

A SIMPLE BIBLE STUDY MODEL FOR SMALL GROUPS

By Bob Young

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIBLE IS ON THE RISE

May I say a word to brothers and sisters who share my faith heritage? We Restorationists have historically been a “people of the Book.” Christians were diligent students of Scripture. Our knowledge of Scripture and our commitment to Scripture were well-known. No longer! One can analyze the situation by thinking about the four levels in which we come to Scripture—the congregation, the class, the cell (small group), and our personal commitment.

First, I do not believe the problem is not in our worship assemblies and sermons. Our preachers study and present the biblical text. There are exceptions, but in most of our churches, the sermons are based in Scripture. My two recommendations are (1) that we preachers be careful about developing too many thematic sermons or series, and (2) that we make a diligent effort to preach the “whole counsel of God” so that over a period of time we preach every part of Scripture.

Nor is the problem in our Bible classes. While there are more and more topical Bible classes, I still see diligent efforts to work with the biblical text. If there is a concern, it is that the focus is too much on content and not enough on application. Classes can spend a lot of time on the “what it says” and not enough time on the “what it means.”

At the cell level (including all small groups in the church and also family groups), I see an increasing lack of focus on Scripture. I see many groups studying contemporary Christian literature instead of the Bible. I see few groups that know how to use the Bible as the primary tool in the group study.

Finally, because we do not work together at the small group level to read, understand, and apply Scripture, more and more Christians lack these skills in their personal devotional life of conversation with God.

MANY CHRISTIANS LACK THE ABILITY TO “DIGEST” THE BIBLE

Another way to describe the situation is this: many Christians do not feast on Scripture because they cannot digest it. In a sermon, we expect the preacher to have studied and “predigested” the spiritual food. While sermons should involve the listeners in the process of understanding and applying Scripture, the congregational setting often leaves us one step removed from personal study of the Bible.

In a Bible class, there are increased opportunities for interaction but many questions, comments, and concerns go unexpressed, especially when the classes are large. Therefore, much of what is presented in a Bible class is also “predigested.”

The cell is the place where we could work together to learn how to digest Scripture. We keep ourselves one step removed from healthy spiritual eating when we turn to books that tell us what others have already seen instead of using Scripture as our primary resource. We fail to handle the text directly. We become dependent. When we use popular books to focus our groups and conversations, we do not have the opportunity to watch mentors personally struggle with the biblical text, we are not involved in the process, and we do not observe all the steps necessary to maintain a healthy relationship with God. But of greatest concern is that we do not learn how to use the Bible as part of our own personal spiritual diet.

AN EASY MODEL TO SIMPLIFY BIBLE STUDY— “Message and Meaning Model”

There are many models of Bible study and many good resources that focus on the message and application of the Bible. Here is an easy model (easy to remember, easy to use) that I developed and recommend. I call it the “Message and Meaning Model.” I used it and taught it in local ministry for more than a dozen years. Now I teach churches around the world how to use it. It is effective,

enjoyable, and encouraging. It is flexible enough to fit into various timeframes. Most group meetings last 45-90 minutes. Christians are thrilled to learn how to grow spiritually on a diet of God's word. The model follows the "look upward, look inward, look around, and look outward" sequence for maximum spiritual development.

Here's what happens before the meeting.

→The group agrees in advance on the Bible passage that will be studied so that all group members know what to read. In the New Testament, Psalms, or Proverbs, this is usually a chapter. In the Old Testament, it may be a subsection of a book, or in the case of some shorter books, an entire book that has only a few chapters.

→The group members agree to read the passage at least once before the group meeting (or as many times as possible, some group members will read the passage daily). Group members read thoughtfully and prayerfully, noting questions, difficulties, things that are impressive or helpful, etc. The group members look for two things—message and meaning.

→A couple of days before the group meeting, a focus question is emailed to the group. The focus question is designed to move from the text to real life. It is not hard to learn to write focus questions. Some groups rotate responsibility for writing the question. (I can provide examples of focus questions for those who are interested.)

Here's what happens in the meeting.

→Begin with prayer that looks upward. I like to ask a group member to write out a prayer in advance. This are not "who needs what" prayers. We do that at the end of the group. The opening prayer focuses on developing a closer relationship with God. Some groups provide a copy to each member of the group and they pray the prayer in unison.

→The Bible passage is read out loud (or predetermined excerpts in the case of longer passages). The leader identifies the excerpts in advance. The reading is done in rotation by several group members.

→Two questions guide the group interaction: what do you hear in this text (message) and what will you do (meaning)? These questions make us look inside ourselves as we hear God speak. It is often helpful to separate these two questions, although some group members in their comments will connect what they have learned and how they will apply it.

→When the conversation runs down (or the time has expired), the leader moves the group to the focus question. The focus question is a partially open question (cannot be answered "yes" or "no" but is limited so it does not lead to extended explanations). "If you could change one thing...what one thing should you do this week in response to this passage...if you could bring one person to Jesus...if you could pray for only one thing..." The focus questions should allow the group members to cast and share a vision for their own lives and for the outreach and multiplication of the group. This part of the group experience looks around and looks outward.

→Close in shared prayer, mentioning special needs. (It is good to have group members write these needs on slips of paper and hand them in at the beginning of the meeting so the one leading prayer can use them as guidance.)