

# Bible Study

## Some Principles and Suggestions

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# The Bible

What is the Bible?

Answer: a book

Book of grace and book of glory,

Gift of God to age and youth,

Wondrous is thy sacred story,

Bright, bright with truth!      Thomas MacKellar

## Answer: a library

There are 66 books in the Bible.

- they were written over a long period of time; from 1,000 B.C. to 100 A.D..
- some are great tomes but others, like the Letter to Philemon, are only a few paragraphs.
- Some books such as Genesis and Exodus have been compiled by editors who brought together different accounts of the same events

# The Bible is more than a book or a Library

Even before books were produced in the fifteenth century Christians studied the Bible

- by listening to it being read
- by telling its stories to one another
- through preaching and church services
- through plays and acting
- through pictures and art

# It is more than a book or a library in another way also ...



In East Africa a story is told of a woman who always carried her Bible around with her.

Someone asked her why she did not read another book?

Raising her Bible above her head she said; 'This is the only book that reads me.'

# A book, a library, great literature and more...

- It should not be forgotten that the Bible was written by many people over many centuries
- The Bible has also been a means of inspiration, encouragement, guidance and enlightenment, directing people to God and establishing them in their faith.

# What is your experience?

- How did you come to know the Bible?
- How has the Bible influenced you?
- What is the best way to study the Bible?

# Order

Before starting a Bible study group it should be asked;

- WHO is it for?
- WHEN will it be held?
- WHERE will it be held?

It is essential that this is decided before discussing what the form the study might take or what will be examined .



# Who?

- Traditionally everybody would be invited to a Bible study.
- Although doing so had its advantages this was not the most efficient way of targeting individuals and encouraging people to attend.
- Some churches have found that it is better to target specific groups such as elderly members, young mothers, young people
- **WHAT WOULD BE THE BENEFITS OF DOING THIS?**

# When?

- If we know who is likely to attend we will have a better idea when to hold the Bible study.
- Not everybody can come at the same time  
Eg in some churches young mothers will meet to study the Bible at 8.30pm after the children have gone to bed.

# Where?

- The chapel is not always the best location.
- New adherents might be nervous of attending a meeting in a chapel and might prefer a more 'neutral' environment .
- Regular churchgoers might also prefer a more comfortable meeting place.
- There are Christian study groups being held in homes, halls, workplaces, even pubs!

# Content

Although the group will inevitably look at different aspects of scripture, it will have to be decided which part of the Bible will be studied, is it going to be a thematic study or based on particular portions of scripture?

It can be advantageous to explore how the books of the Bible hang together by using, for example, the Emmaus course.

# The text

Traditionally the text was encountered by inviting those present to read a verse in turn.

However, more interesting ways of engaging with the Bible may be used and it is important to remember that the group must be given an opportunity to discuss the text and explore their reactions to it.

# Listening

For most of its history the Bible was transferred by word of mouth and received through listening.

- Jesus himself was an oral teacher who used various means of communicating his message – parables, proverbs, physical signs and gestures.
- Even after Paul had started to write his letters and the evangelists had begun to record the events of Jesus' ministry the Early Church often preferred oral testimony as Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis indicated.

- Oral testimony was important because of its personal nature and the way it could be applied
- Even when the scriptures were read, this would be done aloud in order that the text be memorized and interiorized.
- This is what we see in the Book of Acts when Philip encounters the Eunuch from Ethiopia ( Acts 8:28,30)

An opportunity to listen to scripture should be afforded in every Bible Study.

# Reading the Word aloud

- Arrange for two or three to read the appropriate portion before hand and start the study with these various readings.
- With such stories as that of Nathan's encounter with David (2 Samuel 12:1-7) the change in the prophet's voice as events unfold could be explored.
- The Easter story (eg Mark 11:1-11) could provide an opportunity for members of the group to take up the different voices while somebody else reads the narrative.



# Telling the tale

- The text can also be engaged by retelling the tale
- The group could be split into pairs, with one member of each pair reading the story to the other, before reversing the roles.
- Then the pair would decide how to split the story into subsections, before recounting it to each other while checking each other's version against the text.
- After mastering the story in this way it could be told to the group – this could lead to a discussion.

# Changing the story

- Some stories 'work' because of their unexpected ending. Eg the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10).
- In order to draw attention to this fact someone could be asked to recount the story giving it an expected ending – Jesus telling Zacchaeus that he should give his money to the poor and the tax collector leaving having been greatly disappointed ( c.f. The Wealthy Young Man - Luke 18:22-)
- The new version could be discussed before reading Luke's account and drawing attention to what he says about Jesus' ministry.

# Reading

- Although Jesus' teaching was originally communicated by word of mouth, by the end of the 4C the Church had decided which books were to be included in the NT.
- Some of these books, such as St Paul's letters, were written documents from the very outset and were intended to be read in the churches.

# Which version?

There are available numerous versions of the Bible and it should be decided before hand which version is going to be used..

- The Revised Standard Version
- The New International Bible
- The New English Bible
- The new Century Bible
- The Message

# Too familiar

- The greatest advantage of reading the Bible is that this method of study ensures that we get all the details correctly .
- It is easy to mistake what the Bible says through careless reading of the text.
- In order to interiorize the text and ensure its careful reading the group could be asked to copy out in their own handwriting the key verse or a short portion which could be checked against the printed page.

# Careful reading

- Careful reading ensures that we see details that could be otherwise ignored.
- Eg The Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-11)
  - What is their context – what comes before and after?
  - When and where did Jesus deliver the Beatitudes according to Matthew?
  - What are the most prominent words and phrases in the Beatitudes?
  - Are the details in Matthew's gospel different to what we find in Luke (6:20-26)? What does this suggest about their various emphasis?

# Compare

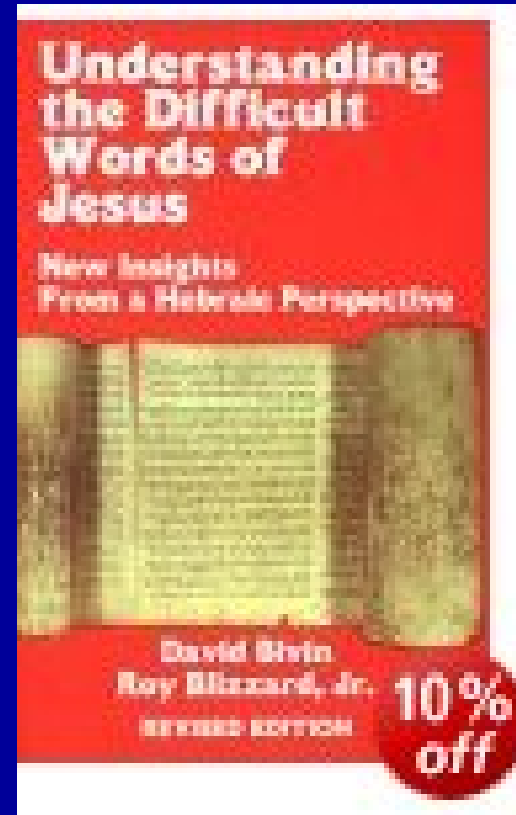
- Various gospel accounts can be compared. Eg 'The Parable of the lost sheep'
  - Ask the group to recite the parable from memory, indicating its original context and to whom it was told.
  - Distribute a work sheet setting out Math 18:12-14 and Luc15: 3-7 in parallel, and inquire how the message of the parable might have changed as it was received by tax collectors and sinners, (Luke 15:1), the Pharisees and Scribes (Luke 15:2) and the disciples (Math 18:1, 15- )

- The main events of Jesus' life could also be compared. Eg Matthew and John's accounts of what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane, or the gospel accounts of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.
- In this way it could be emphasised that it is not history as we think of history that is to be found in the New Testament, but the testimony of people who wanted to introduce the Faith to others in various situations.
- This approach can lead to a consideration of the particular emphasis of each gospel.



# Words of Scripture

Individual words  
and phrases could  
be looked at with  
the help of such a  
book as this



# The Old and the New

- When studying the Old Testament it is important to ask to what extent are its views reiterated and attested in the New Testament, and when studying the New Testament it is important to remember its Old Testament background.
- Eg compare Matthew's account of Jesus' death (27:45-54) with Psalm 22
  - Which parts of the psalm are quoted by Matthew?
  - What light does the psalm shed on Jesus' death?

# Different kinds of literature

- There are different literary genres in the Bible, and we should be aware of what type of literature we are reading – poetry, narrative, parable, creed etc
- Eg God the Creator
  - Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a a repetitive, solemn, almost liturgical piece, probably written by a priest.
  - Genesis 2:4b-25 an ancient narrative account
  - Psalm 8 a poem of praise and teaching

# The Epistles

- Reading Paul's letters is like listening to a telephone conversation in which one hears only one party. Often one has to guess what the problems were that Paul addressed and what news he received to which he reacted.

- E.g. Imagine what kind of letter Paul Received from the church at Galatia
  - What had the visiting preachers been preaching there?
  - What happened to the church as a result of this?
- Ask the group to try and re-write the letter Paul received, with different members concentrating on 1-2, 3:-4:7, 4:8-5:1, 5:2-6:8 before coming together to list the reports and questions to be included and drafting the letter.
- After reading this letter and Paul's response the group might feel like sending word to Paul!

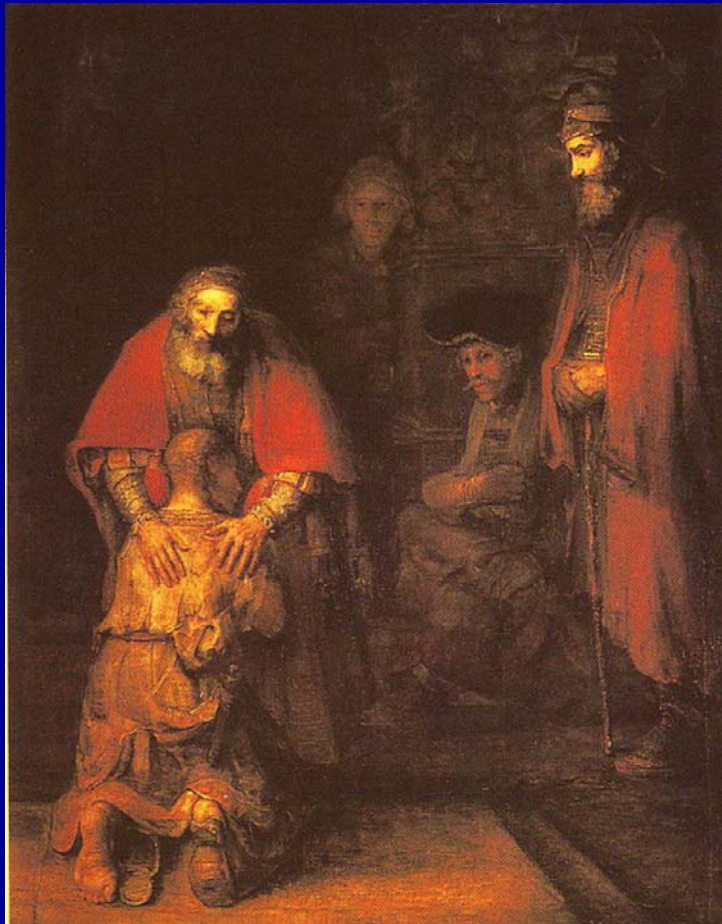
# Word and action

- Jesus and the prophets used signs and actions, as well as words, to communicate their message.
- After spending some time considering the words of Jesus and the prophets' teaching the group could be invited to consider the use of signs. Eg I Kings 11:29-39
- Other signs could also be considered - Isaiah 7,8,20; Jeremiah 13,16,19,27,28,32,43,51; Ezekiel 4,5,12,21,24,37 and new ones designed.

# Art

- Scripture has been introduced through painting and art from the very beginning.
- A bible study session can be greatly enhanced by inviting the group to consider a relevant painting.
- E.g. Rembrandt's portrayal of the Prodigal Son

# The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)



- This was one of the artist's last paintings.
- He suffered numerous afflictions during his long life and the painting is an expression of his faith



# The paintings characteristics

(cf. Magdalen Lawler, Celebration of an encounter (Books and Media Productions, 1996)

- The use of light suggests the dawn
- The centrepiece is the father and son who radiate light as a candle
- The father welcomes the son, bending over him lovingly
- The son appears completely calm resting on his father brest
- The son's head has been shaved, his garments are in tatters and fall in dark folds about his feet

- The eldest son stands to the right of the picture and it appears that the glow from the two central figures lights up his face.
- Standing on the fringe the eldest son appears suspicious and uncertain but the light of the father reaches him in spite of his apprehensions.
- Two more characters can be seen in the background – we do not know who they are or why they are there, but the light falls on them also.

# Inquire

- What is your first impression of this painting?
- Which of the characters do you identify with?
- What does the portrayal of the father say about his character?
- What is the artist trying to express through his use of light and darkness?

# Summary

- The text – the Bible, ‘the world’s greatest book ’
- Bible study! For whom? When? Where?
- How? By listening, reading and reflection.
- Testimonies and witnesses – listen to the different voices found in scripture
- Use discussion, drama, art etc

# Thank you for attending

- Future arrangements
- Registration forms and feedback