

MIXED BIBLE READING GROUPS

“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

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. 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.

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 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. 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 only one other individual can arouse a fear of being manipulated. Presenting the Bible in dogmatic terms does not seem acceptable or a 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.” 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. 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, sea, and sky beyond.” The author of Proverbs tells us that whatever else we do, we need

to be sure we watch over the condition of our heart. “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.”

Learning is mutual.

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.”

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.

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 the leader, not just the Christians in the group.

There are long-range purposes.

Mixed Bible reading groups fulfill these two purposes:

- A safe place for continued growth as a follower of Jesus Christ and 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 potential to be ‘generational.’

Here are four ways that emphasize changes in our beliefs.

- Emphatic Reading
 - After you read any passage, close your eyes and put yourself in the scene. How might those in this passage feel and think? What do you see, hear, smell, taste, touch? Visualize the people in the scene. Where do you find yourself among them? What are you feeling? Doing? Saying? Record your thoughts in a journal.
- Four questions
 - What does this passage have to say about my intimacy with God?
 - *Who is God and who am I in relation to Him?*
 - *In what ways am I being drawn to Him? Is there anything I don't like?*
 - What does this passage say about the deep issues of my heart?
 - *What about my brokenness and pain, jealousies, joys, etc.?*

- *Are there dreams that are challenged? encouraged? What fears are being addresses? Is there a difficult decision this helps me with?*
 - What does this passage have to say about my relationship with others?
 - *How can and should I relate to family, friends, believers, non-believers, nature, animals, etc.?*
 - *As I reflect on my relationships, is there unfinished business: pain, hurt, anger, fear, numbness, resistance to even looking at those relationships, peace gratefulness, joy?*
 - *What relationships am I most drawn to? Which ones am I resisting or ignoring?*
 - What does this passage tell us about how God views reality?
 - *What is God's view of the world and beyond?*
 - *What do you sense surfacing inside you as you reflect on this? Are you motivated? Is there some resistance inside you?*
- Images & Identity
 - As you read, ask yourself these two questions:
 - *What image of God is being painted?*
 - *What does this picture show about my own identity?*
- Visual Reflection of Biblical Stories
 - Find and reflect on a visual representation of a Biblical story (as Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son). Where or who would you be in each representation?