



Some Methods/ Elements of Small Group Bible Study

COMPILED BY SABINE KALTHOFF
IFES Secretary for Scripture Engagement / March 2013

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WORD FROM THE COMPILER

These are just some ideas: this document is there to inspire you to come up with further ideas of your own! It is in no way complete.

You may or may not find the above categorization helpful. There is a lot of overlap between the categories: creative approaches can lead to a detailed study of the text, reflective approaches can be very creative, using questions can help build bridges between Scripture and life, etc. Nonetheless, my hope is that this categorization will help us to think about how we can integrate all of life in our Bible studies – so that we engage Scripture deeply with everything we are: mind, will, feelings, and actions.

Please take into consideration that the approach you choose needs to be appropriate for the type of Scripture passage (genre) you are reading, your group members, and your overall context. Not all of these methods, for example, are appropriate for Bible studies with non-believers who might not be comfortable with (extended) times of prayer or worship.

I have not tested all of these ideas myself. So, I am very interested in any feedback you may have as you try out these approaches or develop new ones: sabine.kalthoff@ifesworld.org. Thank-you!

For more ideas and reflections on Scripture engagement, see <http://scriptureengagement.ifesworld.org>. From there, you can also download this paper.

Sabine Kalthoff
IFES Secretary for Scripture Engagement
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Using Questions

I.1 QUESTIONS ON A PARTICULAR PASSAGE

Good questions are the most basic and essential tool for small group Bible studies. The small group leader can prepare questions based on his/her study of the passage or use questions from a guide book. If questions from a guide book are used, they should be adapted for the specific small group context.

In a question-based Bible study, it is helpful to have a mixture of questions which together accomplish all of the following¹:

- encourage group members to look carefully at the passage and grasp major insights (not questions which just point to some correct details);
- motivate group members together to think deeply about the meaning of a passage;
- build bridges between the message of Scripture and our reality today – connecting God’s Word with our personal lives and with the world around us (university, church, society, culture, etc.);
- help group members to respond in prayer and with practical steps in their lives.

Questions should be open for more than one possible point of view or answer. Questions whose answers are too obvious or which can be answered with a yes or no can kill a conversation and lead to the Bible study becoming a “question answer time.”

The other methods presented below are not intended to replace this method of Bible study completely, but to provide some alternatives or creative elements to the Bible study. Often a few good questions will still be needed when using one of the other approaches.

¹ See also: Ada Lum, Martin Haizmann, Werner Baderschneider, ‘Getting Excited About Jesus, Preparing and Running Evangelistic Bible Studies, Including Study Guides on the Gospels of Mark and John’ (First published 2005 by IFES Europe), 26-28. This is an excellent and practical book on evangelistic Bible studies.

I.2 STANDARD QUESTIONS TO USE ON ANY TEXT

The difference to the previous method is that the questions used are the same for every text. Getting to know some standard questions can help students in their personal Bible reading. In small group Bible studies this approach should not be used too often since tailor-made questions are usually more helpful in drawing out the essence of a passage.

Different sets of “standard” questions have been developed such as¹:

- a) Where and when does the incident take place?
- b) Who are the main characters in the passage?
- c) What are the difficult words or phrases?
- d) What are the main ideas of the passage?
- e) What did the passage mean to those to whom it was addressed originally?
- f) What does the passage say to people today?
- g) What is the meaning of the passage for me?

Another set of questions can be:

- a) What does this passage teach about God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?
- b) Is there a promise I can claim?
- c) Is there a warning I should heed?
- d) Is there a command I should obey?

Another set of questions can be²:

- a) What about the text catches your attention most today? Why?
- b) What is the number one question you want to ask of the text today?
If you were the one to have to answer it what would you say at this time?
- c) How is this text structured?
- d) What is the “main point” being made in the text?
- e) How is the rest of the passage related to this “main point”?
- f) So what is this text calling us to do today?
And does the text give us any help in doing it?
- g) How can we pray for you in light of this text?

¹ The first two question sets are from Ramez Atallah, “Some Methods of Bible Study,” an unpublished paper. This paper provided the major basis for developing my paper. Ramez Atallah is head of the Egyptian Bible Society and is very connected with IFES, having served both on staff and as the IFES president.

² From a course taught by Darrell Johnson on “Christian Education and Equipping,” Fall 2007 at Regent College/Canada.

I.3 THE SWEDISH METHOD – USING SYMBOLS INSTEAD OF QUESTIONS¹

This is basically a “standard question” method but using “standard” symbols.

Each person studies the passage on his own and marks:

- with an arrow upwards ↑ everything that reveals something about who God is;
- with an arrow downwards ↓ everything that reveals something about the nature of man;
- with a question mark ? anything which they do not understand;
- with a heart ♥ any new insight/idea (anything which speaks to you);
- with an arrow → anything which calls to a response of obedience.

Then the group members share their discoveries. Together the group works to answer the questions which were raised. Make sure that there is time to talk about your response to the passage.

I.4 QUESTIONS FROM THE GROUP MEMBERS

If the questions being discussed come from the group members, their interest in looking for an answer will be stronger. The risk with this approach is that not all questions might be helpful; the leader should be prepared to rephrase questions.

There are different ways of generating and working with questions from the group members:

- After reading the passage, the group members have a few minutes of silence to reread the passage on their own and write down questions. These are then shared, grouped and become the basis of the study.
- Group members can be asked to specifically share questions they would like to ask of a certain character or of the author of the passage.
- **Origami-Method².** After reading the passage, the group members reread the passage and write down their most important question on the bottom (!) of a piece of white paper. Everyone then passes their piece of paper to the person on their left. That person writes their answer to the question on the top (!) of the piece of paper. The answer should be based on what they see in the passage. Before passing the piece of paper on to the left, he/she folds the paper in such a way that the next person can see the question at the bottom, but not the answer which has been written. The next person writes his answer, folds it away, and passes the paper on. And so on. Until everybody receives back the paper with their question. Everyone reads through the answers on their paper and thinks about them. Then there is a time of sharing about what everyone has learnt while thinking about the questions and reading the answers.

It is important to stress that the questions asked should be based on what is in the Bible passage. The leader might have to help group members not to ask purely speculative questions.

¹ Ada Lum, *Creative Ideas for Lively Bible Studies* (published by FES Malaysia, 2002), 13-15. This method was developed in Sweden and is also called the Västeras Method. Some versions of it use other categories and symbols.

² Daniel Rempe (Hrsg.), *41 Methoden zum Bibellesen mit Gruppen*, (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 2012), 44.

I.5 KEY QUESTION¹

The key question approach is a way to study one aspect of a book of the Bible or a Bible character without having to study everything in the book or about the character. Naturally, the focus of the study is limited, but it does allow one to move quickly through the text and cover much ground.

The leader prepares a question which will focus the group on one key aspect of the passage.

For example:

- What are the reasons for Paul's joy in Philippians and what can we learn from his example? (An option would be to study one chapter per week, each time using the same question.)
- While Onesimus travelled back (700 miles!) and kept on rereading the letter, what would have encouraged him?
- What are the proofs of salvation in 1 John?

A key question helps study one aspect of a book or character without looking at all the details. It is important that the key question identifies a central theme and not a secondary issue.



¹ Atallah, "Some Methods of Bible Study." With elements added from Karen and Rod Morris, *Leading Better Bible Studies*, (Sydney: Aquila Press, 1997), 94-95.



Creative Interaction with the Text

2.1 CHARACTER IDENTIFICATION

This approach is especially suitable when studying narratives. The Bible study group divides into as many subgroups as there are major characters or groups in the story being studied. (A subgroup can consist of only one person.) E.g. In Luke 7:36-50, the characters would be Simon, the sinful woman, Jesus, and the other guests.

- **Option 1 Character Interview**¹. Each subgroup/individual prepares answers from the text to questions which they have been given addressed to their character. The leader then interviews one person from each subgroup who has been nominated to represent this subgroup's character. This should be done in an informal style alternating between characters.
- **Option 2 Character Interview**. Each subgroup/individual studies their character and imagines how this character experienced the event. After a time of reflection/discussion in the subgroups, a representative of each character gives a very brief report about his experience of the story speaking as if he/she were this character. This means that they speak using "I..." or "We..."-language. After each report, other group members can address questions to this character. It is important to emphasize that the questions must be related to the passage.
- **Option 3 Footsteps**². Each person cuts out a pair of footprints using their own feet to make them. On these footprints, they write the name of one character/group in the story. All main characters of the story should be represented by at least one person. The leader explains where the different geographical locations of the story are located in the room. The biblical narrative is read out loud. After each section/verse, the group members place their footprints where they think they now belong. A newspaper reporter goes around and asks (some of) the group members why they are in that location and what they are just experiencing. The reading of the narrative continues. Afterwards, the group can talk about what they observed and what they think is central to this story.
- **Option 4 Journal Writing**. Each group member writes a paragraph in their journal as if they were one of the characters in the narrative. It is good to make sure that all main characters of the story are represented by someone. These short journal entries are shared with the whole group. (Instead of a journal entry, the group members could write a blog post or an email to a friend about their experience, based on the biblical passage.)

1 Atallah, "Some Methods of Bible Study."

2 See Rempe, 41 Methoden, 34-35.

Character identification (and the use of imagination which goes with it) helps group members to observe carefully and to enter into Scripture narratives – to get drawn into the story. Group members start to see what the Biblical characters saw, to feel what they felt. Identification can also help group members grasp that the stories in the Bible really happened and involved real people.

When using this approach, the small group Bible study leader might need to add 2-3 good questions which help the group deepen and summarize their understanding of and response to the Scripture narrative.

2.2 THE FIVE SENSES¹

Ask people to pick one of the five senses: touch, smell, sight, hearing, emotional feeling. Each person is asked to “hear” with the sense they picked. Read the passage aloud and then, after a short reflection time, each “sense” shares what it perceived. This is a method which is best used with narratives. (E.g. John 11:1-44: The Raising of Lazarus.)

This approach helps imagine what is happening. It is a good way of observing well with all of one’s senses. The Bible study leader will have to decide how he/she helps the group then reflect on the meaning of what is going on in the story.

2.3 BIBLE CHARACTERS ON TRIAL²

This method is particularly useful when studying Bible characters whose life was somewhat controversial. The character under consideration such as Jonah, for example, is accused of some major failing (e.g. because Jonah disobeyed God he should not be considered a prophet!). Jonah is put on trial “in the dock”.

The group divides into two sub-groups, one is the prosecution and the other is the defence. Each group has to develop its case for or against the defendant. Each group can call its own witnesses as long as they are people mentioned in the text!

This often results in an extremely lively study of the text and can involve some very dramatic presentations. The final presentation can be done in front of a large group or simply within the small group. Many characters can be handled in this way such as Adam, Abraham, Noah, Joseph, David etc.

The advantage of this method is that it helps one understand the positive and negative aspects of the character’s life. This makes one invariably wonder at how God was willing to use such frail people as His ambassadors.

¹ I first heard about this approach from Thena Ayres, former professor at Regent College/Canada.

² Atallah, “Some Methods of Bible Study.”

2.4 ‘MAKING’ A VIDEO/FILM¹

This approach works best with narrative passages that have some dramatic elements. Group members are asked to use their imagination to think of how the text might come alive if it were a short film or video clip. So, the film isn’t actually ‘made’, it is imagined and discussed.

The leader might start by providing some background information and describing the method. Areas for discussion can be listed on a paper/board – these will include things as: how the movie might start; what are the key ideas the audience needs to understand; what characters to focus on; what kind of details the camera should zoom in on; what kind of music might be appropriate; how the story could develop visually; how it would end. To address these things group members are encouraged to observe the text closely, talk about its meaning, and its relevance for today. The aim is to ‘make’ a film which is true to the text. At the end, the leader might want to help draw together some of the key insights from the Bible passage.

example: Mark 5:1-20, The Demoniac of Gerasenes. The group might discuss such things as how they would set the scene, the small boat drawing near, the sound of the boat being dragged ashore, men talking, and then a sudden piercing scream; the music and atmosphere changing as the camera picks up the demoniac raging around the tombs and heading towards them. They would figure out how to capture the disciples’ reactions, the conversation between Jesus and the man, the command to “come out” and everything which follows. In the process of thinking about the film, the group could talk about what it means to be marginalized and live in an environment of deadness. They might consider the contrast in the man’s life before and after meeting Jesus, and how that contrast has been for them, or others they know. They could think about the implication of the fact that Jesus sent the man home to talk about his experience to others. They would need to clarify what they want to focus on in this short film, and how they could convey the power of the story most effectively.

This approach can help group members see or hear things freshly in the Biblical narrative. It requires close observation and careful thinking about the meaning of the text. It is an approach which often leads to lively conversations and gets students deeply involved.

2.5 ACTING OUT A PASSAGE

One concrete example:

A Bible study on “Integrity when no one is looking.”² Divide your group into two subgroups (if the group is not big enough for two subgroups, you can work on one passage all together). One subgroup studies Genesis 39:1-23 (on Joseph), the other group studies 2 Samuel 9:1-13 (on David). Come together and act out the stories. In closing, lead a brief discussion on the question: What have we learnt from these two stories about integrity in leadership when no one is looking?

¹ Thena Ayres, former professor at Regent College/Canada.

² Example taken from *Servant Leadership: 10 Bible Study Discussions*, written by the SCO staff team (IFES movement in South Africa), May 2002, 15-16.



Detailed/Analytical Study of the Text

3.1 REMEMBER, WRITE, COMPARE¹

This method is a lot of fun. The leader mentions a well-known text to the group, for example the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10). The group then divides into smaller groups (e.g. three subgroups) and each of these tries to reconstruct the main elements of that text. These groups are not required to arrive at exactly the same words of the Biblical text, but they are expected to include all the major elements without any omissions or additions. Usually each person works by himself, shares the result of his work with his small group, and then the group comes to a common agreement of their reconstructed text.

Each group writes its text on a large piece of paper and these are posted on the wall. The original Biblical text is also written on a large piece of paper and put alongside the “reconstructions” to see what the various groups have omitted or added. This often results in lively interaction as people find themselves quite surprised at what they forgot and what they added! The leader then leads the group in a discussion as to the possible reasons for having omitted or added certain ideas to the text.

This method works best with well-known passages which people do not usually memorize. It will not work when people are unfamiliar with the Bible or have memorized the passage.

Variation²: The Scripture passage is read out loud once, clearly and slowly. Everyone is asked to listen carefully. After that, each person makes notes to the following questions: What do I remember? What stood out for me? Which images came to my mind as I listened?

The group members share what they wrote down. Then the passage is read again. While listening, the group members ask themselves: What did I not hear? What did I hear differently than it is in the passage? Why is that so? The group shares their answers.

This method helps to listen well. It can also help well-known texts come alive again.

3.2 PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase simply means repeating the content of a Scripture passage with one’s own words. It can be a helpful approach when reading passages which are full of Christian terms, since often we don’t stop to actually think about their meaning.

¹ Atallah, “Some Methods of Bible Study.”

² Adapted from Rempe, 41 Methoden, 37.

example: Ephesians 1:3-14. One verse is read at a time – group members take turns trying to express in their own words what this verse is saying. Others can help them if they struggle.

Alternatively, group members can be asked to rewrite (a part) of the Bible passage in their own words and then share what they have written. This can be done individually or in subgroups of 2-3.

3.3 ORGANIZING

There are many different ways of “organizing” the content of a Scripture passage: tables, diagrams, flow charts, drawing a story line, etc. This helps group members think hard and capture the content of a passage.

example 1: Ephesians 2:1-10. Write up a table which contrasts being dead in transgressions and being alive in Christ. (This can be done together by the whole group on a poster paper.)

example 2: Philippians 4:2-9. As a group, write out all imperatives in this passage (on a poster paper). Talk about them: What do they mean? How are they connected? How do they speak into our lives? Now go back to the text and add what encouragements the text offers to live out these imperatives.

These elements are not necessarily in themselves the whole Bible study, but if chosen well they lead to good observation and interpretation of a Bible passage.

3.4 ANALYSING THE FLOW OF A TEXT¹

This method involves rewriting the Biblical text in such a way that the meaning and main ideas of the text become apparent. No change is made to the actual words but they are organized in such a way that the logic of the argument becomes clear.

Each group member works on his own to rewrite the text. Then they work in twos or threes to try to come to some consensus. Then the whole group tries to develop the best “analysis” of the text. Sometimes several different models emerge each being equally useful.

¹ Atallah, “Some Methods of Bible Study.”

1 Peter 5:1-4 after being rewritten could look like this:

“To the elders among you,
I appeal as
 a fellow elder,
 a witness of Christ’s sufferings,
 and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:

Be shepherds of God’s flock
 that is under your care,

serving as overseers -

not because you must,
 but because you are willing, as God wants you to be;
not greedy for money,
 but eager to serve;
not lording it over those entrusted to you,
 but being examples to the flock.

And when the Chief Shepherd appears,
 you will receive the crown of glory
 that will never fade away.”

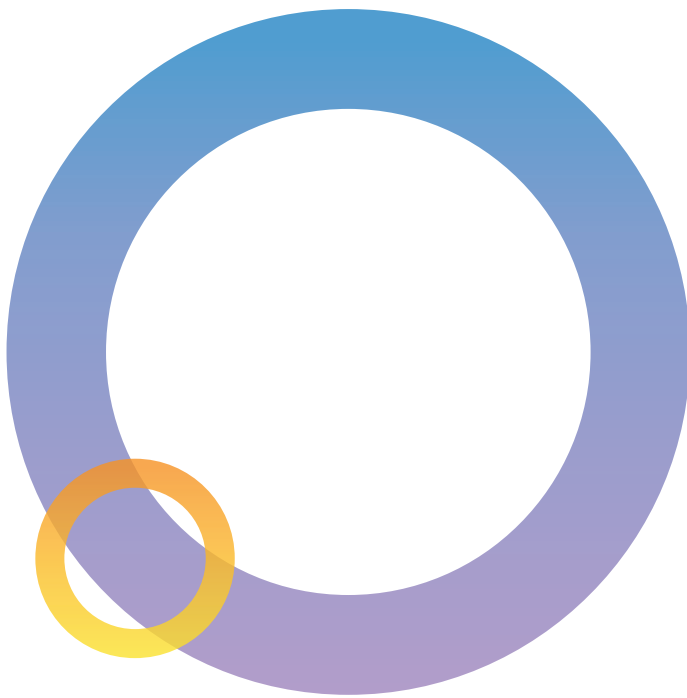
As can be seen from the above, this method helps one to really grapple with the actual words of Scripture and forces one to observe carefully and understand well the message of the passage. It invariably results in lively and exciting interaction in the group. Since this method always involves the actual words of Scripture, the leader rarely has to help the group to “get back to the text”.

Another way of using the analytical method is to give the group an already rewritten passage and to have them study it. The rewritten text is often much easier to study than working directly from the Bible. This approach can be used with those less able to do the rewriting themselves. It makes the text much more accessible to the common man.

3.5 THE MANUSCRIPT METHOD¹

To promote looking at the text from the perspective of the original audience, a printed manuscript is used rather than studying out of a Bible. The manuscript is formatted with wide margins, double spaced, and without verse or chapter numbers, paragraph divisions, or section headings. (It is called the “manuscript” method because the original manuscripts of the Bible did not have the verse or chapter numbers.) This format encourages group members to write directly on the text, trace themes, and mark various observations using different coloured pencils.

The leader of a manuscript study functions as a facilitator rather than a speaker. Group time moves between individual study, sharing in groups of two or three, and large group discussion. The leader guides the group through a process of observing closely, asking questions that arise from the text, developing answers from the text itself rather than referring to other parts of the Bible, and applying the core message. This type of study is highly participatory, interactive, and enjoyable. Group members are taught how to think rather than what to think, and can remember well what they have learned because they have discovered it themselves.



¹ Lindsay Olesberg, Scripture Engagement Director for InterVarsity (IFES movement in the United States). For a more detailed description of the manuscript method see Lindsay Olesberg, *The Bible Study Handbook* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).



Building Bridges Between Scripture and Life

God's Word interprets and transforms the reality we live in today. Yet, many students struggle to see how Scripture relates to life – as a result, their motivation to engage with Scripture is not strong. How can we help them see the relevance of God's Word for all of life? What follows are some methods which can specifically help to build such bridges.

4.1 LIFE SITUATION - BEGINNING FROM WHERE YOU ARE¹

This approach begins by having the group discuss a matter related to its daily life or concerns. This is done without any reference to the Scriptures or Christian truth. One could start with a question such as “What do you think God would want you to do if you knew this was the last week of your life?” The group discusses the question and makes a list of its conclusions.

After the discussion, the group leader introduces a passage of Scripture which relates to the question discussed. In the above mentioned case it could be 1 Peter 4:7-11.

The group is asked to find out from the text what Peter advised people to do since “the end of all things is at hand.” They then compare this list with that which they had reached in their previous discussion!

The main advantage of this method is that it makes people more open to consider the Scriptures than if one had taken a direct approach with them. By getting excited about an issue first, they are more interested to find out what the Bible says about it.

Variation 1: Collage A topic is written on a piece of poster paper. Group members cut out fitting headlines, images, articles from newspapers and magazines and post it on the paper, making a collage. During the Bible study, the connection is made back to the content of the poster.

example 1: Philippians 4:2-9. Before reading the passage, the group makes a collage on “things to be anxious about.” This topic is written in the middle of a big poster paper. Group members cut out headings, pictures, and articles from newspapers and magazines which relate to this topic and glue them on the poster paper. With thick pens, group members can write in things which they are personally anxious about. At the end of the Bible study, group members are invited to write down one verse/phrase from the passage on a small piece of paper and stick it on top of the collage.

example 2: Ezekiel 34. Start by making a collage on ‘bad leadership’ – again using newspapers, magazines, thick pens.

¹ Atallah, “Some Methods of Bible Study.” The variations are not from him, but added by me.

Variation 2: Silent Discussion A question or theme from daily life is written on a poster paper. All group members silently start writing their answers/comments on the poster at the same time (if possible with thick pens). They can also add comments, question marks, explanation marks etc. to what others have written. During the Bible study, the connection is made back to the content of the poster.

example 1: Matthew 18:21-35. What makes it hard to forgive others? (During the Bible study, one might then want to talk about what helps us to forgive others – even though it is hard.)

example 2: Isaiah 58:1-14.

Where do you see injustice and oppression in your community/society?

Other starting points can be video clips, a text from another religion, an advertisement, a newspaper article. Or one can start by inviting group members to share a certain aspect of their own story. These entry points need to be chosen in such a way that central aspects of the Bible passage being studied relate/speak to them.

4.2 REAL ENCOUNTERS AND PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES

Linking Bible studies to real encounters and practical activities can help us connect God's Word deeply to our reality today. Some examples:

example 1: 1. Timothy 2:1-15. After studying the passage, encourage group members to go to people who have responsibility (at their university, in their housing units, in their city) and to ask what their concerns are – and to tell them that they are asking this so that they can pray for them. Take time to pray for these concerns in the following group Bible studies.

example 2: Deuteronomy 10:12-22.¹ Before studying this passage, ask the group members to talk with at least one international student at their university and hear their story, their struggles. During the Bible study, think about how you as a group can extend hospitality and love to the international students living in your midst.

example 3: Genesis 1-3.² As a group go and visit a home for severely disabled people and spend time talking with them about their life (or invite disabled people you know into your group). Alternatively, go and visit a refugee camp or slum. Then, in your Bible study, talk about the dignity and value of every human being because they are made in the image of God. Talk about what sin does to human beings and their relationships.

example 4: Isaiah 45:1-13 (or another passage on the sovereignty of God). Before studying the passage, ask group members to go and talk with Muslim students about how they understand the sovereignty of God. Or invite a Muslim teacher to come and share what Muslims believe about divine sovereignty. In the subsequent Bible study, talk about how a Muslim understanding of God's sovereignty is different from a Biblical perspective on God's sovereignty.

¹ When studying this passage, you might also want to read one or two other passages which speak of God's concern for foreigners e.g. Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 24:17-22; Psalm 146; Matthew 25:31-46.

² The next two ideas are taken from a talk held by Vinoth Ramachandra at the IFES Living Stones Conference, Malaysia 2010.



Reflective Approaches and Elements

These reflective approaches/elements can help group members *internalize* what they are hearing – to take it in at a deeper level, to treasure it up in their hearts – so that their beliefs become heart convictions. We want students to remember God’s Word and be shaped by it long after the Bible study is over.

These reflective approaches/elements can also help us to interact not primarily with words on paper, but with the living God. In every Bible study, we want to be *responding to God’s Word*. If this is what God is saying to us, what do we say back to him? What is our appropriate response?

5.1 A SIMPLE BIBLE STUDY¹

Begin: One group member opens with a brief, spoken prayer.

Read: Another group member reads the passage aloud, slowly.

Reflect: After one minute of silence, each group member writes down an answer to the question: “What word/phrase caught my attention?”

Share: Each group member (who wants to) shares his /her word or phrase without comment.

Read: Another group member reads the same passage aloud from a different translation.

Reflect: After 3-5 minutes of silence each group member writes down an answer to the question: “Where does this passage touch my life experience?”

Share: Each group member (who wants to) shares his/her answer in turn, without comment.

Read: A third group member reads the passage aloud from yet another translation.

Reflect: For 3-5 minutes group members write an answer to the question: “From what I have heard and shared, what is God inviting me to be? How is he inviting me to change?”

Share: Each group member (who wants to) shares, beginning: “I believe God wants me to...”

Pray: Each group member then prays aloud for the person on his/her right, praying only for what that person expressed in the prior step. Each continues to pray for that person throughout the week.

¹ Thena Ayres, former professor at Regent College/Canada, from a course she taught on “Small Group and Bible Study Leadership.”

5.2 PRAYING SCRIPTURE

This approach is particularly appropriate when studying prayers in Scripture: Psalms, the Lord's Prayer, Paul's prayers, etc. These prayers teach us to pray. As we enter into these prayers and start praying them, we learn to pray – to pray back all of our life to God, to pray with the big and wide scope of God's kingdom.

- **Option 1¹** Praying through a Scriptural prayer is at the centre of the whole Bible study. All have their Bibles open to a certain passage e.g. Psalm 63. After reading the psalm out loud and giving some time for silent reflection, you can move into communal prayer. Read one verse at a time and allow time for people to respond with their own prayers – in praise, confession, request, intercession, etc. In this way your prayers will alternate between the words of Scripture and your own words of prayer. It is good to be sensitive about how much silence is good, when to move on to the next verse, and when to conclude. Encouraging participants to use times of silence for reflection can prevent silence from feeling awkward. (It is also possible first to study the passage together and then move into such a time of prayer.)
- **Option 2** Pray for one another (e.g. in groups of two) using a prayer from Scripture. Personalize the prayer by inserting the name of the person you are praying for. Paul's prayers lend themselves well to this. E.g. Philippians 1:9-11 "I pray that your love (insert name) may abound more and more...." It is possible to simply pray the words from Scripture for one another or to add words of prayer for the other person as one prays through the Biblical prayer.

The study of any Bible passage calls for a response in prayer to God. I am surprised at how often prayer times at the end of Bible studies seem unrelated to the Word which has just been studied! Group members can be encouraged to 'pray with open Bibles' – to have God's Word in front of them as they pray and respond to it in prayer. It can also be helpful to introduce a closing time of prayer by asking everyone to share prayer requests based on the passage studied: How do you want us to pray for you in light of this text?

¹ I first encountered this approach in a course taught by Darrell Johnson on "Praying by the Book," Summer 2005 at Regent College/Canada.

5.3 WRITING A RESPONSE TO SCRIPTURE

Writing a response to Scripture is another way of helping group members internalize and respond to what they are hearing from God's Word. Writing helps to sort one's thoughts, be concrete, and remember.

A few examples:

- write a **prayer** or **song** in response to Scripture. This can be done individually and then shared in the small group by those who want to. It can be done collectively e.g. by taking a key statement from the Bible passage and asking everyone to write a line of prayer in response. These can then be prayed out loud with the key Bible statement being prayed/read in between together as a refrain. E.g. Jesus, you are the bread of life (John 6:35).
- **write a SMS** to someone who is not at the Bible study, sharing one central thought with them.
- **write out a key verse** from the passage. Encourage group members to memorize the key verse they have written out. Depending on the content, group members might want to re-write a key verse and insert their own name.
- **help group members summarize** how this Bible study was meaningful to them. This could be done by asking questions like: How did God meet you? What verse/phrase was most important for you? How might this shape the rest of your week? Give group members time to reflect and write down their thoughts.

Other ways of responding to Scripture can be:

- **drawing, acting out**, or even **dancing** a response;
- **confessing sin** (if this is the response which is appropriate to the passage); e.g. symbolically by writing concrete sin on paper and nailing it to a small wooden cross;
- **worshipping God with songs, prayers and/or testimonies of his goodness**; This could, for example, be very appropriate after studying a passage which is all about the character and acts of God.
- **making a commitment in response to God's Word**. e.g. After studying John 13:1-17, each group member is asked to identify at least one way in which they can serve someone regularly that will remind them of Christ the servant leader. They are encouraged to find a friend with whom they share this commitment, who can pray for them, and hold them accountable.¹

¹ Example taken from *Servant Leadership: 10 Bible Study Discussions*, published by SCO, 8.

The passage being studied must be allowed to set the agenda. Some passages speak very personally to believers, others address societal issues. Some passages call us to wonder at who God is and respond with worship while other passages call us to take action in our lives.

When preparing a Bible study, we need to be asking: What kind of a response does this passage call for - thanksgiving, praise, confession, reconciliation, trust, an action of some kind, etc.? And: How can we help group members respond to God's Word?

As we ask these questions, it is good to be aware of the fact that one Bible passage can lead to a number of different responses. We need to leave room for the Holy Spirit to speak to group members as He chooses to. As we pray and think about how we can help group members respond to God's Word, let us expect the Holy Spirit to be at work in our small group Bible studies! Let us come to Scripture in the awareness that it is not so much we who read and interpret God's Word, but God's Word which reads and interprets us.

We believe in a God who speaks.

Enjoy the gift of God's Word as you listen and respond to Him in your small group Bible study!

