the people come to worship and to share the needs and concerns of their lives. But here they also encounter the word of God preached and shared in the common life and story of the church and together, through preaching, prayer and discussion these many stories of God are woven into one conversation and one discovery of God’s presence and way in the present time and situation. This conversation is the theological life of the local church.

It is important to recognize that we are not here advocating a church life which ignores the past and abandons the historic wisdom and formulations of the churches in earlier times. To do so would be foolish and would produce a repetition of so many of the mistakes we imagined we could avoid by ignoring that history. What is necessary here is the theological freedom to receive the wisdom of the past without being bound to fixed forms or structures. Indeed, one of the great gifts of the discipline of theology is precisely to preserve that wisdom and to pass it on, ideally in ways which do not seek to bind the church to the past but rather use that wisdom to inspire and guide the church to be free for God in the present. The church’s tradition can be seen in terms of fixed formulae and a fossilised faith. When it is, it is rarely a help and if this is what theology sees as central then most people will find no value in it. But if the history of our faith is seen as the story of a living tradition of people like ourselves learning from God and offering their wisdom to us in our own journey, it may be a rich resource of inspiration and guidance.

The central task: Reading the Bible together

Evangelical Christians seek to be people who read the Bible together, in order to be formed by it as followers of Christ. That is to say, they seek to be people in whom the word of Christ dwells, in whom the Spirit is evoking conformity to Christ and in whose lives, individually and collectively, the way and purposes of God are paramount.

To fulfil this fundamental purpose of knowing and responding to God, it is essential that we re-discover the Bible and its place in the life of the church, not just in individual Christian lives. The Bible does not primarily offer us information, even information about the life and words of Jesus (though of course it does this!). Gaining ‘Bible knowledge’, in the sense of information is not the central purpose here. Rather, what we are seeking is encounter with God, in a way that shapes and directs our lives, individually and corporately.

Marius Bockmuehl has written of the biblical texts as having an ‘implied reader’, who is always a disciple.8 The Bible implies readers who are seeking God and seeking to live in response to God. God has so guided the authors of the Bible that the focus is always upon what is ahead of us; the text is calling us, the readers, forward. James McClendon has articulated a similar

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view, in summarizing what he sees as the distinctively 'baptist' style of being the church, which he distinguishes from the 'catholic' and 'protestant' styles. McClendon proposes a hermeneutical principle which encapsulates the baptist stance: 'the present Christian community is the primitive community and the eschatological community'. In this view, a contemporary group of disciples is in effectively the same situation as the first hearers of the gospel. They are equally competent to receive and respond to the biblical call and invitation, allowing themselves to be directed by the text and by the Spirit towards God's promised future.

Discipleship, then, is the critical factor in our reading and this is what must characterize our communities of faith. Becoming theologically aware is really the same thing as becoming communities of disciples who read the Bible together and seek to respond to God's presence and call. Disciples always are learners. We are always in the situation of seeking guidance, wisdom, insight. To seek God through the study of scripture is also to be directed to the world, to our situation: it is to see that God is present not only in the past but is active, inviting, healing, challenging, enabling, in the present. The Bible points us forward to what God is doing in the world and calls us to participate in this way of life, a life with God.

To become a theologically aware community is to engage, centrally, in the kind of biblical reading which not only 'studies' the text but allows the text to speak to us and direct us towards what it promises. This allows the word of the Scriptures to have active authority in our lives and communities. It sets our priorities and direction. To discern this, we will need more than textual study. We need also the guidance of the Spirit and thus the collective sharing and decision of the community. The authority of the Bible is exercised through our reading and studying, praying and discussing together, and through this process coming to a decision. This affirmation of God's word and calling to a community, in their situation and time, is what it really means to speak of the 'authority' of the Bible. Here the word of God is really directing and forming our life together, our life with God.

It is important to recognize that reading the Bible together in this way will give rise to some difficult questions. It is crucial that pastors and leaders have an appropriate sense of the role of theology as a critical discipline and are able to ensure that the negative connotations of such 'criticism' are avoided or overcome. What is called for is a constructive exploration of the situation of the community, not in terms of a negative critique. Though there will be a need for prophetic protest in some situations, maybe all situations, the primary focus must be upon the positive invitation of God, the good news which calls us forward. In this sense, reading the Bible together calls for a critique of our situation and

9 McClendon purposely uses lower-case letters to distinguish his styles of church community from the names of specific denominations.
of our own response to that situation and to the promise and call inherent in the word of God. We must consider what we are called to do and to become and thus what we are called to change, to leave behind or to challenge, in order to go with the way of God.

Some examples of what might be done to become theologically responsive communities

Here I would like to identify and explain briefly a number of possible activities which, in various situations, might be used to encourage and nurture the kinds of biblical responsiveness described above. In no sense is this an exhaustive list and always these activities need to be adapted to a local situation. Most I have seen to be very helpful in a variety of situations.

1. Preaching, teaching and small group studies should all be directed toward the overall purposes we have described. This requires planning, purpose and leadership, to encourage appropriate emphases. Here the central purposes and themes must be:
   • Christian life as discipleship;
   • Church understood as discerning community;
   • Priesthood of all believers affirmed as the collective responsibility;
   • The mission of the dispersed church seen as theologically significant.

The crucial factor here is seeing the text as a living word in the present and seeing the present alive with the same reality, the same God who is revealed in the text. As a result, pastors and teachers will encourage all participators to see themselves as engaged in a living theology. Faith and life, theology and practice, thus come together and affirm one another.

2. Church life as story-telling: A vital expression of a theologically aware and responsive community is the sharing of stories about God and God’s presence. Here are a few possibilities:
   • ‘Insights’ segment in services: very short talks by people, sharing where God is present, what God is like, in their daily lives, at work, home, neighbourhood. History segments which relate the story of this church, this place, these people;
   • Church reports written and told as the story of theological response: that is, the story of the church year told as a story of people with God;
   • The history of each church written as the story of theological response;
   • Similarly, new proposals for mission activities, church programs and other developments in the local community can be presented in terms of the continuing story of the church’s engagement with and response to God.

3. Specific activities encouraging spiritual awareness:
   • Workshops responding to God’s presence in our daily experience;
   • Taking an ‘exegetical walk’ around the local church’s neighbourhood: discovering who is here and what is happening, and relating these activities to theological themes, biblical stories;
   • Some introductory classes in biblical imagination: reading the Bible in ways that connect stories with our living experience now: where is God, who is God, what is God like...
in this passage? Where is God, who is God, what is God like in our situation now? What guidance does this reflection offer for our living?

d. Providing specific opportunities for theological study, in a wide range of activities and levels:

- For Deacons, Elders or other leaders: a workshop describing the priesthood of this local church, and exploring how the gathered life can contribute to the dispersed and total priesthood, and how the dispersed life can be expressed in the gathered life;

- Some classes, forums, films, workshops on specific and theological ideas: what does it mean to be a disciple? what is the church? living with questions; living with difference;

- Making available short papers on specific topics, and encouraging people to read them;

- Identify some internet resources, such as transcripts of radio talks, or short papers, appropriate for people to read;

- Establish an on-line forum for discussion and response to studies, sermons, etc.;

- Invite a college teacher to be a scholar in residence for a month—and perhaps do this every year, with a variety of contributions;

- Hold one weekend per year which is a ‘teaching’ weekend;

- Encourage those interested and capable to engage in tertiary study of the Bible and theology;

- Invite a theological college to conduct a diploma or degree class on site at your church, in an area of interest, such as biblical studies, pastoral care, mission, theology, spirituality, etc. etc.

In addition, many of these same activities may be used in encouraging a deeper social awareness. Here too a wide range of resources, speakers and materials may be judiciously used to stimulate and encourage responsiveness. Not least of all these resources will be the daily experiences, at work and at home, of the people themselves. When they discover that their experiences are welcomed as contributions to the spiritual life and discernment of the church, they will become very positive and pro-active agents in this process. It will no longer be necessary for pastors to ‘push’ the issues or try to stimulate awareness.

Unlike Findley Edge’s proposals, I have not suggested a ‘curriculum’ as such for the local church and its developing theological awareness. Rather, I see it as the task of the leadership within each local community to discern together those things which will nurture that community’s life with and in responsiveness to God and its mission in that context. There are many resources and many supportive guides for those who seek them. What I do not recommend is that pastors and leaders adopt a program or pre-packaged course of studies from any other place and use it without first relating it to their own people and situation. To do that is to avoid the responsibility of leadership and the great excitement of working together as a theological community. It may seem easier, but in effect it impoverishes the church. The challenge, then, is for pastors and leaders to become facilitators of the life of the church as a biblically formed, socially aware and theologically responsive community.