



Igniting Hope Together

Bible Reading Groups

By Mike Shamy

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? – Luke 24:32

INTRODUCTION

A ‘mixed Bible Reading Group’ is a small group of friends who meet together to read the Bible, reflect on its message and its relevance to their life context. The ‘mixed bible reading group’ is proving to be a contextual ‘form’ that enables the people of our increasingly post-modern culture to experience community as well as the ‘freshness, power, and relevance’ of the Scriptures.

It is called ‘mixed’ because people are at different places in their spiritual journey. All are learners, but not all are Christians.

It is deliberately referred to as a ‘reading’ group, not a ‘study’ group. The word ‘study’ linked to the Bible is not a helpful word for people of our post-modern times. It triggers connotations of precision, rationality, facts, definition, and cognitive activity to a generation more comfortable with ambiguity, intuition and flexibility.

It is a group. “To read the Bible alone has become more and more difficult for people. For an increasing number of people it is more motivating to read in a group. The different thoughts and ideas that come up in a group help people to form their opinions. Reading it with another individual can arouse a fear of being manipulated. Presenting the Bible in dogmatic terms does not seem to an acceptable or relevant way ahead with friends, work associates and neighbors.

FOUNDATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

The Bible is a unique book

Through the true stories of people and events, using a variety of literary forms, the Bible reveals God and His purposes. It is the primary means He has employed to do this. In the Bible “we read of real people living in real situations experiencing God in their own particular historical and cultural contexts. They are like stories within the big story. Stories of individuals, communities and peoples relating to God and to one another. Together these stories trace the moving story of God’s amazing love for humanity” (Lynton Brocklehurst – “What Is the Bible and How Should It Be Approached?”). Through the Bible the people of our generation can encounter the living God.

The Holy Spirit is at work

As people read the Bible together the Holy Spirit is at work. He can be trusted to use the consistent message of the Bible to reveal God and work in the lives of people. We do not need to defend the Bible. Neither do we endeavor to prove its authority. We do not have to take control of this process. We can pray looking with confidence to the Holy Spirit to work in His mysterious ways and according to His timing.

The receptivity of the heart is vital

This is the point Jesus makes in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13). Observing, reasoning, analyzing and concluding have their place, but they are inadequate as we read the Bible. “A glass window stands before us. We raise our eyes and see the glass; we note its quality and observe its defects; we speculate on its composition. Or we look straight through it on the great prospect of land and sea and sky beyond” (Benjamin B. Warfield – quoted in “Windows of the Soul” by Ken Gire). The author of Proverbs tells us that whatever else we sow we need to be sure we watch over the condition of our heart (Proverbs 4:23). “It is by the heart that God is perceived [known] and not by reason...so that is what faith is: God perceived by the heart” (Oswald Chambers).

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Mutual Learning

The Bible reading group is a meeting place of learners. Each person has something valuable to offer out of the interaction of the Scriptures and their life context. It is not a place where levels of knowledge create distinctions. The group leader is not a person who has the truth clear and then skillfully uses questions to communicate that truth. All are learners. All are listeners. All are contributors. In this way God reveals His character and ways to the group both corporately and individually. “We need one another to help us detect our personal biases of which we ourselves are unaware. Through the open probing of what a text means or implies, the worst misinterpretations of truth are exposed and corrected by the others in the group. We also need the help of one another to go beyond present understandings” (Rinus Baljeu).

People value Community

In our frantic consumer oriented society it is increasingly rare for people to experience meaningful community. Yet this is an essential component of our humanity. The Bible reading group provides a ‘meeting place’ for community to emerge. Friendships deepen and people feel an increasing freedom to share personal and specific needs. A safe place begins to emerge.

Ownership belongs to the Group

The Bible reading group is based on affinity (common life circumstance). It does not belong to anyone other than those in the group – not just the leader, not just the Christians in the group and not some church.

Long Range Purpose

The mixed Bible reading group can fulfill the following purposes.

- ◆ A safe place for continued growth as a follower of Jesus Christ – the creation of a spiritual home. It is a place where people can bring their life context and through interaction with others and the Scriptures move forward in their spiritual journey.
- ◆ A simple form that enables people to introduce their friends to the Scriptures. It has the potential to be ‘generational’.

FORMING A MIXED BIBLE READING GROUP

The Bible reading group was an extension of our existing friendships. It was not the defining feature of our relationships, but an overflow. We began with a few Christian friends and 1 or 2 where it was not clear. The Christians were not bound by ‘evangelical culture’ and all of them were involved in the lives of non-Christians. Naturally we shared with our non-Christian friends the ‘good time’ we were having. We began to drop the thought that they could join us. After doing this on several occasions, we asked. They accepted. Looking back, the fact that the group was already under way meant our non-Christian friends did not think they were the focus of the group. This is one way to begin a group. Others have tried different approaches.

“There are 3 entrance doors to the setting up of a Bible Reading Group. It starts with rapport. There has to be an attractive and compelling reason to start meeting regularly. Either the life context factor dominates – the sharing of particular felt needs in the realm of everyday life. Or the community factor is foremost – a group of friends who want to meet together. Or the Scriptures is the motivational factor – a group that gets together to read/study the Bible” (Rinus Baljeu).

Whatever the entrance door, the forming of a Bible reading group will cause us to face fears of being misunderstood, being rejected or losing our friendships.

DYNAMIC ELEMENTS OF BIBLE READING GROUP

Life Context

The reality of life circumstances provides the context for reading and discussing the Bible. We seek to integrate what we are learning with where we are living. Our lives and circumstances also provide an entry point into the Bible. Without this we have found our discussions have lacked intensity and become boring. It takes time for trust to develop and authenticity and vulnerability to grow. In our experience, the breakthroughs in this area came from those who did not think of themselves as Christians.

Scriptures

The Scriptures are essential if our life circumstances are to be interpreted and if they are to lead us to deeper knowledge of God. Our attitudes, beliefs, actions and reactions are exposed as we read together. There is no need to seek to prove the 'authority' of the Scriptures. We have observed that the Bible begins to have increasing authority in the group. It speaks for itself.

Community

By reading together our personal blind spots, biases and understandings are exposed and modified. Over time, the community can become a 'safe place'. People change and error is corrected. We seek to understand what God is saying to us as a group as well as individuals.

Fun and Atmosphere

Where we meet and the 'ambiance' can significantly contribute to the evening. We try to stay with contextual 'meeting places'. Occasionally we will do something special. Initially some people come for this reason alone!

Regularity

We try to meet once every two weeks. Any more than this is non-sustainable. Any less lacks continuity.

Size

About six couples seem to be the maximum number. It allows for participation, but also means that when some people are absent the group can continue to meet.

Affinity

A common shared life context allows for greater group ownership of the discussion. It also facilitates social interaction.

Freedom

People are free to share their doubts, encouragements, struggles, joys and insights. The response of others in the group will facilitate or hinder this. People are able to respond freely to the Scriptures. They are not confined to certain insights. The willingness of people to freely share is vital of the group is to fulfill its function.

Neutrality

The Bible reading group is not a door to something more formal.

Mutuality

Each Group member is a contributor and a learner. The group is stronger as people offer themselves to each other.

Journeying Mentality

The group promotes the notion of life as a journey. It values the willingness to keep growing and learning.

Realistic Ambitions

"Another danger is that of too high ambition. When the group starts to put too high a claim on one another and expect them to meet all one's individual needs, then the end is in sight. The idea of the Bible reading Group is that it enables you to live your life as it is in the midst of your relationships. Organizational claims or expectations can also destroy the whole enterprise" (Rinus Baljeu).

THE ROLE OF THE GROUP LEADER

Leadership is absolutely essential for the success of the Group. It is not leadership in the traditional sense. It appears 'low key' and casual, but it is actually very intentional. Informality does not mean lack of leadership, but requires more of the leader. However, it is a different style of leadership that is required.

A Fellow Learner and Traveler

The leader is among the group, NOT above the group or apart from it. He/she must genuinely believe that this will be a personal journey of discovery he/she has not taken before. He/she is not the group teacher or resident expert.

Enable Full Participation

It is essential that all the members of the group are able to contribute. It is too easy for a few articulate participants to dominate the conversation. Some Christians feel compelled to have an answer or move to 'fix' a life situation shared in the group. When this happens the dynamics essential to the well being of the Bible Reading Group are seriously threatened. There are a variety of methods a leader can employ to enable full participation. The leader promotes a free and open atmosphere where people can be real and interact with the text from where they are at that moment. He/she welcomes open discussion and can resist having to bring closure. The leader has a deep trust that Truth will 'emerge when there is full freedom to participate. Truth will emerge when the Scriptures are into play" (Rinus Baljeu).

1. Encouraging

"Who else wants to say something?" "Could we hear from someone who hasn't talked for a while?"

2. Balancing

This is useful when most members appear reticent to disagree with someone in the group. "Does everyone see it that way, or are there other points of view?" or "what are some other ways of looking at this?" These sort of statements lend support to people who do not agree with the predominate point of view.

3. Making Space

This involves questions or supportive statements focused on specific individuals. "Frank, you look like you want to say something – do you?" or "We only have time for one or two more comments, perhaps we could hear from someone who hasn't spoken for a while."

4. Using the clock

"We have five minutes left. I want to make sure we've heard from everyone who wants to speak, particularly those who haven't had a chance yet." or "we only have time for one or two more comments. Perhaps we could hear from someone who hasn't spoken for a while."

Painting a Picture

The leader serves by providing the picture that enables the group to step into the text. He/she is stimulating the imagination of the group by fleshing out the life context of the text through story telling. This is a very important aspect of preparing the 'heart'. The more we are able to help people step into the original context the greater the intensity of application to life context. To do this the leaders needs to do some background reading on the original context.

Building a Bridge

The leader asks very open-ended questions that promote the interaction of heart, mind, life context and text. In my experience it is usually only necessary to ask a question at the beginning. The role then becomes one of facilitating full participation and helping the group to explore more deeply the issues that are being raised.

Some Helpful Launching Questions

- ◆ **As we read the passage, did any part of it stir you?**
- ◆ **What did you feel as we read the passage?**
- ◆ **What situations, circumstances and memories from your own life came to your mind as you listened?**
- ◆ **What would you love to be true of you from the passage?**
- ◆ **What surprised, angered or puzzled you from the passage?**
- ◆ **What do you think the original recipients heard when they encountered this passage?**
- ◆ **What does it say to your situation?**

CONCLUSION

If the Bible Reading Group is to fulfill its purposes, it is essential that there is growing harmony between the dynamics of 'life-context', the Scriptures and 'community'. If 'life-context' dominates, then the Scriptures take a back seat or vanish altogether. This, of course, affects the group's growth towards God. If relationships are the dominant reason for meeting, it can become difficult over time to establish a compelling reason to meet regularly with the Bible. If the Scriptures exist apart from the other two dynamics, then they easily are separated from life and become stale. This lack of harmony will eventually erode the relevance and power of meeting as a group to read the Bible.