

## Introduction

# Contextual Bible Study to Hear the Vulnerably Loving and Just God

As a brainchild of liberation theology, contextual Bible study (CBS) is an interactive reading of biblical texts. The facilitator uses the process of See, Judge and Act in setting and preparing the CBS<sup>4</sup>. During the CBS session, the facilitator also creates a safe and sacred space so that the social/cultural context of the reading community interacts creatively with the social/cultural context of the writer. The aim is to raise awareness of the reading community's concerns in order to work toward transformative justice and change.

Hebrew Bible scholar Sarojini Nadar sums up CBS in what she refers to as “the five key ‘Cs’”<sup>5</sup>:

### 1. Community

It is important to receive an invitation from a community. Questions raised in the course of interpretation are answered by participants themselves. It makes sense to record a process of interpreting in CBS, especially in contexts where the majority of the community cannot read or write without extra assistance from the more literate. It is always important for every participant to know that their contribution and experience are important in this process of change. In CBS, the Bible is being read in a community of women and men, rather than individually. All voices are listened to and critically engaged with. CBS engages participants through critical engagement rather than by lecturing or preaching at them. This kind of reading is not an interpretation by an

---

<sup>4</sup> Gerald West, *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual* (The Ujamaa Centre for Biblical & Theological Community Development & Research, 2011). At: [http://www.diohuron.org/what/HR/clergy\\_conference/2012/Ujamaa%20CBS%20Manual%20part%201.pdf](http://www.diohuron.org/what/HR/clergy_conference/2012/Ujamaa%20CBS%20Manual%20part%201.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Sarojini Nadar, *Doing and Understanding Contextual Bible Study* (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2008). At: <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/46368278/Doing-and-Understanding-Contextual-Bible-Study>

individual, but an engagement of all voices with the text. The process of such an exercise is more important than its product. One of the strengths of this methodology is its ability to create a space where there is mutual sharing of knowledge and resources, from both the community and the facilitator.

## **2. Context**

The readers' social location is important both in the process of preparation for the Bible study and in the actual study with the community. CBS begins with the reality of issues of concern within the community requiring the Bible study: for example, for the studies compiled in this booklet, the community context is that of the ecumenical movement, with its concerns and commitment to building a just community of women and men and ensuring a culture of abundant life of peace with no violence against women and children. The awareness-raising therefore focuses only on six issues:

- Women's and girls' lives as sexual and reproductive beings in the context of sexual violence, early motherhood, HIV, and AIDS (CBS on Exodus 1:15-22);
- Rape, gender-based sexual violence, and death (CBS on Judges 19:1-30);
- Sexism, racism, and xenophobia of the "othered" (Matthew 15:21-28);
- Incest as an expression of hegemonic masculinities (2 Samuel 13: 1-22);
- Enslavement and commoditization of "her" body through human trafficking (Ruth 1-3); and
- Gender justice as God's justice agenda (Luke 18:1-10).

The texts in this volume were chosen in order to engage the ecumenical community to specifically address the above issues, which

are crucial to the church's response to a vulnerably loving and just God of life who leads us as women and men to live and work for justice and peace.

### **3. Criticality**

The CBS is designed using two types of questions: *exegetical* (literary or critical consciousness questions that draw on tools from biblical studies) and *interpretive* (community consciousness questions that draw on feelings, experiences, and resources from the community). To formulate questions, the study facilitator uses hermeneutical tools of *exegesis* (finding meaning of the biblical text within its historical and social context) and *interpretation* (reading the biblical text from the context of the participating and interpreting community).

The facilitator uses hermeneutical tools of exegesis and interpretation to form the questions for critical reflection, since interpretation is always “located” – whether one is using the traditional methodologies of reading in the original languages or not. No matter how “scientifically objective” the readers try to be, all interpretation of biblical texts is influenced by certain contextual perceptions and mindsets at the level of both the writer and the reader. Notwithstanding the sacred nature of the Bible and the belief that the Bible was inspired by God, it was written, often read, translated, and interpreted by inspired men (and women, if any) in a time different from our own. This critical process also notes the importance not simply of knowing the right answers to the questions, but of being able to ask the right questions and to analytically engage with the issues raised by the text in dialogue with the contextual realities of the community of readers – issues that often threaten justice and peace.

### **4. Conscientization**

Contextual studying of the Bible is aimed at raising awareness about the issues at the heart of the community. The tendency is to read the Bible with hermeneutics of trust, not suspicion, and to find solutions through

it. One of the aims of CBS is also to highlight how the Bible and other sources of sacred knowledge can be used both as a tool of justice and liberation and a tool of exclusion and oppression, where certain texts are used to silence questions or to encourage engagement in dialogue for moral discernment on difficult issues. For example, the Bible has been used to justify slavery, apartheid, and racism. And, needless to say, it is still used to justify the discrimination of women and the denial of their dignity and rights.

How would using the Bible to justify exclusion and injustice compare to how it is sometimes used by current church leadership: for example, using 1 Ephesians 5:22 (“wives, submit to your husbands”) to silence a wife who is experiencing violence against women in her home? Or using 1 Corinthians 14:34 (“women should be silent in the churches”) to silence women who are trying to actualize their equal participation in the churches’ ministries?

## **5. Change**

The ultimate goal of CBS is to use interpretation of biblical text to help decipher God’s liberative voice, in this way motivating the community’s reflection and praxis for a transformation (positive change) not only of attitude/mindset, but hopefully on a structural and systemic level as well. It is hoped that through the inspiration of God’s Spirit, once people are made aware of the issues of concern, transformation will occur. This transformation takes place on various levels.

- How we read the Bible is transformed. In other words, we learn how to read the Bible in a way that is liberating and inclusive: creating a space where the biblical stories become alive in the stories of the community.
- How we act is transformed. In other words, CBS transform us to such an extent that it spurs us into action for just change in a world that is often unjust and unwilling to change, especially when it comes to women’s dignity and rights!

Now I invite you to join this ecumenical community of readers as we allow God's Spirit, the internal witness who unveils God's word, to lead us to reflect and act for gender justice and peace with no violence against women and children.

Each CBS below uses the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible as the most gender inclusive available biblical version. Each of the studies has three special features:

1. Unlike the given CBS principle that the facilitator does not teach but rather facilitates for meaningful and transformative interaction between the context of the community of readers and the context of the writer, each study, provided in written form, contains brief background notes to the biblical text used. This is a compromise in case the readers need this information to make sense of the text in order to engage more meaningfully for awareness raising and transformation. The concerns raised in each Bible study came originally from my own struggle with specific issues.
2. Each starts with either my life narrative (to allow the community of readers to put a woman's face to the reflections and call to praxis that follows) or, where case studies are used instead of my story, background notes to the text.

This second feature above, the starting story, is a deliberate methodological choice in order to bring out two personal convictions.

First, if we are to engage as a community united for justice, dignity, and peace, we have to start by embracing our own vulnerabilities as relational resources. In this way, whether it is toward our own justice or the justice of our less-privileged sisters and brothers, we engage in reflection and praxis for justice for all (humanity and creation as a whole) from the basis of compassion as part of the interconnected and interdependent creation. My narrative becomes my vulnerable invitation to the community of readers to engage with the reflections and call to praxis of the questions. For this conviction, I find the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well (John 4:1-42) as a very good example of

entering into reflections and praxis for liberation from the level of mutual vulnerability: Jesus as thirsty traveler who has no means of drawing water from the well, and the “nameless” woman as a discriminated “immoral” woman, probably abused by endless husbands and therefore thirsty for meaningful relationship.

Second, for those of us who are in search of gender justice and dignity, starting with narrative is also an accepted feminist holistic approach. According to Karen Lebacqz, “Attention to concrete injustices of women’s lives, use of narrative and story to lift up aspects of the struggle, and a sense that justice making is an ongoing journey characterize feminist theological approaches to justice.”<sup>6</sup> Sarojini Nadar and Fulata Lusungu Moyo, editors of *Gendered Perspectives: God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace* (*Ecumenical Review* 64.3 [2012]), assert that storytelling is actually a gendered way of doing theology because it uniquely embraces the story and experience, especially of women and girls, as an integral part of and the starting point to theological reflections and praxis, rather diminishing them as simply addendum to the theoretic process of reflection and praxis. The story(ies) and experience of my own passionate search for gender justice and peace without violence against women are core to the nature and mission of the church, so that both church and society become real, just communities of women and men. In these communities, every person’s dignity and potential is nurtured to prosperity for the good of the whole inhabited earth to the glory of God, the ultimate creator and sustainer of all.

My personal stories told in this booklet – as well as those of the women, men, girls, and boys with whom I have interacted through my life and work for the World Council of Churches’ processes of building a just community of women and men as well my work with the inter-religious Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – are used as a reminder that often it is these “data with souls” that become the

---

<sup>6</sup> Karen Lebacqz, “Justice,” in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 159.

inspiring cloud of witnesses that cheer us on as we steadily and oftentimes painfully take one step at a time on this pilgrimage of justice and peace.

So I welcome you, sisters and brothers, on this journey of reflection and praxis. And as we make this journey, let us keep on praying together: “God of life, lead us to justice and peace.”