

An Ancient Bible Study Method for Today's Small Group

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The most effective method of Bible study today resembles that of the earliest churches. The goal was not to understand the Bible, but rather to live like Jesus, walk with Jesus, look for Jesus at work in the world. Bible study then and now is more about spiritual discernment and faithful conversation, and less about research and reading. After all, you are a *small group* of seekers, not a classroom of students.

There are three things each member of the group must acquire in order to prepare themselves for Bible study for both the Old and New Testaments.

1. A modern *translation* of the Bible: There are many quality versions of the Bible, and conversation can be enhanced if several translations are used and compared. Avoid the King James Version, because interpreting 16th century terminology sidetracks quality conversation. Avoid Bible paraphrases, because the author's biases color spiritual discernment. [Many people use the NIV or NRSV, and the new Common English Bible (CEB) is readable and accurate].
2. A *commentary* of the Bible: There are many good commentaries, and again it is useful to compare different ones. Make sure it is a commentary by a credible Bible scholar. The best commentaries provide information about the writers' viewpoints, historical context, religious debate about a passage, and the spiritual significance of the passage for faithful living. [Single volumes like the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary* are often used, or a more specific series like *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* (ed. Bruce W. Winter, Eerdmans: 1994) provide detailed analysis. Compare modern and ancient perspectives by exploring the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series (ed. Thomas C. Oden, Intervarsity: 1998)].
3. A *dictionary* of the Bible: The group only needs one for joint reference. This lets you look up difficult words, understand complex subjects, or identify people and places.

The group leader may also find it helpful to have on hand a Bible *atlas* referring to both the Old and New Testaments; and *Gospel Parallels* that compares verses from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and a *concordance* that helps you find verses when you only remember a word or phrase.

The Method

Read the Bible aloud before you read it silently. There are three big reasons why this procedure is more effective than private (and silent) reading.

- ✓ We listen better than we read. Our culture is really an oral culture. Our hearing is more acute, and more alert to nuances of meaning, than our memories. Reading aloud captures the drama and power of words that are otherwise plain and unadorned on the printed page. This gives more opportunity for the Holy Spirit to touch our hearts, wrench our guts, and stir our souls. We have to *surrender ourselves*.
- ✓ We stay with the text, and are less likely to skip ahead. People unconsciously skip over the parts of a text that seem already familiar, or which seem too difficult to readily understand. We can read along with a speaker, but the speaker is required to articulate every word, in the proper order, at the appropriate time, and this discipline holds us back from leaping ahead. We have to *pay attention*.
- ✓ We observe body language and make eye contact. When people read aloud, the slight inflections of their voice cause us to repeatedly look up and look around. We look into their eyes and see emotion. We observe their posture, interpret their gestures, sense the blush or pallor of their skin, and note changes in their breathing. Unspoken signals reveal how our colleagues are reacting to God's word, and we are drawn into the unfolding drama of God's real presence in our lives. We have to *get involved*.

Reading aloud is what helps the printed word become the “living word”. The story of the Bible intersects with the life stories of each member of the group. There are four “conversations” in each Bible study session. Each conversation is preceded by a reading of the text.

First Conversation:

*What is the **significance** of the text?*

The goal of this conversation is to discuss the *significance* of the text. How is the passage significant for me? What is the important information I really need to know? What are the key insights that grasp my attention? Certain words or phrases, ideas or insights, capture our attention immediately. They carry power to interpret out living, enlighten our situation, or strengthen our resolve.

Each small group participant underlines words or phrases of special significance during the reading. At this time, the small group leader may refer to a Bible Commentary that sheds light on the *writer’s original viewpoint*. Understanding why an author thought it so important to remember an event, tell a story, sharpen a criticism, or focus an idea helps us discern why a text might also be significant for our personal lives.

Second Conversation:

*What is the **urgency** of the text?*

Read the passage aloud a second time. The goal of this conversation is to discuss the *urgency* of the text. How is the passage motivating, disturbing, or exciting for me? How does it challenge the culture in which I live ... my work environment, family life, and circle of friendships, personal habits, and customs of daily living? What are the implications for of the text for my career, stage of life, and future hopes or fears? Certain words or phrases may be shocking and disturbing, or exciting and energizing.

Each small group participant places an “exclamation point” beside certain words or phrases. At this time, the small group leader may refer to a Bible Commentary that discusses the *historical context* in which the passage was originally written or to which it originally referred. Understanding the original situation that shaped a Bible passage, or the original impact on contemporary events, helps us discern why a text might also be significant to our life and times.

Third Conversation:

*What is the **uncertainty** of the text?*

Read the passage aloud a third time. The goal of this conversation is to discuss the *uncertainty* of a text. How does the passage confuse me? What questions are unanswered? What reference to people, places, things, events, or relationships are unknown? What ideas are bewildering? What ideas are unclear? Certain words and phrases, verses and stories, are simply foreign to our thinking and living. They reveal the huge disparity between ancient cultures and our cultures; their ethical assumptions and ours.

Each small group participant places a “question mark” beside certain words or phrases. At this time, the small group leader may refer to a Bible Dictionary to clarify the text; or to a Bible Commentary to understand the broader religious or ethical debate that surrounds a particular passage. If you happen to be reading the Gospels, the leader might compare the text in all four Gospel versions. Observe the footnotes in each Bible translation, and trace the connections between a word or phrase with similar uses in other books of the Bible. All this helps each small group participant choose how they might most faithfully apply the text to their lives.

Fourth Conversation:

*What is the **joy** of the text?*

Finally, read the passage aloud a fourth time. The goal of this last conversation is to discuss the *joy* of a text. What is the blessing that is uniquely yours, at this time and place of life? How has God reassured, comforted,

encouraged, or strengthened your spiritual journey? Has God revealed a personal message of hope? Has God opened you to new compassion or acceptance, or satisfied some deep longing?

Beyond the “underlinings” of the mind; beyond the “exclamation points” of the heart; and beyond the “question marks” of the gut; our soul finally meets the real presence of God in Christ. Each step has been valuable, but there is one step more. Your response to this last reading is to circle those words and phrases that are most precious to you. Sometimes these circles include the words and phrases we have underlined or marked with exclamation points and question marks. Sometimes these circles stand apart.

Each small group participant makes a note in the margin of their Bible (or a journal) indicating the blessing received. Over time, these notes enhance future individual Bible reading. At this time, the small group leader may highlight how a text is used during the Christian Seasons of the year, or in the liturgy of worship. For example, a small group leader might relate Isaiah 9:1-7 to Christmas, or Psalm 22:1-2 to Easter, or Luke 22:14-23 to the Eucharist. Commentaries may link a passage to a saint, reformer, or great leader of the Christian movement.

Participants can build on the passage to do further meditative reading; witness to God’s grace with friends, neighbors, or work associates; or incorporate Biblical wisdom into their social service. For example, some participants who are impressed by the story of the "Rich Young Ruler" (Lk. 19) might read Augustine's *Confessions*. Participants who are thrilled by divine acceptance described in 1 John 4:7-21 might share the message of God's love with people who are particularly depressed or lonely. Participants who are moved by the message of peace in Micah 4:3 might join a march against war and violence.

Whenever we read scripture conversationally, we savor the words like consecrated bread and wine. The scripture is a sacrament to be tasted and appreciated. “Chew” it slowly. “Drink” it thoughtfully. The Holy Spirit is in it as surely as in Holy Communion (or Eucharist). The power of the Holy Spirit in scripture is often only revealed *after* four oral readings and conversation. We tend to respond to scripture in successive layers of mind, heart, gut, and (ultimately) soul.

In this way the words of scripture help us to participate in the "Living Word" of Jesus Christ. He is the "Word made flesh", and we participate in Christ fully when we connect our minds, hearts, guts, and souls with story of God's saving grace in scripture. People who immerse themselves in scripture can feel the touch of God in their whole lives, and participate in a dialogue with God that has been going on from the beginning of time. It is as if Jesus were walking incognito beside us, as he did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13-35). He helps us understand scripture, and in doing so reveals himself to us.