

11-1-2005

## Language of the heart: how to read the Bible--a user's guide for Catholics

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### Recommended Citation

Weigel, Arnold D. (2005) "Language of the heart: how to read the Bible--a user's guide for Catholics," *Consensus*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 2 , Article 22.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol30/iss2/22>

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**Language of the Heart: How to Read the Bible**

Noel Cooper

Toronto, ON: Novalis, 2003

360 pages, \$20.97 Softcover

This text is a personal testimony of the faith and educational journey by Noel Cooper – a Canadian Roman Catholic educator who for some thirty plus years has offered Biblical courses for teachers and developed curriculum for students in Catholic schools in Ontario, Canada. Says the author: “This book is built on the conviction that believers of long ago were people very much like us, living in societies surprisingly similar to ours.” (10) “Through the Bible, we learn that God responds to the deepest yearnings of humanity, reaches into our lives to lead us to wholeness, and gives meaning and purpose to our journey. The study of the Bible is not just an interesting literary adventure; through the Bible, God can change our lives.” (9)

In this chronological guide to reading and studying the scriptures, the author begins with questions like: *Why read the Bible? How is the Bible “the Word of God in Human Words”?* *In what ways does the Bible have important insights to offer to a people living in the here and now?* His account of scriptural literature regards the Bible as “remembered stories” or “sagas” told and re-told by a people much like us!

In reading this text, I found myself experiencing it as a valuable and engaging “primer” in helping me appreciate biblical faith and life stories, as well as differing genres of scriptural literature. Scripture is presented, engaged and reflected on as “remembered stories.” For example, in Chapter 5 entitled *Abraham and Sarah: People of Faith in a World Like Ours*, Cooper identifies and explores a format for exploring scriptural narratives; according to the author, this format includes three specific steps:

*Step 1: Consider the narrative at face value, including its connotations ...*

*Step 2: Focus on the human side: Does anything like this ever happen today?*

*Step 3: Application: What does the story teach us about God and about life?*

Cooper’s intent is to provide an easy-to-read and realistic road map in exploring the faith-and-life riches in the Bible. Says he: “Luther and others insisted on providing the Scriptures to the people in a language

they could understand, and declared individual interpretation on the Bible to be a fundamental principle of the life of faith. At the same time, the Reformed Churches maintained strong community interpretation of the Scriptures to guide believers in their search for meaning.” (19-20) *Language of the Heart* is indeed such a two-fold road map!

Included in the book are particular features that make this text an appealing resource for personal and communal biblical study. The author includes a discussion on the use of gender-inclusive language in talking about both humans and God, and a brief narrative of the history of the many people who shared their stories in and through the scriptures. In the margins, Cooper has provided specific biblical texts - chapters and verses - which make for ready correlation between biblical text and what is said in this book. At the end of the book, there is a detailed nine-page *Glossary of Terms*. There is also a selected annotated bibliography and an extensive alphabetical scriptural index. All this makes for a reader-friendly document!

If I were doing a Bible study with adults, I would recommend this text as basic reading for all participants. In fact, I would probably use the chapters in the sequence in which Cooper has arranged them in the text. Although the sub-title of this book is *A User's Guide for Catholics*, I believe it is also a valuable resource for believers who are other than Catholic. I agree with the author that Biblical stories hold a significant relevance to the yearnings of our human hearts – hearts searching for meaning, purpose and wholeness!

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