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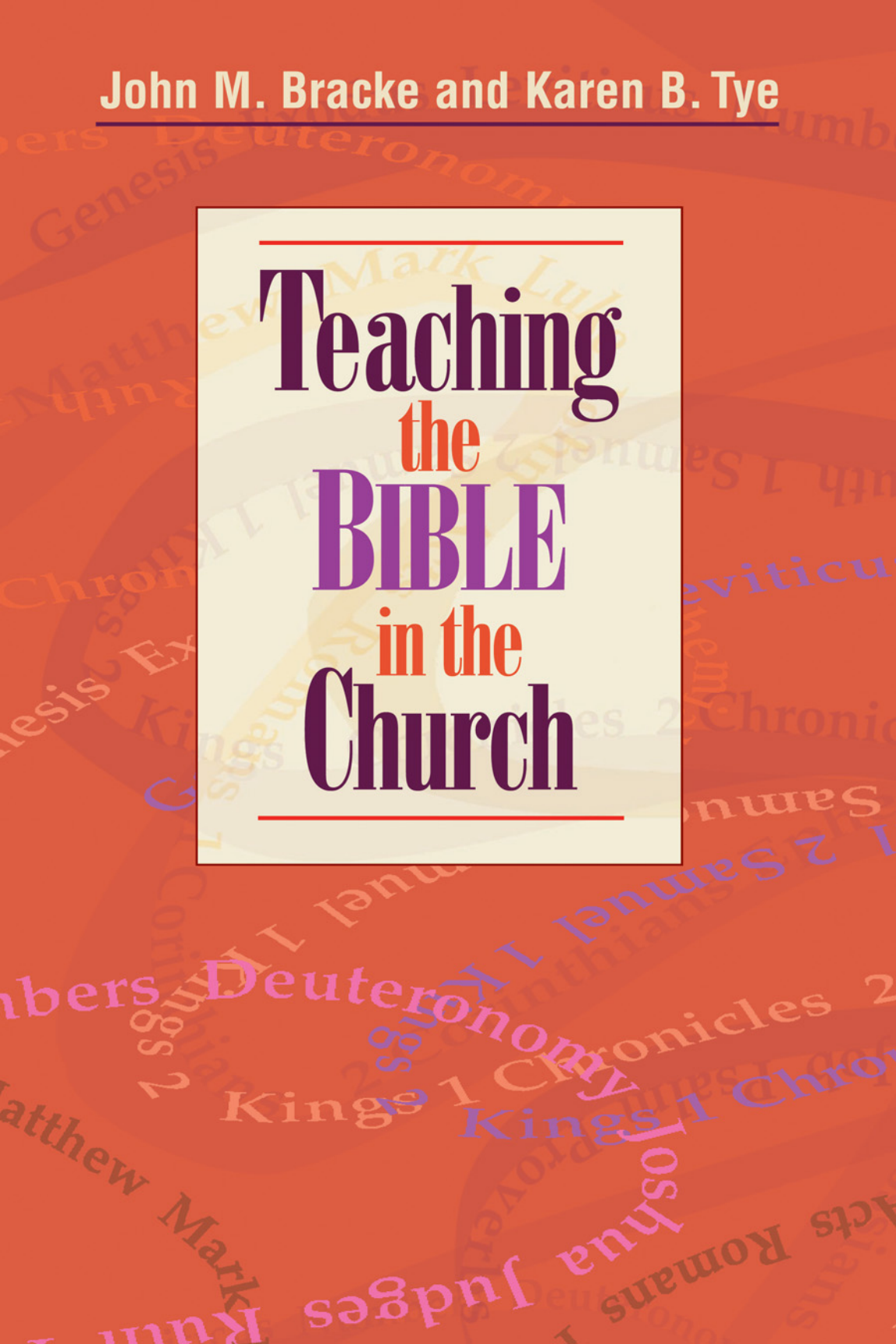

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ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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To our students at Eden Seminary
and in the churches,
our partners in learning to teach the Bible.

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Acknowledgments

It has been said that one's own biography is often an influence in defining the focus of her or his work. Such is certainly the case regarding our work in this book. We are both children of the church and have been taught a deep love of scripture. We are grateful to all of those throughout our journey who have played a part in our continuing love of and commitment to the Bible and its study in the community of faith.

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Introduction

Bible study is not just an emphasis to be recovered; it is a revolutionary possibility…Bible study is every bit as important as preaching; without it, preaching's centrality becomes a positive hazard.[1]

The students quickly join us as we begin singing the familiar song many of us learned in vacation Bible school: "The B-I-B-L-E. That's the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God. The B-I-B-L-E." Their faces reflect their curiosity as to why their professors begin a class on teaching the Bible in the church with this childhood memory. They discover the "method in our madness" as we talk about the many ways the church reflects its deeply held conviction that its foundational source of authority is this book it claims as holy text. Even children learn this early through the words of a simple song.

As Christians we are called "the people of the Book." Throughout the centuries we have claimed the Bible as central and authoritative to our life and mission. To know its stories, to hear its words of wisdom, to wrestle with the truths it offers, and to draw our identity from its pages have always been at the heart of the Christian community's journey in faith.

Even with this claim of authority, however, there seems to be ample evidence in today's church that many persons hardly know or study the Bible at all. Several years ago a friend of Karen's shared with her the results of an informal survey he had done in his congregation. He asked several people to identify the source of some wisdom sayings he often heard voiced in our culture. To his great concern, he discovered that the people were unable to distinguish between a common folk wisdom such as Benjamin Franklin's "God helps those who help themselves" (which the people he surveyed thought came from Jesus) and the actual teachings of Jesus, which

clearly point to a God who helps those who are least able to help themselves.

During a faculty trip to Europe, we found ourselves in a church in Geneva, Switzerland, on the Monday after Pentecost. Pentecost is a national holiday in that country, and there were groups of tourists enjoying some sightseeing on their day off. We overheard a young woman who was touring this church with some friends ask the guide at the desk what this Pentecost was. She had never heard of the story in Acts.

We even see this growing biblical illiteracy in seminary students. We teach in a theological school whose students come from local churches all around the country. We have noted that increasingly students come to seminary to prepare for positions of church leadership with little knowledge of scripture, unfamiliar with even the most basic biblical stories. We have heard this same observation voiced by our colleagues in other seminaries. The evidence seems clear to us—biblical illiteracy pervades our churches.

We believe that offering persons opportunities to study the Bible is among the most important activities that needs to take place in any congregation. The life and mission of churches and the meaning of Christian discipleship are grounded in scripture. The Bible is widely held to be the church's primary witness to the God of Israel whom we have come to know decisively in Jesus Christ. In the United Church of Christ, for instance, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are understood as "the word of God" and "the rule of Christian faith and practice."[2] The church has long held that engaging the Bible invites an encounter with God, an encounter through which people may discover the gracious love of God, find their lives transformed, and discern ways to participate in God's mission in a broken world.

The book you are about to read grows out of our claim that there is no more important task for church leaders than to offer persons opportunities to encounter the Bible in deep and meaningful ways. It is vital that the Christian community know, tell, and live the narratives that form our identity. We must be preaching and teaching the Bible in the church.

Claiming the central importance of helping persons in the church engage scripture is not enough, however. We need to address

the question of *how* this is done. How do we teach the Bible in ways that form and transform persons and the church? The purpose of this book is to address this question and explore some of the answers that have emerged out of our work in both the seminary and the church.

The work that we have done *together* is vital to the insights we share in this book. We believe this cooperative endeavor between a religious educator and a biblical scholar was and continues to be critical, and we offer it as a model to others concerned about vital issues in the life of the church today. Our effort here is more than the sum of our individual contributions, and we trust that it enables us to offer important insights into this central task of the church—teaching the Bible.

Assumptions

Our approach to teaching the Bible is grounded in several beliefs and assumptions that influence the way we engage the question "How do we teach the Bible?" and answer it. First, we believe that the goal of teaching the Bible is transformation, not just information. We live in an "information" culture. One of the growing fields of employment is information systems management. We are hungry for data, for facts, for more and more information. Often we approach Bible study from this perspective, in which the goal is the learning of "facts" about the scriptures. We focus on "who, what, when, where, why, and how." Who was Moses, and when did he live? Did he actually write the first five books of the Old Testament? What was it like to live in Palestine during the time of Jesus? Why did Paul persecute Christians? Where did his missionary journeys actually take him and when? We want the "facts" and think that when we have acquired the information we have engaged the Bible.

Of course, we don't deny that knowing "facts" about the Bible is important. In fact, such information is a critical starting point. It is much easier to study scripture when we know the books of the Bible and their sequence. We believe that it is worthwhile, at an appropriate age, for children to learn the books of the Bible and to memorize some texts. Information about the social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances of peoples in the Bible is also important. Yet we do not believe that churches have really "taught" the Bible by simply conveying information about texts.

Given this key assumption—that the purpose of teaching the Bible is to invite transformation—we submit that studying the Bible involves more than knowing when Moses lived or where Paul may have traveled. Truly encountering scripture is to stand before the God whom Moses served when he dared to say to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" and having stood before this God, to ask how the God of oppressed slaves may be calling us to serve today. Studying the Bible is more than asking about where Paul traveled and when. Studying the Bible is to hear Paul proclaim that the gospel of Jesus Christ means "there is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female" (Gal. 3:28), and then struggle with the meaning of this radical gospel for our time and place. To teach the Bible faithfully is to have transformation as our goal. It is not that we as teachers effect the transformation, but that we invite through the study of scriptures an encounter with God, who empowers transformation—of both teacher and student. One author has captured this transformative character of Bible study like this:

> A characteristic of formational reading is openness to mystery. Instead of the problem solving mentality, instead of coming to what we are reading to find a solution for something else in our life, we come to be open to that Mystery we call God. We come to stand before that Mystery and allow that Mystery to address us.[3]

We assume that teaching the Bible has as its goal not just the conveying of information, but an invitation to transformation, an encounter with "that Mystery we call God."

A second assumption is related to one of our primary concerns in this book, an educational concern involving the process of learning and teaching. We assume that there is a need to teach the Bible in ways that all involved are invited to journey to a new place—a new place of knowing and understanding the Bible, a new place of living before God, a new place in becoming Jesus' disciple, a new place for the church to be part of God's mission.

In order to engage the Bible in these ways, we need to be attentive to the dynamics of learning and teaching. We need to pay attention to the ways in which people learn. We need to explore the brain, our primary organ of learning. Every day researchers are

making new discoveries about how the brain learns. We need to be familiar with these discoveries. We need to recognize that persons are different and do not all learn the same way. Thus, an understanding of learning styles is important to the work of teaching.

The dynamics of how the brain learns and an understanding of the different ways in which people learn are factors that skilled teachers always consider in planning their teaching. Too often in our churches, however, we ask people with wonderful commitment but little background or experience to teach. Good intentions help but cannot be a substitute for awareness of and knowledge about how learning and teaching best occur. As we think about teaching the Bible in churches, we believe that attention to the dynamics of learning and the skills of teaching is essential.

A third assumption that informs our approach to teaching the Bible concerns culture. We believe that teaching the Bible in the church is an intercultural educational experience. In order to teach, therefore, we need some understanding of intercultural education and how one teaches and learns across cultures.

Put simply, culture refers to the way of life of a given community or people. Culture includes behavior, speech, traditions, beliefs and values, institutions and their structures, relationships and how they are organized, and ways of thinking and doing things. We believe that the cultures of our modern world and the cultures of biblical times are different. People in each of these contexts speak, behave, believe, relate, and organize their lives in very different ways. In order to engage scripture in meaningful ways, we have to be able to move into another culture, engage it, and learn from it.

This begins with understanding our own culture. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that "culture" is what those different from us have. However, we *all* live in a culture but are often unaware of it and the way it shapes us. It has been said that culture is like water to fish. Ask a fish about the water, and it may well respond, "What water?" Like fish so immersed in water they are likely not to see it, so we are immersed in our culture and hardly notice it. Unless we are aware of the cultural lens that we bring to the biblical text, we risk imposing our own cultural viewpoints on the Bible and thereby misunderstanding the text. Such misunderstandings can lead us to distort the meaning of biblical texts.

Not only are we challenged by our own cultural lens, we need to be aware of the layers of cultural perspectives present in any given teaching situation. People who gather to study the Bible in the church are likely to bring different cultural experiences to the task. Although all may belong to the same church, they may have been brought up in a different church tradition and bring that cultural perspective to the conversation. Persons also come from different social positions in the community that carry cultural perspectives—about how wealth or poverty are viewed, for instance. An awareness of these cultural lenses is important, too.

Finally, the Bible itself is the product of cultures that are historically and geographically far removed from us. Notice that we said *cultures* in the plural. The Bible took shape over many hundreds of years, during which time culture changed. When reading the Bible, one encounters many cultures and also different cultures encountering one another. For instance, in the Old Testament, we encounter the late Bronze and early Iron Age Palestinian culture of indigenous Palestinian peoples that soon is in tension with an emerging Israelite culture. In the New Testament, we encounter Roman and Jewish cultures existing in tension. All these cultures have a shaping influence on the texts we read.

In several ways, then, we assume that teaching the Bible is an intercultural experience. As we work at the teaching task in our churches, we need to be attentive to the intercultural dynamics of our work and develop those understandings and skills that enable us to engage in this multilayered task.

A fourth assumption informing our work is the importance of the insights of critical biblical scholarship for teaching the Bible in the church. Over the last two hundred years, scholars have studied the Bible from a variety of perspectives. Some have attempted to understand who wrote biblical texts and the historical and cultural context in which this writing was undertaken. Other scholars have attempted to understand the processes by which the Old and New Testaments as we have them took shape. Others have focused on the biblical text itself and have observed how literary features of a text—for instance, the way a story is told or the way a poem is developed—can contribute to our understanding of a biblical text. Some have observed that often the way we make sense out of a biblical text has