Three resources for Christian formation: DVDs, online resources, books

by Jason Byassee in the September 9, 2008 issue

"You pays your money and you takes your choice.” Several generations of students at Duke Divinity School have heard James “Mickey” Efird use those carnivalesque words to conclude debates over the meaning of a biblical passage. The words take on a new resonance now that students of the Bible can pay their money and receive Efird’s own interpretations via the Efird Bible Study Series, which features videos of Efird teaching and provides accompanying study guides (see efirdbiblestudies.com).

As a biblical scholar, Efird is something of a throwback. These days most seminarians do not serve as student-pastors, but Efird began working as a pastor when he was an undergraduate. He joined the Duke Divinity faculty after he graduated in the early 1960s and secured tenure at a time when one still could do so without having a long résumé of works written for other academics. Almost all his publications have been aimed at laypeople.

Efird has a passion for teaching churchpeople, a passion perhaps born from his experience leading a congregation as a teenage college kid. Four or five nights a week, the septuagenarian Efird can still be found at a church on some godforsaken highway teaching why the rapture is not part of the book of Revelation or showing that Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination isn’t found in Romans. Efird pretty much teaches what he learned in the early 1960s: a faith-informed, historical-critical approach to the Bible. For him, hearing what God says to us today is dependent on rightly understanding the context in which God spoke in the scriptures.

I remember one aphorism I heard Efird use with seminarians during the day and with laypeople at night in response to the question of how to preach both Isaiah and Amos. Asked how “Comfort, comfort ye my people” can be reconciled with Amos’s angry, almost violent denunciations, Efird would reply: “If you got a church that’s

down on its luck and hurting, give them Isaiah. But if they're fat and happy and satisfied with themselves, give 'em Amos. With both barrels!" In a few memorable words, Efird summarized a swath of the prophetic literature.

Graduate students eager to engage the cutting-edge theories of internationally famous professors often chafed when asked to serve as Efird's teaching assistants. He's not up on the latest scholarship, or at least he doesn't choose to share it with students. He would have no problem going toe-to-toe with the newer stuff, but he has chosen to expend his efforts where most of his students will expend theirs—in the congregation, among the saints in the pews. His teaching manner both in the seminary and in the local church is expository: he analyzes the text verse by verse and comments on what interests him. When his students return to the text, they will know their way around—more like pilgrims who've prayed in a place than like tourists who happened to visit once.

Efird's down-home humor and witticisms make his lectures enjoyable, even when they're laced with stories about Hebrew verb forms and New Testament text criticism. It's no wonder that the Carolina Broadcasting System, which normally produces TV programs on politics and public policy, saw fit to produce videos of Efird teaching all 66 books of the Bible. Many of these are now available in sets for Sunday school use; more are on the way. Watching Efird on video, I wondered how audiences outside the Bible Belt would take to his drawl and his eagle-like visage, which intimidated me in spite of his avuncular manner. My guess is his self-deprecating manner will play as well in Peoria as in the rural Carolinas.

The purchase of a $220 set of lessons on Genesis will bring you the DVD, a facilitator's guide for a layperson to lead questions after each session, and participant workbooks that offer questions after each lesson, homework for next time, space for note-taking and highlights of the lecture.

Is torture ever justified? Where is God when disaster strikes? What do Methodists believe? What's my child doing on the Internet?

These headlines of studies available from The Thoughtful Christian (TTC) show that this Web-based curriculum aims for the gut (at thethoughtfulchristian .com). For $10 a study can be downloaded Saturday night in time for teaching Sunday school the next morning. The courses are written by an enormously diverse group of respected scholars. Two of the studies mentioned above are by David Gushee, a conservative

moral theologian who teaches at the Baptist Mercer University; another is by Wendy Farley, a liberal theologian at Emory. These two scholars may not be able to meet with you for coffee, but both are available for your next Sunday school class.

TTC gathers its all-star cast largely by paying them well and by offering academics and other experts the chance to write directly to people in congregations. Writers put together a leader's guide to help the teacher conduct the discussion. The curriculum includes participants' handouts, which ideally are read by class members beforehand (though the writers are told not to expect this; we all know how much homework is ever done for Sunday school). The studies offer teaching suggestions—asking students to offer a one-word response to what was just presented seems to be a particularly popular one—and include alternative ideas designed to enable a leader to go in a completely different direction from the primary one. Since TTC is Web-based, it can travel quickly and stay light on its feet. Within days of an international event, like the execution of Saddam Hussein or a natural disaster, TTC has a related study ready and available for purchase.

These strengths could also be TTC's greatest weakness. What church will keep such Web studies around for future use after Sunday school class? These TTC lessons can be used and quickly discarded. Yet they are rigorous studies of very high quality. For example, a study on Celtic Christianity includes historical background but also suggests a broad lesson: "'I don't understand you' can become 'How can I learn from you?' and 'How can we be the body of Christ?'"

The so-called new monastics have gotten a lot of press coverage. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a visionary of that movement, worries that capitalism has shaped us all "to desire the next new thing"—and if that's all the new monasticism is, he isn't interested. "Movements don't move me," he says, quoting Peter Maurin, cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement. But if the new monasticism is part of God's work of raising up people to live a distinctive form of life, a form in conflict with the fusion of Christianity and empire, then people should pay attention.

In *New Monasticism*: *What It Has to Say to Today's Church* (Brazos), Wilson-Hartgrove tries to show what the wider church can learn from the new monastics, and vice versa. A companion volume is Sam Ewell's *Building Up the Church*: *Live Experiments in Faith*, *Hope and Love* (Cascade).

Not all Christians will follow the lead of the new monastics to create intentional communities in abandoned places of empire, but those that do, such as the folks at Camden House in New Jersey, can teach the rest of us a lot—for example, about environmental racism. New Jersey's burning of garbage causes health problems for kids in Camden, who live in a city that doesn't have the political muscle to resist. If you're not ready to join a community like Camden House, you can study the Bible with homeless people in your area (buy them lunch if you need to). Doing so will give you new eyes for reading the Bible. Ewell's book is chock-full of suggestions like this, which are intended to indicate that the new monasticism isn't meant for spiritual heroes. There is no "don't try this at home" label, as Ewell notes.

Wilson-Hartgrove writes beautifully. "All those yous in our Bible are y'alls," he says, as a way of telling us that scripture is addressed to a community, not to individuals. Every church has a "few folks who love selflessly and shine like stars with the gentle glory of God made flesh." Monastics are like a root system of the church, working underground, growing quietly and slowly—but hard to remove. "All the bishops of the church couldn't have organized such a movement."

Wilson-Hartgrove insists that it is "hard to be a Christian in America." He's not interested in making it any easier. He is interested in helping the church use its best resources to cut against the grain of conventional wisdom.