

Bible Studies, the good, the bad and the ugly

Bible studies can be organized around a common interest of the group, for example an evangelistic Bible study designed to study the gospel (Greek: *euangelion*) and get people saved, a discipleship-oriented study is aimed at growing together as Christians. An apologetics study, which concentrates on reasons to believe that Christianity is true (e.g. the Bible is reliable, God is real, etc.), can be either evangelistic or discipleship oriented. Another kind of Bible study is something of an explorative Bible study, in which we explore the Bible to find out what it really says and teaches us. This is a great type for personal or group study when the motivation is to discover what the truth is and submit to it. This can also be used evangelistically for people who are not Christians but are already interested in and respect the Bible, or who even already believe the Bible is God's Word.

This last type of evangelistic Bible study is becoming less and less useful in our postmodern, Western culture because fewer people in our culture recognize the authority and value of the Word of God than did in twentieth century America. So, it is important to know your audience and how willing they are to receive a Bible study, or is some other approach more appropriate, such as an apologetic approach in which you discuss reasons that the Bible is true, important, authoritative, of divine origin, etc. Below are several examples of popular done-for-you Bible studies which provide an overview of the biblical message designed to lead a person to receiving salvation in Christ.

Search for Truth (pre-trib)
Search for Truth 2 (better—not pre-trib)
Exploring God's Word
From Grace to Glory
The Way, the Truth and the Life (pre-trib)
The Master Series—Word Bible School
Something from End Times???

The best way to do evangelistic Bible study is to focus it as a study of Jesus. The Old Testament predicts His coming, and the New Testament tells us about His coming, who He is, what He did, and what that means for us. Another good way to do evangelistic Bible study is a Bible study of the End Times (e.g. the Book of Revelation), again focused on Jesus and His return and rule, the coming judgement and salvation in Him, His identity and atoning work on the cross, and the future and reward of His people living forever with Him.

A word of warning. It is important to not pursue a “what the Bible says to me approach” to people who are unlearned in the discipline of biblical study. The reason is that what someone thinks the Bible means or says is means absolutely nothing if it is not in line with what the Bible actually says and means. Many well-intentioned Bible studiers impose their own meanings onto biblical texts that are in fact foreign to the text and would never have been understood by the original readers nor intended by the author.

Some important things to keep in minds are:

1. Every book of the Bible was written for a specific purpose, on a specific occasion, to a specific audience.
2. No passage of the Bible can ever mean what it never could have meant to its original audience. More simply, the Bible can never mean what it never meant to its original audience (readers/hearers).
3. It's important to first ask, "What does the Bible (or this verse or passage) mean?" before asking, "What does it mean to me?" The first is called interpretation, the second is contextualization. Interpretation should always precede contextualization.
4. The first step of biblical interpretation (often called hermeneutics) is called exegesis, which means to "draw out" the meaning of a passage, as opposed to imposing your own meaning onto the text, trying to make it say what it is not saying (a fallacy called eisegesis, meaning "putting into" a passage some specific meaning). The meaning of a Bible verse or passage should always be "drawn out" of the passage and never "placed into" the passage from the reader. That's not studying, and no one will ever learn anything that way from any kind of writing.

2 Peter 1:20-21 says (words in parenthesis are mine),

"Knowing this first, that no prophesy of Scripture (the Bible) is of any private interpretation. For prophesy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (God)."

When we read and study the Bible, whether alone or in a group, we are seeking to learn from "holy men of God" who were "moved by the Holy Spirit," and from God Himself, who inspired the words and teachings of Scripture and who has preserved them for us throughout the centuries and millennia of human and church history.