they should not put the heavy yoke of circumcision on the gentiles. Peter and the council of Jerusalem modeled an interpretive community.

In *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton distinguishes between decision-making and discernment. In the first paradigm, Barton writes that usually when faced with a decision, a congregational meeting with a set agenda is called. Following perfunctory opening prayers, the agenda actually makes the decision on behalf of the congregation. In contrast, the second paradigm views the agenda itself as the process of discernment. Once leadership is conscious of God as their leader, God

guides the discernment forward. Barton writes to cultivate interpretive communities who seek discernment individually and corporately to navigate their crossroad moments. According to Barton, cultivating a discerning posture is transformational for all present in the community of faith.⁸

Look

The dilemma for leaders navigating present realities cannot be overlooked. Proverbs 29:18 reminds us of the importance of vision and the thriving of people attached to such vision. Determining where we are going, how we are going to get there, and what resources we must have to arrive at the vision requires strategic thinking. However, the Hebrew word for *vision* in this verse is much broader than creating a strategic plan for God's people, the church, and its leaders. The Hebrew word חָזוֹן (*châzôwn*) is translated "vision, prophecy, and revelation." It implies divine communication and the ability to discern what that divine communication entails rather than a personal plan for a successful future.⁹ Through the prophetic office, one could interpret a divine and specific word for God's people.

Humility characterizes leaders who seek God for insight and discernment. Looking for specific and divine revelation for present realities and future possibilities has always been a church imperative, but when everything seems chaotic the intense longing for a divine word escalates. In the rush to chart a new course, communities of faith may skip interpretation all together, with dire results. Matthew Taylor exemplifies this in his podcast *Charismatic Revival Fury*, tracing what he calls the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), which began with John Wimber asserting that the church was in its dismal state because it lacked apostles and prophets who could hear from God directly.¹⁰ Taylor places the NAR behind the Capitol insurrection on January 6 by those convinced of Trump's divine

⁸ Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 50–51.

⁹ StudyLight.org, Strong's #2377, חָזוֹן, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://studylight.org/lexicons/eng/hebrew/2377.html>.

¹⁰ Listen to Matthew D. Taylor, "Episode 1: January 6th and the New Apostolic Reformation," *Charismatic Revival Fury: The New Apostolic Reformation* (podcast), March 27, 2024, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-1-january-6th-and-the-new-apostolic-reformation/id1738709631?i=1000650888048>. According to Taylor, the NAR is primarily led by white leadership. However, the NAR is a multiracial, global, and Pentecostal movement.

role as their spiritual leader.¹¹ One wonders what discernment practices the “prophetic and apostolic” leadership of NAR employed to arrive at their conclusion. To avoid pitfalls such as these in discerning the movement of God’s Spirit, a careful review of historical narratives is crucial.

Looking Back: “What Happened and Why?”

I was introduced to Jesus at the age of nineteen through a Pentecostal campus ministry. At our gatherings someone would regularly offer a prophetic word to an individual or the community about something present or future. Each week a prophetic word was spoken, but there was never a moment to look back to pay attention to whether what was said previously came to fruition. The leadership of this ministry cultivated a culture of always addressing the present and the future with a prophetic “word from the Lord.” I stayed with the ministry until I graduated and then ended up as a high school intern at First Covenant Church in Oakland, California. That internship experience led me to apply to and attend North Park Theological Seminary for my MDiv studies.

As a student at NPTS, I took a course titled “Exile and Hope” with Fred Holmgren. This seasoned faculty member and Old Testament scholar presented a perspective on the prophets that challenged my previous paradigms. According to Holmgren, the prophets in Scripture were highly intuitive, fully aware of the crises that they, God’s covenant people, were experiencing. However, the prophets did not immediately look forward in order to strategize how to get out of their current situation. Their *first* act was to look back to understand how they arrived in the crisis they were experiencing. Primarily they focused on God’s actions and words in their past, along with their responses of commission and omission to interpret their present. This was necessary before charting a course for the future. Without exegeting history, the prophets believed they might misstep charting a course for a desired future. God’s people needed to repent from their past to ensure that their present and future would be in alignment with God.

Biblical prophets were mindful of counterfeiters who preached promising messages aligned with societal desires rather than their historical call. Motivated by personal gain, false prophets gave a fabricated sense of security that everything would be fine if the community followed

¹¹ Rick Pidcock, “The New Apostolic Reformation Drove the January 6 Riots So Why Was It Overlooked by the House Select Committee?” *Baptist News Global*, January 10, 2023, <https://baptistnews.com/article/the-new-apostolic-reformation-drove-the-january-6-riots-so-why-was-it-overlooked-by-the-house-select-committee/>.

their edicts. Biblical prophets issued warnings and corrections to God's people after analyzing and interpreting their history. In other words, prophets were greater historians rather than predictors of the future. They acknowledged that their present and future would change only if they could honestly engage their past.¹² This was imperative because they acknowledged the severity of their current crisis despite the enticing proclamations of their false counterparts.

Because their messages were in direct conflict with true prophets and their interpretation of history, false prophets used political power to stir up violence toward biblical prophets. This clash of differing perspectives resulted in the death of many of God's messengers. Jesus's first public message quoting from Isaiah 61 demonstrates this, "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn" (Luke 4:18). This reading provided a present and future hope for those listening that their political ruler (messiah) had arrived and would deliver them from Roman rule and occupation, uprooting one political empire and replacing it with a spiritual empire to accomplish what they perceived was God's purpose. Those listening to Jesus's sermon that day were amazed and hopeful that their present would change toward Israel's advantage, giving them a bright and hopeful future. Knowing this, Jesus reached into their collective past to remind them that two well-known and respected prophets, Elijah and Elisha, performed miracles for non-Israelites. He interpreted their history to address their present and future. This put him in conflict with what the people wanted and expected from him as their Messiah. They immediately attempted to end his life by throwing him off a cliff. Evidently, they did not want to look honestly at their past if it challenged their desired future.

In his article "Discerning True and False Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah," Paul Gallagher contrasts the biblical prophet Jeremiah with his counterpart and false prophet, Hananiah.¹³ During Israel's Babylo-

¹² The Evangelical Covenant Church demonstrated a prophetic impulse to look back in order to interpret its present by repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery on June 25, 2021, at the 135th Annual Meeting, <https://covchurch.org/resolutions/2021-resolution-to-repudiate-the-doctrine-of-discovery/>. This act of communal repentance for a historical moment realigns the church with the mission of God for its present and future.

¹³ Paul Gallagher, "Discerning True and False Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah," *Asia Journal of Theology*, 28 no. 1 (2014), 3.

nian exile, Hananiah held a prophetic office within Israel's leadership framework, but Jeremiah did not. However, each of them had specific and contradictory words for Israel's critical moment. Jeremiah addressed their history of false religiosity and social degeneration as the reason for God's punishment through Nebuchadnezzar, resulting in a long-prophesied exile.¹⁴ Hananiah, on the other hand, assured them of God's promise and that God would force Babylon to its knees. While sounding good, it did not address or interpret how or why Israel had arrived where they found themselves. Hananiah's hopeful and optimistic message and his confidence in God's provision was appealing. However, by preaching false assurances to God's people, Hananiah failed to address the history that had led them to where they were.¹⁵ In fact, Hananiah was not interested in interpreting their history but instead ignored it completely.

In Hananiah's prophecy, the covenant with Israel is detached from history understood as Yahweh's dialogue with his people; instead, the covenant takes on a separate existence as a ready-to-hand means to cope with crisis. In such a case the covenant, and the truth of God and his intention for Israel that it brings to light, provides no illumination in times of upheaval. It is more of a spiritual lie in which the prophet's theology of God, uprooted from a historical vision of the covenant, renders him incapable of distinguishing revelation from wish-fulfillment.¹⁶

Gallagher goes on to state the false prophet Hananiah encouraged Israel to cling to their institution for comfort and, in doing so, distanced themselves from what God was doing and saying in their midst. Jeremiah, on the other hand, predicted the political, social, and religious collapse of all the institutions Israel relied upon. Gallagher's work highlights the imperative for interpreting present realities through the lens of historical exegesis. Preaching declarations of hope, confidence, and prosperity through an ahistorical lens satisfied the wishful demands of Israel as a nation but failed to engage the sovereign hand of God throughout their history.

Interpreting the Present by Looking to the Past

In her book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, Phyllis Tickle used a prophetic metaphor of a "giant rummage

¹⁴ Gallagher, 10.

¹⁵ Gallagher, 12.

¹⁶ Gallagher, 13.

sale” that happens every five hundred years in the church. In these rummage sales, the church “cleans house” deciding what to keep, what to get rid of, and how to make room for new things.¹⁷ In 2008, well before COVID-19, she believed the church was amid such a rummage sale. Tickle noted four chapters in church history that demonstrate such a yard sale. The first chapter was in AD 313, when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which allowed Christianity to be practiced in the open. That was followed by Emperor Theodosius in AD 380 with the Edict of Thessalonica to declare Nicene Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman Empire. This marriage of a faith forged in diaspora with political power was new for followers of Jesus. Tickle’s second chapter was on the first church split, occurring in AD 1054 between the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox church. The split primarily was about papal authority, including theological, political, and cultural differences. The third chapter was Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses in AD 1517. The context for this chapter, interestingly, included much of what had been taking place in the second chapter: church corruption, divisive theological differences, and the politicizing of the faith. Finally, according to Tickle, is our present chapter. She highlighted the desire for participatory spirituality, the inclusivity of all people, the drift from denominationalism, and a more robust engagement with culture rather than a retreat into isolationism. She may have not used the term “deconstruction” to identify these monumental shifts for the church; however, she did point to these moments to demonstrate her “giant rummage sale” of the church and why it takes place.

Tickle used the metaphor of an apple cart to illustrate the cycle of every five hundred years. God’s people work for approximately four hundred years institutionalizing their faith and placing metaphorical apples on a cart one by one. Once it is ordered, the Holy Spirit upends the cart for a span of one hundred years, and the apples go scattering. The church finds itself in chaos and begins the work of gathering all the apples and putting them back in order on the cart. That takes approximately four hundred years and then the cycle repeats itself. Tickle stated confidently that we are in the midst of one hundred years of scattering in which things appear to have been tipped over.¹⁸

¹⁷ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 19–21.

¹⁸ Phyllis Tickle, “The Great Emergence,” lecture presented at Rubicon: A Yearly Gathering to Explore the Interplay Between Culture and the Gospel, November 2, 2012, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNgd5ObMg&t=963s>.

Tickle's work is historic and prophetic. She reached back into the history of God's people and the major moments that caused cultural, political, and theological upheaval. The crescendo of these upheavals left leaders unable to provide new vision and has often meant doubling down on "what used to work." However, that response was proven futile, and new movements sprang up despite the resistance of leadership. One can imagine the chaos, confusion, and conflicts in each of these chapters in church history.¹⁹ In essence, according to Tickle, what we are presently experiencing, is not new for the church, but it *is* new for us in our present.

In May 2024 while attending a homiletics conference, I attended a lecture titled "Preaching Your Way Through an Apocalypse: Homiletics of Feral Hope amid Collapse," by Cody J. Sanders.²⁰ Sanders is the associate professor of congregational and community care leadership at Luther Seminary. Like Tickle and the prophets of old, he reached into our past in order to understand our present. However, unlike Tickle, he went further back to the origins of the Bible itself. He began his presentation by boldly stating that our present moment is one of the most exciting times to be in pastoral ministry, which is something Tickle often said. With a grin on his face and exuding confidence, Sanders stated that the entire Bible was written *amid* apocalypse *and* collapse! Beginning in the Old Testament, he reminded us that the predominant theme of the narrative is exile; God's people being overthrown by other people groups and nations where they were taken away against their will. He helped us to envision what it may have felt like to be uprooted, taken from our homes, our possessions stolen. While some would need to "envision" what that is like, others comprehend this through their own history. American author, journalist, and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates recounts this narrative in the Black experience in the US.²¹

Exile is thematic throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Sanders moved from exile in the Old Testament to the New Testament and reminded us that it was also written during a time of diaspora and martyrdom. God's people were shocked when their temple was destroyed after Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection even though he had told them it would happen.²²

¹⁹ One would wonder if Nicodemus perceived Jesus's kingdom movement as one of chaos, confusion, and conflict. Was Jesus's invitation to Nicodemus to perceive the Spirit alive and at work in such moments like this?

²⁰ Cody J. Sanders, "Preaching Your Way through an Apocalypse: Homiletics of Feral Hope amid Collapse," Festival of Homiletics, Pittsburgh, PA, May 15, 2024.

²¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014: 19-30.

²² The destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE and the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE fits the pattern Tickle wrote about.

That event sent them fleeing for their lives.²³ They sought safety as they emigrated from their home to unknown places, uncertain whether they would be welcomed or harmed. The first church was a refugee church looking for a safe harbor.

This is why Sanders chose to use the word *feral* alongside the word *hope*. The definition of feral is the refusal to be domesticated, a disposition of being wild and living in the wilderness. He believed that where we are currently seeing a collapse of so many familiar, domesticated institutions, we—God’s people—are being invited into the wilderness once again, as were those in Scripture who recognized the Spirit of God in their own histories. Sanders prophetically wondered if we have been viewing Scripture through a domesticated lens rather than the apocalyptic lens in which it was written; using Scripture to defend and promote our domestication to institutions rather than as a guide through the wilderness where we would meet the very presence of God.

Sanders, like Tickle, returned to the past to retrieve a narrative to provide hope, albeit a *feral* hope. Both spoke with excitement, rather than doom, for our present moment. Both reminded their audience of the ways God always showed up in apocalyptic moments in order for us to envision and move toward a hope-filled future. Neither Sanders or Tickle provided a road map out of apocalypse and collapse, but both framed this present moment in a way that reminds us that God never leaves and forsakes but continues to build his church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. God finds a way when one does not seem possible. In moments like these, we may need to deconstruct many things as we are invited into the wilderness. Yet with confidence, we will meet God in the wilderness in ways we had not imagined. Sanders specifically suggested that we view Scripture with an apocalyptic lens to find hope wherein we would meet God in our moment.

Listen

At a recent holiday gathering our four children began telling family stories. Through laughter and nostalgia, it became very clear that our recollection of events often differed. At times, memories of specific instances conflicted with divergent opinions as to what happened when and with whom. I could sense the discomfort. Yet, as we asked questions, gathered more information, and recognized particular personalities, it became a rich moment I will cherish forever. Watching my adult children listen to

²³ The apostles, however, remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1).

one another about our shared history was an experience of love.

Exegeting spiritual narratives of God's work in the past includes recounting how God's people responded and may lend direction to what God desires moving forward. Though this process can threaten to reveal divergent views, it is imperative if one is attempting to cultivate a Spirit-led, interpretive community. Jesus challenged Israel's understanding by recounting how God had worked in their past in ways which they had failed to see, hear, and understand. Jesus brought forth history that many may have forgotten or ignored. Jesus's invitation for Israel to consider their collective history threatened their leadership. This threat drove them to silence Jesus using the political empire of Rome.

Reviewing historical narratives is both threatening and imperative to lead spiritually and to discern the movement of God's Spirit. In our present moment, there has been much division surrounding honest reflection upon the history of our own country, which demonstrates both the threat and imperative involved. An interpretive community will exegete the past by listening with intent to others' experiences and perceptions of that same history. James 1:19 states, "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."²⁴ As in my family, bias occurs when we believe our personal engagement with history is the same as that of everyone else. Leading an interpretive community involves cultivating an environment that prioritizes listening to one another for a hopeful present and future. Reviewing history together can raise concerns that the past will be rewritten. It is not a rewriting of history but a broadening of the narrative, ultimately leading to a communal enlightenment of how others experienced those same events.

Tickle and Sanders present a prophetic framing of our current situation through an exegetical review of biblical narratives and church history. While these are informative, an interpretive community such as a local congregation would desire to focus more specifically on their own context. That would include both the secular and spiritual histories

²⁴ Examples in our present day include Critical Race Theory, see Gloria Ladson-Billings, interview by Jill Anderson, "The State of Critical Race Theory in Education," *Harvard Graduate School of Education EdCast*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/edcast/22/02/state-critical-race-theory-education>, and the 1619 Project, see Jake Silverstein, "The 1619 Project and the Long Battle Over U.S. History," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 12, 2021. These topics have sparked a national conflict with some citizens who do not believe it is important to look honestly at the history of race in the US.

of their geographic location, their social and political structures, their denomination, their congregation, and individual narratives.²⁵

Even though a local congregation cannot all do this research together, someone must begin to gather these histories. Once the histories are discovered, the data should be brought to the local congregation. The data brought forward should not be *taught* to the congregation but rather *provided*. The subsequent listening to one another regarding the data is where interpretation begins. A local congregation needs to understand why this work is necessary; to interpret what God could be asking a local congregation to do in their specific context, with their specific people, and for a specific purpose. A congregation that has been disciplined in listening to one another as they engage their collective history *and* the Spirit of God has the potential of sensing what God is asking them to do. However, it is crucial that a congregation understand that conflict will likely ensue in historical exegesis.²⁶ It takes humility and active listening to invite everyone to perceive and exegete past histories. It is imperative for leaders to comprehend that it is a very long process. Cultivating an interpretative community takes intentional work over the course of years. Taking three to five years to intentionally create fertile soil for discerning what the Spirit of God is asking of a specific congregation is a slow but worthwhile process. By cultivating this soil, a congregation will be prepared for looking at the history of their local congregation and context. The lessons from the past will be mined for the present and what the future could look like and how to get there.

In Philippians 1:6 Paul states, “For I am confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work among you will complete it by the day of Christ Jesus” (NRSV). The context of these words was that the community of faith in Philippi were experiencing distress, danger, and chaos. Decades earlier their rabbi had been crucified and was resurrected. However, they were experiencing conflict within and without. While they were experiencing great threat, persecution, and martyrdom, there were conflicts within the community of faith. Paul goes on to state, “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2). It was from that context that Paul writes his confidence in the work of

²⁵ Matt Cheney, “Historical Database of Sundown Towns,” *History and Social Justice*, 2025, <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundown-towns/using-the-sundown-towns-database/state-map/>.

²⁶ The refrain “What’s happened in the past is in the past and we just need to get over it” is often vocalized in discussing histories. However, we need to understand that what happened in our past is active in our present. The biblical prophets, again, did this work.

Jesus Christ; that since he began something with them, he will complete it. I wonder if Paul was able to interpret this based on his engagement with his history. Can we, like Paul, state confidently that this present moment in which we find ourselves is not lost on the Lord? That we can *stop, look, and listen* for how and what the Lord did in our collective past to navigate our present and future hope?

Lord, have mercy.