

WEBINAR

Theology and Orality

From the God Who Speaks to the Peoples Who Hear

Cleber Paula Santos

OPENING

The journey of this webinar

1 15'

The God Who Speaks

Where does revelation begin?

2 12'

Organizing in order to worship

What is the place of systematic theology?

3 15'

Peoples Who Hear

Why is the linear path not enough?

4 18'

From doctrine to story

How do we communicate concepts without carrying Western terms?

5 10'

Demonstration and sending

What does this look like in practice?

God speaks → the Church organizes → peoples hear differently → doctrine becomes story → the community tells

+ 20 minutes for questions

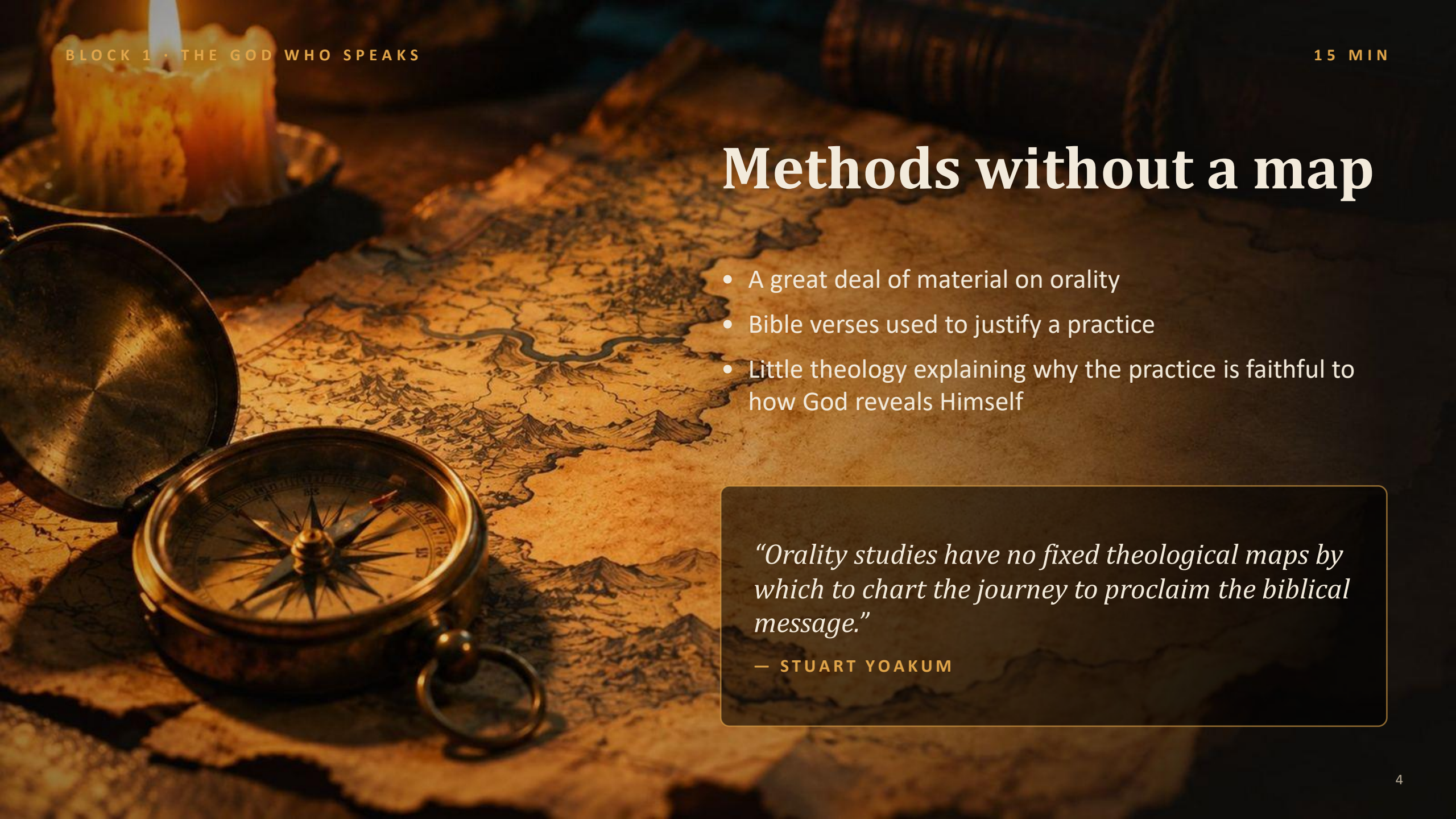


By Heart

- A brother from a semi-isolated Amazonian people begins to preach
- The Scriptures pour out of him like water from a burst dam
- “He knows the entire New Testament by heart”
- Portuguese “de cor” comes from “cor” — heart

“In your community, where is the Word kept: on paper, in memory, or in both?”

— QUESTION FOR THE AUDIENCE



Methods without a map

- A great deal of material on orality
- Bible verses used to justify a practice
- Little theology explaining why the practice is faithful to how God reveals Himself

> *"Orality studies have no fixed theological maps by which to chart the journey to proclaim the biblical message."*
>
> — STUART YOAKUM

The thesis

Orality is not primarily a missiological strategy but a theological category, rooted in the self-communication of the triune God.

1. Orality begins with God, not with culture
2. Orality does not compete with writing
3. The whole church was formed by a Word heard before it was read

THEOLOGICAL SENSE

Orality is the originating and relational mode through which the triune God reveals Himself and invites humanity to share in His life

HUMAN AND CULTURAL SENSE

The ways people receive, keep, and pass on knowledge through voice, memory, narrative, the body, and the community

A biblical journey

The Father speaks · the Son is the Word · the Spirit is the breath

Creation

Gen 1:2–3 · Ps 33:6

Word and breath (ruach)

Covenant

Deut 6:4–7

“Hear, O Israel”

Incarnation

John 1:14 · 1 John 1:1–3

Heard, seen, touched

The Spirit

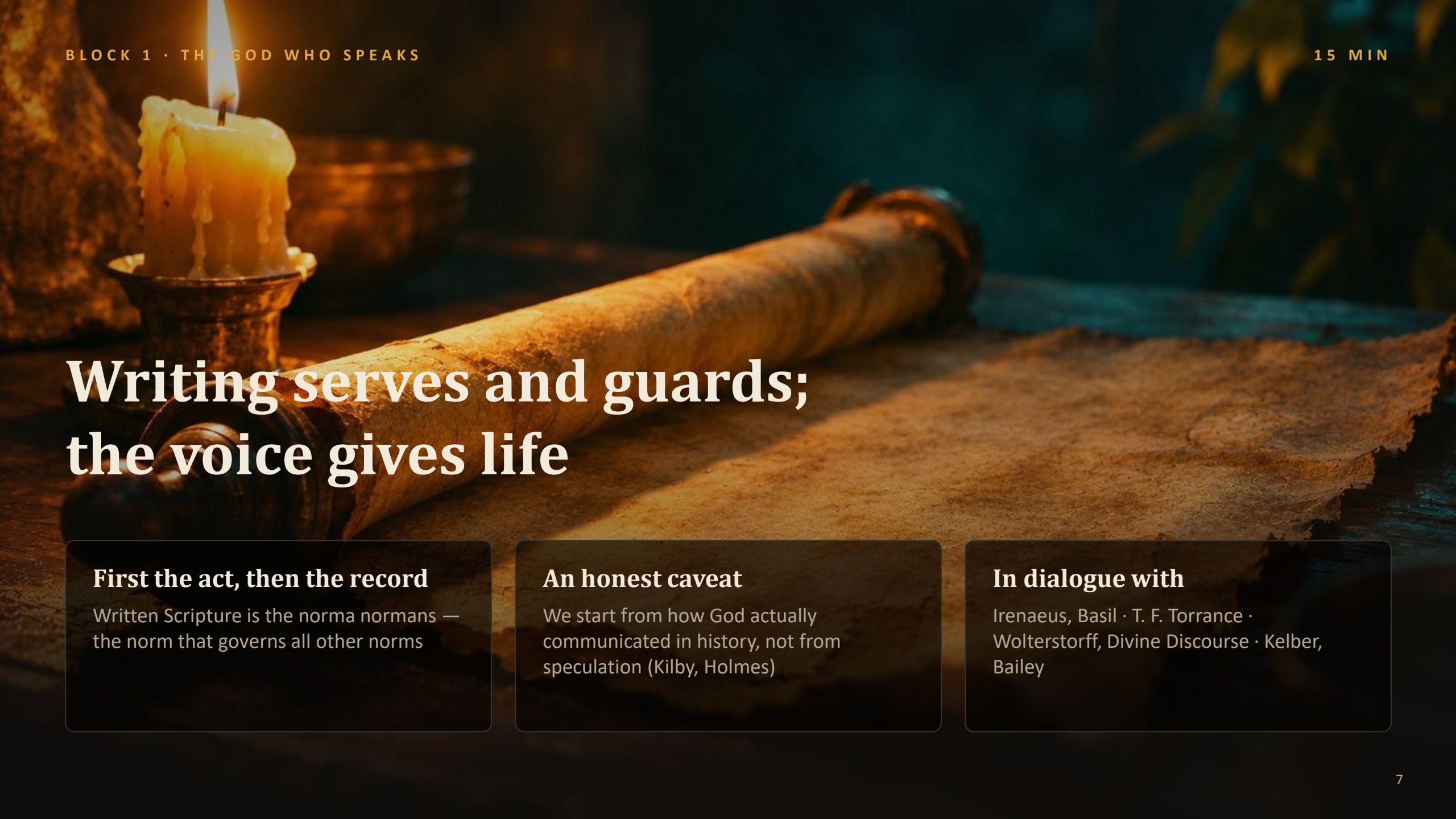
John 14:26

Brings to remembrance

The Church

Rom 10:17

Faith comes from hearing



Writing serves and guards; the voice gives life

First the act, then the record

Written Scripture is the norma normans — the norm that governs all other norms

An honest caveat

We start from how God actually communicated in history, not from speculation (Kilby, Holmes)

In dialogue with

Irenaeus, Basil · T. F. Torrance · Wolterstorff, Divine Discourse · Kelber, Bailey

Four paths, one theology

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The story

How revelation unfolds across the canon (D. A. Carson)

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

The grammar

How the story connects with the doctrines of God, Christ, the Spirit, and Scripture

MISSIOLOGY

The horizon

How the Word reaches the peoples

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The body

What this changes in the life of the church

A theology that can be thought, believed, lived, and also told

> *"The problem was never abstraction; it was abstraction that forgot the story from which it was born."*
>
> — THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

Organizing in order to worship

- Systematic theology is the grammar of faith
- Doctrine exists to lead to devotion
- Romans 9–11 ends in doxology
- The guardrail protects the path so the people can arrive at worship

> *"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"*
>
> — ROMANS 11:33

The inheritance and the eclipse

> *"...fitting the biblical story into another world with another story."*
>
> — HANS FREI

> *"It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text."*
>
> — GEORGE LINDBECK

- Leaders trained in abstract models return to peoples who think in stories
- Lidório: "catechizing" that imposes external values → nominal religiosity

Two modes, both welcome

> *"Arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness."*
>
> — JEROME BRUNER

STORIES

Narrative mode

Parable, story, character, consequence

ARGUMENTS

Paradigmatic mode

Argument, epistle, principle, system

Scripture contains both. Orality does not come to compete; it comes to serve.

CHAT When did a theological term need more explanation than the Bible story itself?



Same message, another voice

- Angola: a quiet, gentle sermon — right message, strange form
- South Asia: “Now I need to say it again” — the interpreter retells with life and voice
- Jesus with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman · 1 Cor 9:22
- Stott: double listening · Acts 16:14 — the Spirit opens the ear

> *“We do not study cultures to make the gospel more efficient, but to love better those to whom God speaks.”*
>
> — THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

A spectrum, not a divide



Primary oral learners — *W. Jay Moon · the key word is preference* — **Learn mainly through print**

High orality preference	Low orality preference
Truth received through listening, shared life, participation	Knowledge validated through writing, analysis, abstraction
Narrative is where truth is revealed	Narrative illustrates principles already established
Authority shows in the life of the one who speaks	Authority rests on the contract, the record, the signature
Asks about relationships, context, consequences	Asks for the principle
Memory is communal	Memory is individual and recorded

"In many Amazonian villages, a story told at dusk can carry more ethical and communal weight than a written document."

Showing the debate honestly

THE DESCRIPTION

Walter Ong

Thought in primary oral cultures is additive, aggregative, redundant, close to the human lifeworld, and situational

THE CORRECTION

Ruth Finnegan · Brian Street

Criticized the “great divide” between oral and literate. They do not invalidate Ong; they correct him — and confirm the spectrum

THE CAUTION

Richard Nisbett · Sherry Ortner

Holistic and analytic thinking — useful as a tendency, not as a border between peoples

If time allows: honor–shame · guilt–innocence · fear–power

Christopher Flanders: all three are present in every culture, and Scripture speaks to all three

The lens that revealed the text

- Mark 4:35–41 told among Amazonian hearers
- Where we saw a miracle over nature, they saw Jesus confronting the powers
- Same verbs as Mark 1:25: epitimaō (rebuke) and phimoō (be silent)

> *“Each people perceives dimensions of the gospel that others had not perceived.”*
>
> — AFTER ANDREW WALLS

The messenger also communicates

> *“What makes a person worth listening to is not the same in every community.”*
>
> — CHANGE CHAPTER

QUESTIONS TO TAKE HOME

- Who has authority to speak?
- Where is memory kept?
- Does meaning depend more on words or on shared context?
- Honor to restore, guilt to relieve, or protection from the powers?

Two risks of importing categories

RISK 1

The terms we bring

“Person,” “substance,” “perichoresis” answered Greek and Latin questions. Water, egg, one actor with three masks — every nature analogy fails.

RISK 2

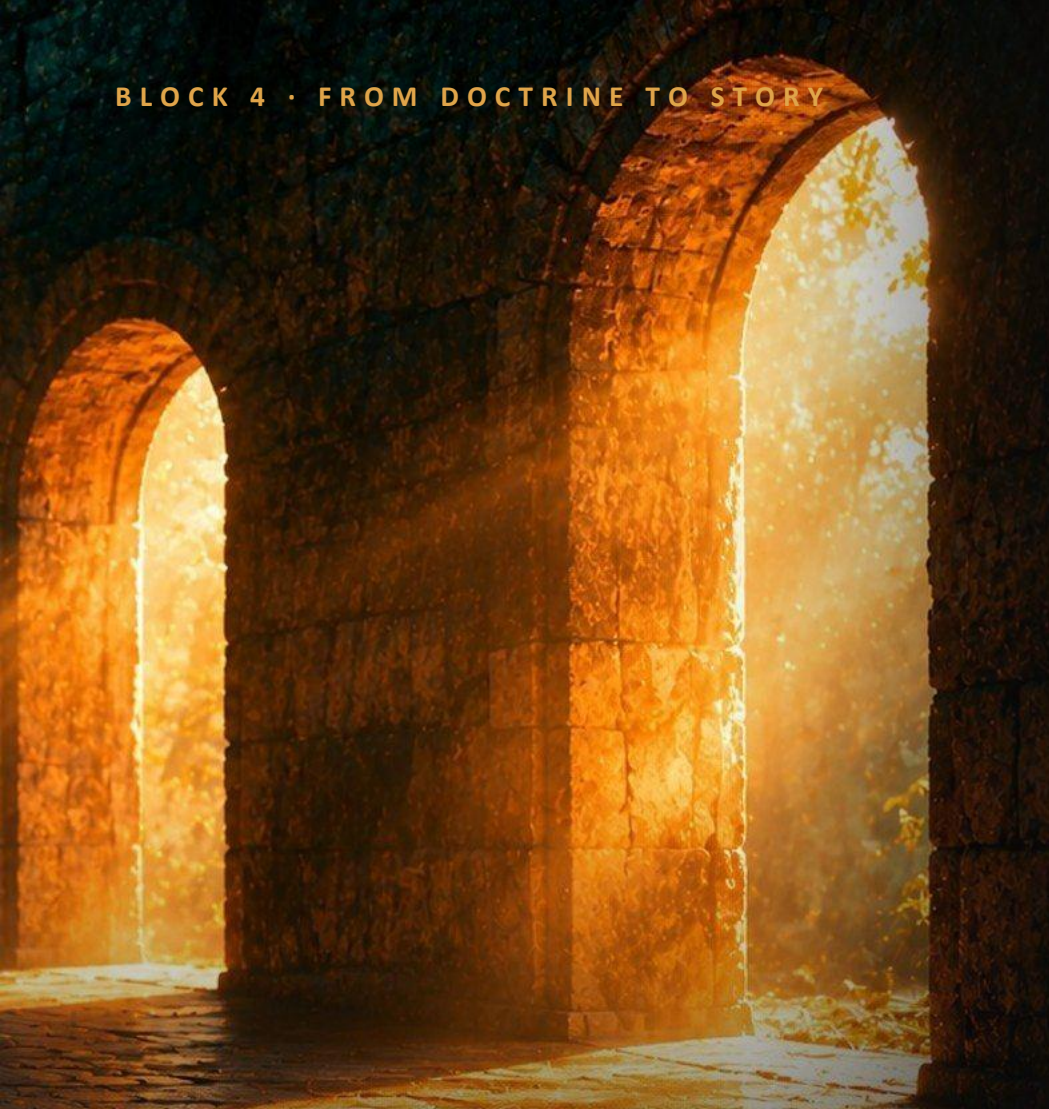
The categories the culture already has

The cave and the two parrots: Matt 24:22 first translated as “God repented.” The community saw God's character at stake — and corrected it.

Three levels of discernment

“The Bible replaces, and it also reconfigures, but not the same thing.”

1	**Object of worship and allegiance**	Replacement: the gods are left behind	**1 Thess 1:9**
2	**Ways of knowing and passing on**	Possessio: Christ takes possession of narrative, memory, song, and rite	**J. H. Bavinck**
3	**Themes, symbols, and questions of the culture**	Case-by-case discernment, by the community, Scripture in hand	**Paul Hiebert**



The Trinity: five doors

4 translators · 5 narratives · no lecture · “What do you see?”

Gen 1:26–31	“When God says, ‘Let us make,’ He is not speaking alone.”
Luke 1:26–35	The Father initiates, the Son is promised, the Spirit overshadows
Matt 3:13–17	“Equal yet different and do nothing separately” (P3)
John 14:8–17	“This Spirit that He has is as powerful as He is” (P4)
Matt 28:16–20	Mission as participation in the life of God

Formation observed: cognitive · affective · practices

> *“Doctrinal perception can emerge before specialized terminology.”*
>
> — FOSTERING TRINITARIAN FORMATION

The path in practice

1 Tell

The story faithfully, with the Bible open

2 Retell

As a group — free in form, controlled in content (Bailey)

3 Observe the characters

What they say, do, choose; the consequences (Steffen & Bjoraker)

4 The heart question

“What did this character feel?” (Elliott, Frost)

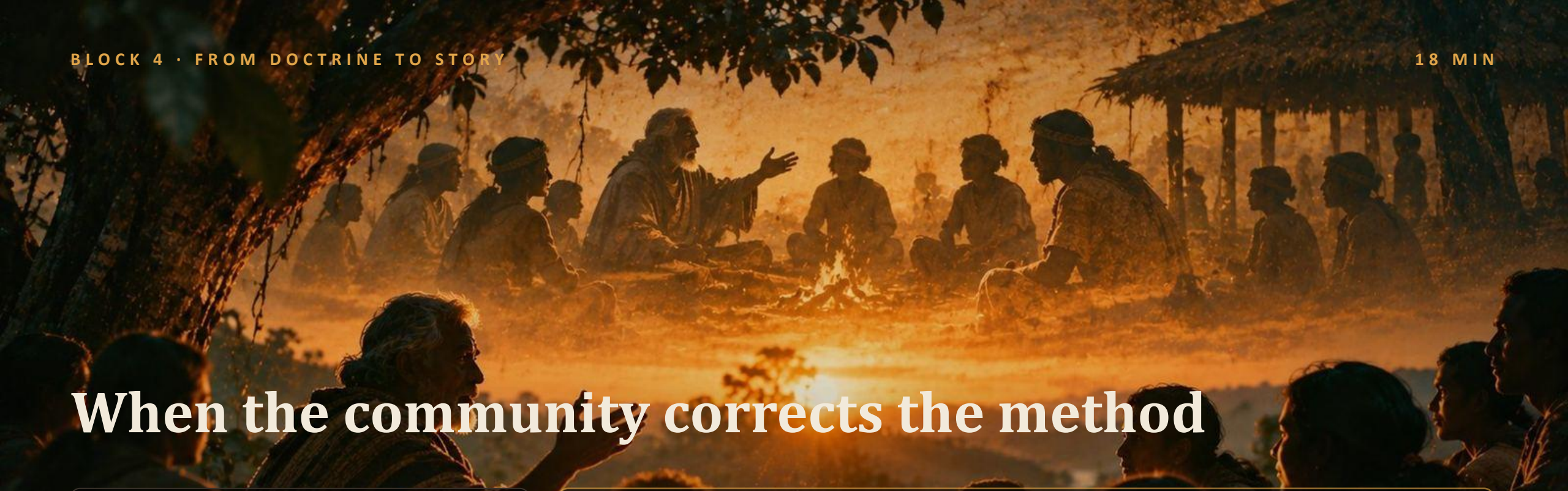
5 Return to the text

“Where did you see that in the text?”

6 Organize, then apply

Name what we saw about God; confirm, confront, or refute

The heart question opens the text; the text itself guards the interpretation.



When the community corrects the method

From “three times today”

…to “How can this community meet the story again over time?” Important stories are heard many times across life.

“Contextualization cannot stop when we exchange a written lecture for a story. The communicator is also being changed.”

— FOSTERING TRINITARIAN FORMATION

Live demonstration

Matthew 3:13–17 · the baptism of Jesus

- Tell the story — no reading, no commenting
- Two people retell it; the group adds what was missed

THREE QUESTIONS

- What did John feel when Jesus asked to be baptized?
- Who speaks, who is in the water, who descends? What does each one do?
- What does this scene show us about God?

Did we need the word “Trinity” for this to be seen?

Every tongue

Philippians 2:9–11

> *"It is not strategy that transforms, but the Word of God, through the Spirit."*

> *"Orality does not relativize the authority of the Bible. It gives the Bible back its voice."*

Revisited → inhabited → embodied

Listen · obey · tell

QUESTIONS · RESOURCES