

of pseudocommunity, chaos and emptiness. Members, including the group leader, will encounter differences, but by approaching the tension that arises intentionally your group can navigate the conflict and build unity. In this process God can display his glory and your group will not only edify its members but be a witness to those on the outside. True community takes time, though, so allow the Holy Spirit to guide you each step of the way, and don't lose heart!

5

NOT *JUST* BIBLE STUDY

THE POWER OF GOD'S WORD IN SMALL GROUPS

Myron Crockett

"WHAT DO YOU THINK of Christians dating non-Christians?"

This was the question Rebecca put before our small group. While discussing how we would live out all the cool things we'd discovered in Genesis 2, the conversation turned to sex and dating. And who could blame these mostly-single grad students? You've just looked at a passage describing the first-ever God-ordained hook-up; a man and a woman are "naked and not ashamed." If you can't have an honest discussion about sex and dating in response to this passage, then you can't do it at all!

Rebecca's question conjured up quizzical looks and thoughtful silence among the group members. "Christians can't date non-Christians," I replied flatly. I was a third-year InterVarsity staff-worker, and I was about as subtle as eight-alarm chili. "Christians relate to non-Christians on Jesus' terms. This involves friendship, love, mutual truth-telling and a

ton of other things. But all these things are done *on Jesus' terms*. If a Christian and a non-Christian are in a romantic relationship, the Christian's faith-walk with Jesus will always cater to this relationship. That can't happen if Jesus is Lord."

One of the chapter leaders later revealed to me that Rebecca had been dating a non-Christian for some time. Immediately I began thinking of all the gentler ways I could have handled her question, all the questions I could have asked her to find out more about where she was coming from. I had even more time to ponder this when Rebecca didn't show up to small group for the next few weeks. She had been a very devoted member of our group. One thought did laps in my head like a gerbil on a wheel: *Good job, doofus!*

Doofus small group leader or not, Rebecca returned to our group after a few weeks. She participated fully, and it was like nothing had happened—that is, until after the study. Rebecca came up to me and said, "Sorry I haven't been around for a few weeks. I had a lot of work to do in class, and I had to study like crazy. Oh, and I just wanted you to know that I broke up with my boyfriend."

This was an occasion for bad news and fantastic news. The bad news: *I was still a tactless doofus*. The fantastic (and far more important than my dooficity) news: *Rebecca had made a significant heart-change for Jesus in response to God's Word!* A Bible study on Genesis 2 had been an open door to spiritual maturity for a Christian sister.

Studying Scripture in small groups is not just Bible study—not simply filling our brains with Bible trivia or proving and protecting our pet doctrines. As followers of Jesus, we study the Scriptures on Jesus' terms, not our own. This means that we view and handle the Bible as God's Word just as Jesus did (Matthew 4:4; 15:3-6). But our *reverence* for the Bible as God's

Word is only the beginning. As Jesus' followers, we must also *respond* to God's Word by living our lives on Jesus' terms.

Some of Jesus' religious contemporaries regarded the Scriptures as God's Word, and yet they rejected Jesus. To them Jesus said,

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:39-40 ESV)

All our knowledge of the Scriptures is stagnant and lifeless without submission to Jesus in all areas of our lives. Our knowledge of God's Word is never meant to be a substitute for life-giving obedience to Jesus. Instead, the narratives, commandments and examples in God's Word give shape to our obedience to Jesus. As a follower of Jesus, Rebecca responded with greater faithfulness to Jesus when the Word was applied to an area of her life.

Like those we lead, small group leaders are called to prayerful, passionate, faithful submission to Jesus that is shaped by God's Word. Additionally, small group leaders have the joy, privilege and responsibility to usher those they lead into life-giving obedience to Jesus through the study and application of God's Word.

OPEN TO GOD'S FRESH WORD: INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Some students of Scripture walk around with *hoopty Bibles*. Hoopties are old, high-mileage cars. Their parts are held together by Crazy Glue, duct tape, cobbled parts from other hoopties and daily appeals to God. Hoopty Bibles are similar; they have so much highlighting that they look like they were

stolen from the tester station at the Crayola factory. Scribbled notes, cracked spines and disintegrated covers point to habitual use. Hoopty Bible owners, like their hoopty car-owning counterparts, wear their Bibles like a badge of honor.

Whether or not students of Scripture scribble in their Bibles, most students of Scripture carry Hoopty Bibles around *in their heads*. Certain Bible passages call to our minds related sermons, teachings or personal studies. The ability to recall previous insights into certain Scripture passages is in fact a large part of how we internalize the Word of God. These insights serve as established, familiar paths that help us—and for centuries have helped other Christians—to find our way around in the Scriptures.

It takes time to locate these paths. Over time, though, we learn by these paths to quickly apply certain Scripture passages to our life situations. However, such familiarity can backfire on us, instilling within us a “been there, done that” attitude that closes our hearts off to fresh insights and applications that God desires to give us. Those of us who are newer to the practice of Scripture study may be less prone to this kind of familiarity, but all of us can be tempted to isolate certain passages from the texts in which they are situated. When we do so, we miss out on the full meaning of what the authors were communicating.

How do we walk down recognizable theological pathways in our heads *and* listen for fresh messages from the Spirit of God? Can we have our cake and eat it too? (Mmmmm . . . cake.) The short answer is, “Yes, we can!” We do this by studying the Scriptures *inductively*.¹

¹In preparing the Bible study material that follows, I benefited greatly from tools and concepts developed by Evan Keller, Bob Grahmann and Lindsay Olesberg. For more Bible study material go to <www.intervarsity.org/Biblestu/page/Bible-studies-index>.

Inductive Bible study is designed to empower small groups and individuals to deeply and honestly examine what a biblical text is communicating on its own terms. We examine particular words, images and concepts in a given text to arrive at its central theme. This is different from deductive thinking. In a court case, the prosecution and the defense come with predetermined positions. They present and interpret evidence to suit those positions and to achieve a desired verdict. To *start with a conclusion* and to use the evidence to prove that conclusion is what is involved in deductive discovery.

A jury, however, attempts to objectively use all the evidence presented by the prosecution and the defense to arrive at a verdict. To *objectively gather, interpret and apply* all the evidence is what is involved in inductive discovery.

In a courtroom setting, the judge keeps the prosecution, the defense and the jury on task by pointing out

- what evidence *is* important to the case
- what evidence *is not* important to the case
- what courtroom procedures need to be followed
- how legal terminology ought to be understood

Small group leaders have something in common with judges: We remind group members to faithfully locate their interpretations of the passage in the biblical text. The secret to inductive Bible study lies in three letters: OIA. Three letters. Nice and painless. Piece of cake.

OIA

At the heart of inductive Bible study is *observation, interpretation and application*. The small group's initial exploration of a biblical passage is the *observation* mode; the jury is examining

the evidence. The small groups' attempt to unravel the central truth of a biblical passage is the *interpretation* mode; here the jury interprets the evidence. During the *application* mode the jury's verdict is delivered; the small group grasps how to put into practice what they have gleaned from the passage. These different phases of study naturally build on each other: we can't interpret what the Scriptures mean until we look at what they say, and if we truly want to apply what we learn from them, then we have to correctly interpret what we find there.

OBSERVATION MODE

The observation mode helps us to fix our minds on a particular passage of Scripture. The observation mode helps those who are unfamiliar with the passage get acquainted with it. Meanwhile, for those who are familiar with the passage, the observation mode gets away from a "been there, done that" mentality. The legwork we do in the observation mode is called the *observation exercise*. Good observation exercises engage the imaginative and analytical parts of group members' minds. We lead creatively to connect group members with the people, places, images and situations in a biblical passage. It is through these connections that we begin our journey to the passage's core message.

Some observation exercises are better than others. Small group leaders must ask themselves, *Does this exercise drive us deeper into the biblical text?* They ought to evoke interest and focus, but if they don't cause us to engage the Scriptures, then we will miss out on the clues to the passage's meaning. Table 5.1 illustrates the difference between helpful and unhelpful observation exercises.

All kinds of observation exercises can be imaginative and creative. But only those exercises that help us to engage and

Table 5.1. Helpful and Unhelpful Observation Exercises in Three Biblical Passages

Passage	Genesis 2:4-25	Revelation 1	John 3:1-22
Helpful observation exercises <ul style="list-style-type: none"> are rooted in Scripture engage the creative/imaginative and analytical/logical parts of the mind explore and analyze the Scriptures 	Put yourself in the shoes of the man or the woman. What do you see, hear, taste and feel in the Garden of Eden? Make a list of the things that the humans are responsible for in the garden. Write a job description for employment in the Garden of Eden.	Concentrate on the scene in verses 9-20. If you were John, how might your recollection of Jesus in his earthly ministry be the same as/different from this vision of Jesus? Catalog the ways that the senses of sight, touch and sound are engaged in the passage. List the different images used to describe the church in the passage. What are some privileges and responsibilities associated with these images?	Explore the passage using some basic grammar tools like repetition of words, comparison/contrast (for example, "born of Spirit" versus "born of flesh") and cause/effect (for example, "He gave his one and only Son" [cause]; "so that everyone who believes in him will not perish" [effect]). Think back to your own water baptism. If you could speak with Nicodemus, how would you persuade him to be water baptized in accordance with Jesus' command?
Unhelpful observation exercises <ul style="list-style-type: none"> can be creative or thoughtful but don't motivate exploration of the passage neglect the main point of a passage in favor of advancing an opinion 	Imagine what it would be like to be naked in the Garden of Eden. How would this affect the way you did your work in the garden (especially with the animals)? If you were the man or the woman, what would it be like to hang out with God face to face? Discuss.	If Jesus appeared in this way to you, how would you react? Compare the suffering of missionary Jim Elliot with John's testimony of suffering for the gospel.	

explore the passage are ultimately helpful. The simple observation exercise for John 3:1-22 in table 5.1 is not flashy, but exploring a passage grammatically does more to help us stick to the passage than speculation about water baptism. In fact, focusing on grammatical analysis of passages can be comfortable and constructive in the early stages of a small group. However, being that grammar analysis is logic-driven observation, you might want to work at more creative methods of observation so as to engage the imaginations of your group members.

THE INTERPRETATION MODE

Ideally, group members make fruitful observations of the passage and are ready to start drawing initial conclusions about the text's meaning. This brings us to interpretation mode. Members begin to advance points of view based on the things they encountered in the passage. Small group leaders can put forth questions that steer group members to a good interpretation. Good Bible study questions

- promote discussion, have multiple answers and are open-ended
- lead students of the Bible back into the text
- use language of the group and of the text
- vary in type and scope
- are creative and insightful, with answers that are not totally obvious
- are short and concise
- connect to and build on other questions

Bible study expert Bob Grahmann has identified four helpful types of questions for interpretation mode.

1. Questions that help the group to enter the scene.
2. Questions that highlight the tension or point of intrigue in a text.
3. Questions that connect our lives to the text.
4. Questions that link different portions of the discussion.

Table 5.2 illustrates the difference between helpful and unhelpful interpretation questions.

By the end of your time in the Scriptures, your group will have had a fruitful discussion that has gone in many different (and rewarding) directions. To bring all the pieces together, it is good to summarize what the group has discovered, to gather all the useful snippets of the discussion and fit them nicely into a big picture. Summaries can range from one sentence to a short paragraph. The passages in tables 5.1 and 5.2 might be summarized as follows:

- Genesis 2:4-24: God created humans for creative work, interdependent relationships and freedom through obedience to his commands.
- Revelation 1: In being called by God to be his priestly witnesses, Jesus' followers sometimes suffer at the hands of the world, but Jesus manifests his power among us.
- John 3:1-22: Our knowledge about Jesus, though accurate, is never a substitute for running toward his light to have more of us exposed and more of Jesus revealed.

Obviously, entering a passage, feeling the tension and understanding where the text intersects with everyday life requires diligent preparation and prayerful study on the part of the small group leader! While having several questions prepared is a good idea, plan to limit discussion to four interpre-

Table 5.2. Helpful and Unhelpful Interpretation Questions

Passage	Genesis 2:4-24	Revelation 1	John 3:1-22
Helpful interpretation questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> are rooted in the text drive group members back into the text don't have only one answer vary in form from one another link the text to everyday life 	What does God's creation of the man tell us about the man's connection to God and the earth? In verses 16-17, what is the nature of the man's freedom? How does God-given freedom differ from how we conceive of freedom? What do God's motivations for creating the woman (v. 18) tell us about how God wants the man and the woman to relate to one another?	What light do John's circumstances (v. 9) shed on what it means to be blessed by God (v. 3) and priests for God (v. 6)? What does John's vision in verses 12-20 convey about Jesus? How does this picture of Jesus confirm/challenge how you experience him? Compare/contrast John's interaction with Jesus in verses 17-20 with that of "all the tribes of the earth" in verse 7. How does this inform the way we bear witness to Jesus in the nonbelieving world?	What does Nicodemus know about Jesus (v. 2)? For Jesus, why is Nicodemus' knowledge insufficient for seeing and entering the kingdom of God? In comparing himself with the snake that Moses lifted up (Numbers 21), what is Jesus saying about himself? What is the connection between believing in Jesus and loving the light?
Unhelpful interpretation questions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> read into passages theological ideas that aren't there invite speculation that doesn't originate in or lead back to the text miss key points on the passage don't foster discussion ignore context 	What do we learn about male headship in the family from this passage? (reads a particular theology into the passage) If the world was perfect, why would God need the man to care for the garden (vv. 5, 15)? (invites speculation that doesn't come from or lead back to Genesis 2)	Why do God's blessings always seem to come with suffering? (misses the point of Revelation 1 regarding blessing and suffering) How scary do you think it will be to face Jesus on the Day of Judgment if you are unsaved? (invites speculation that doesn't come from or lead back to Revelation 1)	What do you think the Pharisees told Nicodemus to ask Jesus? (invites speculation that doesn't come from or lead back to John 3) Snakes are usually bad in the Bible. Why do you think Jesus is comparing himself with one? (doesn't adequately explain the imagery; fails to deal with the context of Numbers 21)

tation questions. Doing so will ensure that the group dives deeply into the Word while honoring the time commitments of small group members.

Having been led by the Holy Spirit in observation, interpretation and summary, the small group's task is not yet complete. To accomplish the broader purposes of group Bible study, the group must determine what the passage is saying to individual members and the group as a whole.

THE APPLICATION MODE

"Blessed is the one who *reads the words* of this prophecy, and blessed are those who *hear it and take to heart what is written in it*, because the time is near" (Revelation 1:3, emphasis mine). Just as it did two thousand years ago, John's exhortation finds a home in gatherings where God's Word is read by God's people. In all three modes of inductive Bible study, we read and hear God's Word, but it is in the application mode that we concentrate on taking God's Word to heart through specific action.

In the application mode Jesus' role as the great and compassionate Judge of his people and the world is underscored. Throughout the Bible study he moves our hearts to respond to his Word and his presence with action. Without active, practical responses to Jesus, all of our Scripture study is meaningless, theological babble that has an appearance of godliness but denies its power (2 Timothy 3:5).

Our responses take many forms: We repent, we worship, we receive encouragement, we become reconciled to those we have wronged or who have wronged us, or we commit to action. No matter what the form, good response questions

- help us to respond to the main message of the passage

- are appropriate and rooted in God's will and character
- are concrete and personal
- can be accomplished with the empowerment of God and God's people

In other words, don't settle for vague applications like "Jesus is calling us to be nicer to other people." This may be true, but if by "other people" Jesus means my roommate, and if by "nicer" he means I need to ask for my roommate's forgiveness for something I did, then a better application would be "Jesus is calling me to ask for my roommate's forgiveness." Small group leaders must not be afraid to bring in applications that are specific to the group. If the group needs to be encouraged or if something already present in the life of the group is praiseworthy, then feel free to craft application questions that are in line with encouragement or praise. If the group needs to be admonished or challenged, then craft application questions that are in line with admonition or challenge.

Don't forget, however, that you are a member of the group; as a leader of the small group, you bear equal responsibility for its accomplishments *and* shortcomings! The Messiah has no use for small group leaders with messiah complexes. Even the prophets in the Old Testament identified with those to whom God had sent them. Also, remember to maintain an atmosphere of trust and openness in the group. You may have in mind particular applications for specific group members, but unless that application is praiseworthy or the member brings it up on their own in the group setting, such particular applications should be saved for a one-on-one conversation. There you can deal with a potentially difficult matter with the compassion and discretion to which we are called.

As with the interpretation questions, it's good to have several application questions ready and to choose one or two that fit with the discussion the group has had. Think through whether or not your group needs to process their responses or pray through them: some responses require that we simply agree with God and prayerfully do what he says, while others require that we seek out guidance and clarity from fellow Christians. You can have people respond individually, in pairs, or as a whole group. Table 5.3 illustrates some helpful and unhelpful application questions.

The rigorous application of God's Word to all areas of our lives is God's desired fulfillment of our faithful observation and interpretation of the Scriptures. In this way, the small group as "jury" submits itself to the wisdom and majesty of God our Father and Judge.

FEED YOURSELF FIRST: PREP LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT

Whether the event is a wedding reception or a Superbowl party or a catered fundraiser for Save the (insert your favorite cute, endangered animal here), everyone is afraid to be the first person to step up to the buffet line for food. You could be so hungry that you'd eat a porcupine and its momma, but you would still hide your grumbling stomach. Why? Because even when their stomachs are oinking, people don't want to look like pigs.

When preparing to lead an inductive Bible study, however, I exhort you in the name of Jesus: pig out. Feast on God's Word. Leaders of God's people are called by our Father to take God's Word to heart before bringing it to bear on the lives of those we lead. Like Ezekiel the prophet, who during a vision was called by God to eat God's words before speak-

Table 5.3. Helpful and Unhelpful Application Questions

Passage	Genesis 2:4-24	Revelation 1	John 3:1-22
Helpful applications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are concrete and specific • underscore the major point of the passage • invite group members to draw support from one another • reassure members of the empowerment of the Spirit of God • allow group members to share ideas with one another 	Do you have any situations in which you're feeling particularly burdened or frustrated? How might someone help maximize your creativity and lighten your load?	In what ways do you need to experience the presence of Jesus to encourage you in evangelism? Are there things our small group can do to be of help in this area?	What are some regular disciplines that expose you to the light of Jesus? Which discipline do you find best opens you to Jesus' light?
Unhelpful applications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aren't concrete • have little to do with the main message of the passage • don't bridge the language of the text and the lives of group members 	What are the qualities of a godly mate?	Have you experienced Jesus in the way that John did?	What has believing in Jesus been like for you lately?

ing them to Israel (Ezekiel 2:8—3:3), we are called to apply God's Word to ourselves before leading others in the observation, interpretation and application of biblical passages. By doing so we

- remain in loving submission to our Father and thereby avoid the pride of believing ourselves superior to those we lead
- gain firsthand knowledge of how God uses his Word to transform lives
- are prepared to offer our small group members not only our Bible study skills but also our biblically formed characters

Good small group leaders allow the Lord to work through his Word to heal, encourage, rebuke and challenge us. God holds his leaders to a strict standard (James 3:1; Hebrews 13:17), so affording him the opportunity to examine our hearts and to perform a work of grace in us prior to our service to others puts our leadership in perspective: We are first and foremost God's servants; serving others never trumps our service to him.

GOD'S FRUITFUL WORD AND THE ABUNDANT LIFE

My small group's study of Genesis 2 just kept bearing fruit. While Rebecca was wrestling with the implications of the text for her relationship with a non-Christian, a group member named Jacob told me that he would like to talk. Our one-on-one discussion a few days later was filled with stories of habitual sexual sin and a deep desire for lasting change. Jacob accepted that he would have to cut off sinful, destructive relationships, but he couldn't imagine how he would do so. Grounded in the Genesis 2 portrait of permanent, dignifying relationships, Jacob and I began to chart the new relational

pathways our Father was carving out for him. As we talked, it became apparent that Jacob had never truly surrendered his life to Jesus. I led Jacob in a prayer in which he acknowledged Jesus' right to rule every aspect of his life.

One Bible study had produced an orchard's worth of fruit, and my mustard-seed faith (and my tactlessness) had received a workout. Studying Scripture in small groups is not about filling our brains with Bible trivia. Nor is it about proving and protecting our pet doctrines. It is about the kind of transformation that Jacob and Rebecca experienced when we observed, interpreted and applied Genesis 2 together. It's about allowing the Living God to bring his Word to bear on our lives so that we look more like Jesus.

Say it to yourself as many times as you need to, Mr. or Mrs.

Small Group Leader:

It's not just a Bible study.

It's not *just* a Bible study.

It's *not* just a Bible study.

It's not just a *Bible* study.

It's not just a Bible *study*.

It's not just a Bible study.

Amen.

6

PRAYER AND WORSHIP IN SMALL GROUPS

Úna Lucey-Lee

OUR LEADER SPREAD OUT a huge world map on the floor, pointed to a country and told the group that we were going to pray for Albania. I wondered if anyone else in the group had ever heard of Albania but thought it best not to do an impromptu survey in case I was the only one who had not. I was not quite ready to unveil my geographical ignorance to my new friends.

Albania. There it was on the map. Next to Greece.

I shifted my legs in their cross-legged position seeking the elusive comfortable spot on the floor. The leader told us that before 1944, Albania had been a predominantly Muslim country. After World War II the communist government set out to create the first atheistic country. No religious observance was allowed. Churches, mosques, monasteries and other religious institutions were closed, and foreign missionaries were expelled. Many Albanian clergy and religious citizens were im-