

Friendly Bible Study

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by Joanne and Larry
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A Note on Translations

A translation cannot reproduce in English all the meaning of the original text. On finer points and on some surprisingly major points, significant differences exist between one translation and another. The English words chosen to translate the Hebrew or Greek are important reflections of the translator's perspective. By using several different translations of the Bible, it will quickly become apparent that translators are human.

Bible study in which different translations are read sensitizes the members to how the choice of English words affects the meaning of the text. The translator's words point to the meaning of the original text, which in turn is an effort to point to truth as the author understood it.

This is a liberating insight to many, and it may transform a reader's antagonism toward the text and enable the reader to approach the text in order to understand the underlying truth.

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Friendly Bible Study

FRIENDLY BIBLE STUDY

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History

Early Friends used the Bible as a source of guidance for experiencing the presence of God in their worship and in their lives. George Fox and early Friends lived with the Bible. Their writings are filled with Bible quotations, reflecting their commitment to careful reading and study of the Bible as a source of authority in their lives.

Present Condition

Among Friends today there is a wide range of views of the Bible, from those who see it as an interesting historical document to those who see it as God's Word. An increasing number of Friends feel the need for study of the Bible. They seek an effective study method which reflects Quaker values and tradition and draws them to the core of the Bible message.

Many people remember Bible studies as occasions which encouraged sermonizing and authoritarian statements and discouraged questions. For these people, time spent in Bible study is remembered as fruitless for their spiritual lives and frustrating to the integrity of their own search for truth. Those who are struggling with life and religion, working through childhood religious understandings which have become inadequate to adult life, need the support and direction that a group study can host and a candid study method can provide.

For many, the struggle to find or retain the core of faith, separate from childhood distortions and disappointments, is intense. It is for those people who have been away from Bible Study and who sense a need to turn in its direction that the following method for a Friendly Bible study is shared.

Tests for Sound Bible Study Methods

We should apply Quaker insights, understanding and standards to any Bible study method. Any Bible study method should support four important aspects of our tradition:

First, a Bible study method should recognize personal experience as a central part of our spiritual lives.

Second, a Bible study method should recognize the equality of all

Friendly Bible Study

believers in the study process. It should remove the centrality of an authority figure as leader, thereby affirming that the Spirit works through everyone out of the open silence of even the few seekers gathered together.

Third, a Bible study method should recognize the availability of continuing revelation of God in our spiritual lives.

Fourth, a Bible study method should affirm the connection of the Biblical witness to our lives in our present world.

These elements should be central tests to apply to any Friendly Bible study.

Friendly Bible Study Method

The process of Bible study suggested here – the method – meets each of these tests and is simple to use. This method provides a structure for effective communication. The method suggested here has been arrived at through years of experiment. It is a tool that enables people to initiate and take part in productive exploration of the Bible and their lives.

It takes effort and practice to see the benefit of any Bible study method. But it is our experience that people invariably find that the sharing which grows out of this study method results in new understanding and deeper insight than may come from the use of many other methods. We suggest the use of this format before trying variations.

Eight Steps to a Bible Study Group

Starting a Bible study group can be a simple matter of following eight easy, specific steps:

1. Gather a group that can commit one hour a week for six weeks.
2. Choose a book of the Bible.
3. Study only a few verses each week.
4. Review the questions.
5. Read the passage aloud.
6. Start in silence.
7. Share the answers.
8. End in silence.

Friendly Bible Study

STEP 1: Gather together at least three, but not more than six, interested people with any religious or spiritual background. No prior study of the Bible is needed by anyone. Members need not have ever picked up the Bible before to participate fully in this Bible study.

A person with extensive biblical background can be helpful to the Bible study process, but should not be seen as an authority figure. A group reflecting a diversity of viewpoints provides a stimulating variety of both spiritual experience and understanding.

Ask each person to make a commitment of one hour per week (regularly every week) for six weeks to study the Bible. The study should not begin until every member can make a commitment to attend all of the six study sessions.

Each Bible study should last one hour. Prompt starting assures completion in one hour. Ask each person to bring at least one translation of the Bible to the study session. A variety of translations is helpful to group understanding.

Ask that no one bring any book except the Bible and a notebook. Other references may be consulted after the study, but these books distract members from the Bible itself during the group study. No reading is required prior to the group study. Members may be stimulated to read further to search out solutions to particular problems which the study raises. They may or may not want to report back briefly to the group. However, no study or time outside the group is needed or expected.

By using several different translations of the Bible, it will quickly become apparent that translators are human. A translation cannot reproduce all the meaning of the original text in English. On finer points and on some surprisingly major points, there can be significant differences between one translation and another of the same text. The English words chosen to translate the Hebrew or Greek words are important.

Bible study in which members read from different translations makes the members more sensitive to the choice of English words and the change in meaning when alternate words are used. The English words of a translator point to the meaning of the original text which in turn is an effort to point to truth as an author understood it.

This alone is a liberating insight to many, and it shifts the study effort from an antagonism between the reader and the text to a cooperative partnership between the text and the reader to

Friendly Bible Study

understand the truth underlying the text.

Have paper and a pencil available for each person. Many will find a notebook useful to maintain their papers for future reference. All writings are private except as their contents are shared orally with the group.

STEP 2: Decide as a group which book of the Bible the group would like to use to begin the study. One of the first three gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, or a letter of Paul, like I or II Corinthians or Philippians, is a good choice. In the Old Testament, the Psalms or one of the prophets, like Jonah, Amos, or Hosea, is a good starting point.

Do not start with a difficult book such as I, II or III John, Revelation, Daniel or Leviticus. It is our experience, however, that after some practice this method can be used successfully with any book of the Bible.

STEP 3: Choose just a few verses at the beginning of the book, to be followed each week by the next few verses. It is very important not to skip around among favorite passages. As the Bible study continues through the weeks, discussion will develop as themes emerge which link each session to the discussion in previous sessions.

One paragraph, or one stanza of a Psalm, will usually be three to six verses. It is dangerous to spiritual understanding to try to cover too much material. The goal of Bible study should be deeper understanding of our spiritual life tradition.

This method reflects the view that there is greater insight available through focusing full attention on small amounts of study material than on large amounts of material. Remember that each verse or section is an extract from a larger work. Each section does not necessarily give the true flavor of the whole content or reflect the major underlying themes. References can always be made to the complete book as each section is studied.

Being sensitive to group indications that a particular text is not consistent with their personal experience may indicate passages which need to be set in a larger context. It is essential to take a small number of verses for each Bible study session.

At first glance, there doesn't seem to be very much to discuss in just a few verses. We are culturally conditioned to cover as much material as possible to complete an assigned task. Resist this

Friendly Bible Study

temptation. Bible study group members often feel frustrated when each member talks about different parts of a long passage. A common focus on a small section provides a focus for deeper insights.

STEP 4: At the beginning of the first few sessions each person needs to write down the five questions (listed below) which are to be answered in the silent period each time you meet (see Step 6). In the first session, and to a lesser degree in the following sessions, each question should be explained as in the text below.

When participants understand the questions, they will need to write down only the abbreviations (MAIN POINT or “Mn Pt,” in question 1) as a reminder of the question. After two or three weeks, group members will be so familiar with the questions that they will not need to be reminded of the questions. Each person can answer at whatever level of background they bring. Assure everyone that there are no single answers which capture the totality of any passage.

Bible study is like the group of blind people describing an elephant, each from a separate viewpoint of experience. This Bible study method contributes the viewpoints of each person to our understanding of a common reality. Stress the value of hearing each person’s views and seeing the passage through each person’s eyes. Each view is important to the study.

The five questions addressed in each Bible study are:

1. What is the author’s main point in this passage? (MAIN POINT)

This question helps each member focus on what the author says. It often helps to state the question again in another form: “What is the author saying about God?” Each person must address the text directly in a relationship formed between reader and author.

This is not the time to share the ideas of a commentator, minister, priest, or other authority figure. The search here is for the main point the author was making in this passage and the author’s understanding of God working in our world. It is easy to respond with what we would like for the author to have said.

It is easy to express our own ideas on the subject. However, the target of the question is what the author actually said. To help those who may be unsure and timid about Bible study, remind the group again that a variety of responses can help the group see the whole of

Friendly Bible Study

the passage more clearly. After one or two sessions, this will be easily understood and liberating to most participants.

2. What new light do I find in this particular reading of this passage of the text? (NEW LIGHT)

This question provides opportunity for the working of the Spirit in our silence. This question reminds us of the continuing revelation in our lives from both unfamiliar and familiar passages. The focus here is on each member's new insight, observation, or understanding during this particular reading of this passage on this particular occasion.

Each reading can bring some new or renewed insight. That insight may be small or great. This answer may grow with more and more points as the group works through the passage with other questions.

The new light may be something that is seen now, but had never been seen before. It may be a new understanding of a word or phrase. It may be a new way of seeing a particular problem that this passage triggers in a member's mind. It may be the last in the sequence of questions answered in the silence. It may grow with more and more points as the group works through the passage with other questions.

3. Is this passage true to my experience? (TRUTH)

The focus here is on comparing the message of the Bible passage with each person's experience in life. Our spiritual journeys are "experimental" as we search toward fuller understanding. Our personal experience and our community experience are sources of authority which we bring to the study to understand and supplement the Biblical text.

For those who come from other religious traditions, this question may come as a shock. Few of us have lived in other traditions in which we have been allowed to question the "truth" of the Bible. Yet we are accustomed to answering this question, if not with the Bible, with other written materials. This question is often a freedom experience and consistently will open up new insights for everyone in the group.

Recognition that our present understanding of the passage is not consistent with our experience may require reassessment of the meaning of our experience, deeper study of the meaning of the Bible

Friendly Bible Study

passage, or recognition that our individual spiritual journeys, as with those of the Biblical authors, are searches in the dark in which full clarity is not given at every moment.

4. What are the implications of this passage for my life? (IMPLICATIONS)

The answer to this question may provide implications for living at any of several levels of spiritual life. The center of the question is, "What difference, if any, does the passage make for my life?" There is a reaching from the text back to our lives in this question. It brings the role of ethics and daily living practices to our attention. This holding together of faith and action is central to our tradition.

5. What problems do I have with this passage? (PROBLEMS)

Here we identify problems of language in the text, of interpretation, of meaning, or of applying the text to our lives. These problems may generate interest in seeking answers from other sources during the days before the next Bible study.

Problems can be identified without being solved. This question reminds us that study of a passage is a continuing process. Like life, understanding is never complete at any one time. It is a continuing dialogue between the text and life.

STEP 5: At the beginning of the Bible study, after being sure each person has understood each question and before starting the study, ask one person to read aloud the passage to be studied. Let all ears hear the sound of the passage. Have all members follow the text in their translations. If translations differ substantially, ask that a contrasting translation of the passage be read aloud. This will often stimulate thinking and insight if the passage seems particularly difficult or without significant meaning.

STEP 6: Move into group silence. After minutes of quiet, individuals begin at their own pace to reread the passage silently and to write answers to each question. This is the time for the group to work in the silence. Each person centers in silence, then moves to rereading and writing when ready.

The duration of the silence is similar to that in worship sharing groups. Take time to settle into the stillpoint and linger there until

Friendly Bible Study

each member starts the silent reading of the passage and answering the questions.

STEP 7: After 15 or 20 minutes of silence and the completion of written answers, or as soon as everyone seems to be ready or nearly ready with written notes addressing the questions, explain the sharing procedure. In turn, around the circle, individuals read aloud their response to one question at a time. After each person's response to the first question has been shared, pause for a moment of silence. Then move around the circle again sharing the responses to the second question and so on until everyone has responded to each question.

This is the sharing of our insights. The accumulating benefit of these insights around the circle is consistently remarkable, sometimes extraordinary. There should be no extensive discussion during this time of sharing. There should only be short comments or questions for clarification of the individual responses for the remainder of the group. Clarity is important.

At all times, in all groups, the movement around the circle should be preserved. Everyone must have opportunity and time to speak to every question in turn so that the combining wisdom and insights are sensed by the group. Smaller groups can be less firm than larger groups in structuring the sharing of responses to each question without digressing.

Remind everyone that all answers are accepted and helpful. Each person may "pass" at any time on any question, with only the caution that something that seems like the obvious or the trivial to one person can be a wonderful new insight to another.

The only leadership needed by the group is one person who determines the time to begin oral sharing. This person should also maintain the movement around the circle. Keep moving around the circle so that everyone has a chance to answer every question in sequence. Movement around the circle must be fast enough to keep to the one-hour time limit. It is important that everyone feel confident that the study will not take a whole morning, afternoon or evening – one hour only.

Encourage each person to write something on the paper in response to each question. If, after serious consideration, there seems to be nothing to write for any one of the questions, a "pass" is always acceptable. Sometimes we are so unclear that even a tentative response seems impossible. No one needs to feel

Friendly Bible Study

pressured to have an answer if there is none for that person at that time.

With experience using this Bible study method, the members will see that insights will grow during the sharing. People who join the Bible study with no feeling of insight will find the passage opening to their understanding through the insights shared by others. As the discussion proceeds, new insights will occur which far exceed the sum of the initial individual insights. An apparently superficial comment can be the key to great openings for others in the group.

STEP 8: End the study with a short period of silence. It may be the occasion for breaking silence with a message or simply providing the conclusion in the stillpoint with which the Bible study began.

At the end of six hours over a period of six weeks, each person must be free to discontinue or continue the Bible study. Each person should make a conscious decision. It is best not to begin this kind of study as a "Lenten Study" or "Advent Study." Choose a time when there is not an obvious seasonal end in order to permit natural continuation if the group wants a continuing Bible study.

It has been our experience that after six studies, one hour per week, with every member participating every week, most people find the study so helpful they want to continue. Where the group decides to continue Bible study, they should always meet regularly even if only three members can attend a particular session.

Skipping sessions, even for very good reasons, breaks the pattern. Like other spiritual disciplines, no matter how good the results, it may be hard to get going again if there are too many interruptions. The expectation must be that every week there will be a one-hour Bible study and the group always meets, even if, after the initial six weeks, some must occasionally miss an hour.

Conclusion

People are seeking to renew their roots in the tradition of the Bible. A Bible study method can be consistent with the testimonies of the Quaker spiritual tradition. This is an extraordinary Bible Study method in its results. Through Bible study, our lives are deepened and renewed.

For further information about this Bible study method, please contact: Joanne and Larry Spears 15160 Sundown Drive, Bismarck, North Dakota 58503-9206, telephone: (701) 258-1899.