



Small Group Bible Studies

Information for transformation

by Paul Lutz

My dad approaches the Bible the way detective Joe Friday approaches a crime scene, Just the facts, Ma' am. He asks questions looking for evidence: who, what, when, why, and how. And then, somehow at the end of all the investigation, armed with facts, figures and certainty, he is satisfied that this is what the Bible is all about. He is well informed, and ready to apply his scientific discoveries to his life.

Inductive Bible study

This approach is sometimes called Inductive Bible Study. You start with the biblical text and use the scientific method of investigation and from that discover the truth of the text. Once the truth has been found, its meaning can be explored and application to life is possible. A popular approach for adult education in many congregations, the Inductive Bible Study usually includes three steps with corresponding questions: **Observation** What does the text say? **Interpretation** What does it mean? **Application** What does it mean to me?

But, what if the Bible is meant to do more than inform? What if my dad's preoccupation with gaining information-and that of others using the Inductive Bible study approach-is limiting the impact of the Holy Scripture? Is it enough to just know the facts and be informed? What if God is interested in stir- ring up more from the scripture?

Engaging the Bible

We can do more than just mine the Bible for information. We can engage the Bible. We can experience the Bible as a reality outside us that acts upon us, making radical claims, giving astonishing promises, asking probing questions, inspiring daring service. And as we engage the Bible, the Bible engages us. It opens our lives to possibilities beyond the purely factual and scientific. As we experience the Bible, we are not only informed, but also form- ed, re-formed and trans-formed.

Approaches to Bible study

Try one of the following small group approaches to Bible study. But, be careful. They move from information to trans-formation. They allow biblical stories to become contemporary stories. They bring you into the presence of the living God.

African Bible Study

In this kind of study a group listens to the reading of a selected scripture passage and responds to the question, What word or phrase seems most significant or meaningful for you, and why? The passage is read a second time and each participant responds to the question, How does this passage speak to your life now, and why? The passage is then read for a third time and participants respond to the question, What will you change or do this week in response to this passage, and why? The passage is read a final time as a closing prayer. Voices of the story In this kind of study a passage is read and participants identify the biblical characters, individuals or groups. Participants are assign- ed or select a character, read the story from the perspective of their character, and then share what they as the character saw, heard, experienced, and felt from their perspective.



Short-term memorization

In this kind of study, typically participants are given ten minutes to memorize the passage, and then gather in pairs. One partner shares the passage from memory, while the other partner makes note of words or phrases shared correctly, omitted or changed. The partners then exchange roles. Small group discussion grows out of the participant's response to the questions: What was the easiest part to memorize, and why? What was most difficult, and why? What words or phrases were changed, and why?

Story Then and Now

This form of Bible study happens when a passage is explored by asking the questions: What is the setting? When is this taking place? How does the story line progress? Who is the audience? How would they understand the point of the story? Next, participants take the story from its biblical setting and place it in a contemporary setting by responding to the questions: Who are the contemporary people who might correspond to the biblical characters? What would be the setting? etc.

In Your Own Words

In this study, participants read the selected passage silently. Then, working individually each writes a short summary and then tells what he or she wrote. After every summary is heard, the group talks about common elements. Each participant reflects quietly on the following questions: What new possibilities does this passage open for me? For us? If I were to take my summary words seriously, what would that mean for me? For us? Finally, individuals offer their responses to the questions.

Not my father's Bible study

Often our tendency is to approach the Bible as my father does. But somewhere along the way, with just a few subtle shifts in perspectives, we can meet a living reality, a divine presence that starts to question, judge and guide us. In the Bible we encounter marvelous stories of what God has done, is doing and has yet to do. We encounter a faithful people endeavoring to arrange, order and live out their lives as God's people. Their stories are our stories. They belong to us, describe us and identify us. Whenever and wherever the stories of God and God's marvelous deeds are told, there God encounters us and we encounter God. And so, the book which begins as an object of our reading and study, becomes a subject which reads us.

The truth my dad sought to discover is not only knowledge that informs, but a God-with-us that reforms. Study of this sort may begin with facts. But it draws us into personal responsiveness and accountability before God, others and the world. Bible study changes not only what we know, but changes how we know and how we are known. It puts us at risk of transformation.

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