

MY JOURNEY TOWARD COMMUNAL DISCOVERY BIBLE STUDY/ DESCRIPTOIN OF COMMUNAL DISCOVERY BIBLE STUDY

Emerging Culture Pilot Project Report
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Introduction

I became a Christian at the tender age of 12 without ever seeing a Bible. My parents did not own one and I had never been to a Christmas or Easter Service. As a new Christian, I was eager to fit in and to learn. My mother bought me a Ryrie Study Bible at the recommendation of my youth group leader. In junior high Sunday school, I felt embarrassed because I had no idea who David or Moses was or why the people of Israel sometimes lived in Canaan, sometimes in Egypt, and other times in Babylon.

In high school, I decided to "catch up" with my youth group and put myself through a program of independent study of the Bible. I would pick a topic and look up all the verses listed under that heading in my Bible's concordance. I made myself a time line of the history of Israel, marking the good and bad kings. I read through the Bible using a "Bible in a year" chart. By the time I got to college, I thought I had pretty well figured out the Bible. In fact, I assumed the IVCF freshmen Bible study on my campus would be too elementary for me, so I opted out.

My relationship to the Bible changed dramatically at the end of my freshmen year, May 1985. I was recruited to a week of camp at Campus By the Sea, where I spent the week studying the first half of the gospel of Mark in a manuscript study. I was introduced to the concept of "the author's intending meaning to the original audience". I learned how to observe, to ask questions, and to seek answers from evidence in the text. I realized the advantages of studying the Bible in a rigorous way with other believers. The Bible opened up to me as if I was wearing

3-D glasses for the first time. I was convicted of my arrogance in thinking I knew the Bible. With my new hermeneutical tools, I set out on an adventure of plunging the depths of the scripture. I have been on that adventure for over 15 years now, and I know I am still just heading into deep country. I rejoice in the 50+ years ahead of me to keep discovering God in the Bible.

As I have learned and served among college students and InterVarsity staff since 1985, manuscript Bible study has continued to play a central role in relating to Jesus. In fact, Tom Sine called what we were doing in Los Angeles “building hermeneutical community”, since the fundamental means by which we built community among students and within staff teams was interpreting the scripture together. We took what we had learned from Paul Byer about inductive manuscript study, and we shaped it into a powerful way of sitting in the scripture as a community and letting it form in us common values and approaches to life and ministry. Students in our ministry participated in a 2 1/2 hour weekly manuscript study led by a campus staff, in addition to their dorm based student led small group Bible study. These manuscript studies were a second level commitment for those who wanted more. Participation in these groups came to define what it meant to be “core” in our campus fellowship. Over the course of a student’s career, they would have gone through Mark twice, Genesis 1-11, Galatians, Amos, Sermon on the Mount, and other books or parts of books in the context of retreats, camps, dig-ins, and weekly on-campus studies.

In moving to Iowa, my staff team and I created the same type of “hermeneutical communities”. Our students came to love rigorous scripture study and the kind of community that is formed and shaped by interpreting the scripture together. As in Los Angeles, students from the core were chosen to be student leaders. The primary responsibility of these leaders is to gather students in their dorm and lead a 1 hour inductive Bible study, to build sub-communities in their living areas. These groups are meant to be places for Christian students to bring their friends, and so often have many not-yet Christians or nominal believers in them. In our ministry strategy, they are the primary door way into the IVCF chapter.

Need

In the spring of 2000, I gathered the Eastern Iowa staff team for a roundtable discussion of how the dorm Bible studies in the area were working. Several experiences had helped me see the need for some more thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of our scripture ministry. Through conversations with staff at Coe College, where the ministry was newer and there wasn’t yet a tradition of hermeneutical community, I knew that students were not connecting to the manuscript study method. Curtis Chang had already been raising issue with “classic O,I,A”, arguing that its paradigm is inherently modernistic. My staff had really resonated with his arguments. I had also participated in the national Bible Study Task Force led by Bob Grahmann. The task force did some thoughtful evaluation of Bible study in IVCF, particularly in light of emerging culture issues. (See “Enhancements” - Article below). I knew that our

method of Bible study needed to be adjusted, but I wasn't prepared to ditch hermeneutical community or stop trying to teach students how to be more rigorous in their study of scripture.

The roundtable discussion was incredibly fruitful. In reflecting together and comparing notes from ministries at different types of campuses and in different places of development, a few important themes emerged. Most significant to me was the observation that the method we and our student leaders were using was causing "a disconnect" with the students at the dorm Bible study level. Young students or those with nominal faith felt that our way of studying the scripture is too rigid and clinical. They didn't have the patience for sharing repeated words, discussing where to put paragraph breaks, looking up cultural background in a Bible dictionary, or waiting to talk about application to the very end of the study. If they didn't get experiential payoff early on in the study, they would become passive and disengaged, as if Bible study is like a class you sit through until the bell rings. Also, disagreement voiced by the other students or the leader was taken personally and painfully, rather than as healthy discussion for the purpose of sharper understanding.

Many of the staff (including myself) were disturbed. We had learned how to put the disciplined effort forth to end up with a very deep encounter with Jesus through the scripture. We bemoaned the lack of fortitude of the "media generation" we are leading, as well as their poor reading skills. We shared our concerns about students having only a subjective experience with the scripture.

I perceived several different strands of the problem. One is that our student leaders were mimicking the kind of disciplined methodical Bible study that they were learning in their weekly manuscript studies for the core. They were not adjusting the method to the context of their entry level dorm Bible studies where the participants do not yet have deep commitment to Jesus or awareness that they can meet him deeply in the Bible. The staff make the adjustments in teaching different groups intuitively, but we weren't doing a strong enough job training our student leaders on the differences between a 1 hour open study and a 2 1/2 hour high commitment study.

Another strand is the realities that come with students who have read less, been entertained more, are very attuned to relational and emotional dynamics, and have been in classrooms increasingly shaped by post-modern literary theory. This challenges the staff to learn how to be incarnational with the present and coming student generations. Though the staff team is all Xer's, we still have enough modernist in us to love the methodical analysis of classic O,I,A. I feared that if we didn't develop new wineskins, we might lose our effectiveness in passing on to our students deep passion for the scripture and skills for quality interpretation.

There was also the problem of the staff team being unclear about the goals and purposes of the dorm Bible study. That structure was being asked to carry too many agendas among which were: a place for students to be fed by the Bible, an entry point into the community for those not yet functioning in vibrant faith in Jesus, a place to give students love and passion for

the Bible, a place to teach reading and interpreting skills, and a place for a community of believers to come to oneness of mind about the scripture.

Changes

To address these problems, we began by clarifying the difference in purpose for the 1 hour student led Bible study vs. the intensive staff led manuscript study. We decided that though students do need to learn how to read well and analyze a text rigorously, those goals must be pursued at the second level study, once students' hearts have been won over to Jesus. Also, until students have come to have strong love for Jesus and passion for the scripture, deep communal agreement about the meaning and implications of a passage of the Bible would also have to wait and so we shouldn't push for group consensus in these contexts. We agreed that our goal for the dorm Bible study is that *students encounter Jesus*. This means that they not only learn the truth about Jesus as shown in the scripture, but they also experience the presence of Jesus in every element of their time gathered for Bible study, from the hospitality of the leader, to gentle and loving interaction with the other studiers, to how well they are listened to.

Bob Grahmann and I had already planned on using the morning small groups at Urbana 2000 as an arena to apply some of the things we were learning about Bible study. In preparation, we gathered 55 staff from North America to prepare the four Urbana Bible studies at NISSET. The "method" we used was a synthesis of our cumulative years in teaching along with the things we were learning from the Bible Study Task Force, Curtis Chang's narrative weave, and the roundtable discussion in Eastern Iowa. We developed "Communal Discovery" Bible study as our approach.

Communal Discovery is a variation of inductive Bible study. It still seeks to let the text speak for itself, rather than use the scripture to support a pre-established theme or theology. We chose to continue to use a manuscript since having a sheet of paper with the text typed out encourages writing and visual learning. We continue to help studiers observe, interpret, and apply, but not in the step-by-step fashion of classic O, I, A. Instead, we first help studiers to *enter the text*, which involves a variety of left and right brain exercises to aid them in *observing from within*. (See "Entering the Text" - Article below.) Unlike the modernistic approach, which sees the object to be studied as existing "out there" to be observed and analyzed in a detached, clinical manner as in a laboratory, we are encouraging learners to observe from within, like a traveler in a cross-cultural situation. This is more true to the scripture, and takes seriously the reality that learners do bring their own lenses when they encounter a text. (This difference is illustrated in the contrast between the training article "The student, the fish, and Agassiz" used by many manuscript and Bible and Life Level II teachers and "Exploring D.C." (Article below) which is intended to replace it. "Exploring D.C." uses the analogy of a vacation to a city to illustrate observing from within..

Rather than ask students to wait on making ties to their life until the end of the study, we ask questions that help them connect their experiences to the text in order to see what is in the text more fully. Well placed questions which draw on personal experience can help a

passage come to life as well as reveal the relevance of the scripture. Thus, *application* is happening in various forms *throughout* the study. (See "Writing Good Questions" - Article below).

Many people throughout IVCF have experienced manuscript study as driven by the teacher's questions, leading the group to discover something that the teacher has already seen. Communal Discovery is primarily driven by the *learners' questions*, encouraging them to develop curiosity, and letting the group discussion follow the path of the interest of the group. Likewise, the application discussion is designed to fit the shape of the group's conversation, rather than being the place where the agenda of the leader is accomplished. (See "Application" - Article below). The bulk of the time spent together revolves around answering the learners' questions as a group. (See "Outline of 1 hour Communal Bible Study" - Article below).

In these adjustments, we are attempting to create a Bible study that is true to inductive hermeneutics and keeps integrity with group process, rather than beginning inductively, but really being a platform for the leader to say what they wanted to say in the first place. We desire scripture study to be a genuine process of discovery that honors the individuals in the group, yet helps them be in community around the Word. We believe that making the space for sincere engagement with the scripture will bring about deep encounters with Jesus and ignite passion for the Bible.

Field Testing

God provided a wide variety of environments to field test the Communal Discovery Approach to Bible study. I used the Urbana Bible studies with a Vineyard Community Church Bible study in my home. This let me see how effective Communal Discovery is for those who have not been trained in classic O, I, A. Bob and I trained a large group of IVCF staff from every region in the country during the Urbana NISSET class. These staff had a wide range of experience in staff work and in manuscript Bible study. During the fall, Bob and I (either alone or together), led on-site regional training workshops for staff in the Southeast, Blue Ridge, and Great Lakes East regions. I also led a student leaders training workshop for Coe College in partnership with Chris Pallas, the full time staff at Coe. Sarah Shannon (TL at University of Iowa) and I put on a training weekend for all sophomores through seniors in Eastern Iowa, to give them basic training in how to lead a 1 hour Bible study. Finally, Communal Discovery was used at Urbana for the almost 2000 daily small groups. 80 IVCF staff helped Bob and I lead the student small group leaders on site.

The training events all followed the general pattern of having participants share about their relationship to the Bible (see the article below "The Story of You and the Bible"), several different sessions of studying a passage together and then debriefing the experience, discussing "Exploring D.C." , preaching and prayer about putting our confidence as teachers in the power of the Word and not in a method or our skill as teachers (see "Power of the Word"), and covering various training topics ("Entering the Text" - Article below , "Writing Good

Questions” - Article below, “Summarizing” - Article below, “Application” - Article below , “Outline of a 1 hour Communal Bible Study” - Article below). In training environments of IVCF staff, we often included a power point presentation on the History of Bible Study in IVCF (see Article below). With the NISSET class, we also did a session on training issues (see Article below). An actual schedule for a student training weekend is attached below.

All of the IVCF field test environments included verbal debriefing and feedback so we have had a good sense of how well the method we are promoting is working in bringing people into deep encounter with Jesus in the scripture. The following section is a summary of what we have discovered.

Discoveries in training Bible study leaders

1. Younger staff, no matter which region they are from, love the changes. They feel the need to revamp the Bible studies on campus and have received passion, vision, and skills from the training sessions.
2. There has been very strong positive response whenever we teach on the Biblical basis of curiosity (See Article below #3). When people become aware that being curious is a conscious choice and that active question asking pays off, they turn some kind of corner in both personal and group Bible study.
3. Studiers love being able to generate their own questions and have those be the basis of the group’s discussion. Group ownership and participation is strengthened.
4. Communal Discovery Method is challenging to staff from different parts of the country in different ways.
 - ❖ For those who come from a regional culture shaped by Bible and Life II, it was challenging to no longer see the goal of Bible study as distilling the passage down into one propositional truth statement, and instead let the truth of the scripture be carried within the Biblical story that has become 3-dimensional through the communal discovery process. They were also challenged by letting the students drive the study with their questions and trusting that they would still get to the heart of the text.
 - ❖ For staff from places whose students primarily use study guides for their small groups, the effectiveness of pre-fabricated questions in captivating students was questioned. To train student leaders to develop their own questions and to encourage their groups to articulate the things they are curious about has implications for student leadership selection as well as student leadership training and supervision.
 - ❖ For those from regions which use manuscript study heavily, they were challenged by our teaching on the difference between Socratic and Inductive questions (see “Writing Good Questions” - Article below), the level of control that the teacher exerts on the group, allowing personal experience and application to enter into the study along the way, and the suggestion that not everything that is said in the study must come out of the students mouths as an answer to an inductive question (e.g. a leader can just tell the group about tax-collectors in Roman times rather than ask the group what they know and have the ones who are biblically illiterate feel stupid).

5. This method works with people who have never been trained in classic O, I, A, but they do need to be trained along the way in how to observe and in generating questions. (In my Vineyard Bible study I give one suggestion a week to pass on those skills, e.g. "Today as you study individually, try to find all the comparisons and contrasts in the passage.")
6. "Exploring D.C." is a helpful tool in explaining the cross-cultural nature of studying the Bible and in demonstrating a posture of curiosity. It works with many types of students.
7. Those that lead Bible study in this way need to shift their perceptions of what it means to lead. Though this type of leadership is more like being a facilitator of a group discussion, that does not mean that it requires less preparation to lead. Many staff and students report back that it requires more preparation because they must know the text really well in order to make the many on the spot decisions about which question they group should work on next (one of the group's questions or one of the leaders questions) and how to summarize and apply in a way that fits the spirit of the group's discussion.
8. Older staff tend to fear that not having a final propositional truth, letting the learners drive the study with their questions, and using more creative forms of observing will compromise the integrity of the Bible study. We contend that if the leader lays down the ground rules of answering the questions from evidence in the text itself, staying within the Biblical narrative will protect the group from coming to conclusions beyond the text. However, it does require the staff to let each group have their own experience rather than grasping the point the staff was hoping for. This last summer and fall, I have studied the four gospel passages used at countless times with different groups. Each time, the flavor of the discussion and what the group gets excited about is different, though we are always amazed at Jesus and are challenged to move forward in faith.
9. A question that has been raised repeatedly and is worthy of further discussion and clearer articulation is, "What is the role of personal experience in understanding Biblical truth?" There is an appropriate fear of subjectivism. Those of us who are comfortable with some parts of the post-modern approach to literature intuitively know the difference between using your experience to give insight into something beyond yourself and seeing the Bible only in light of your self and your culture. A related question raised by a number of staff is "What is the role of the prophetic voice of the teacher in communal Bible study?" Again, I have an intuitive way of blending group discovery with prophetic leadership and teaching, but have not articulated that sharply enough.
10. Though everyone loves the quality and dynamism of these Bible studies, they see them as a "higher bar" form of teaching than a study guide. Bob and I wrote teaching notes for the Urbana Bible study leaders though we feared that student leaders would rely on them and use them like a study guide. Many staff want fool proof Bible studies and think study guides offer that. Our contention is that quality Bible study is worth the training investment. Can students with minimal staff input learn to teach like this? I believe they can. Success is greatly increased as students prepare together by having

their own communal discovery study on the passage before leading. Using communal discovery may change the way some do their staff work.

11. It is possible to go overboard with the creative entering the text approaches (e.g. too many different creative exercises, or ones that don't fit the feel of the text well). Student leaders can feel like they need to always come up with something new or unusual. Variation (including older forms of observing like marking repeated words) is important.
12. There is an interplay between the learners questions and the teachers questions. It is not all one or the other. The leader is still the leader and is responsible to guide the group in an orderly and productive way to the center of the text, yet their leadership involves being a learner and participant as well as a guide. This combination comes naturally to some and is much more difficult for others.

Conclusion

Communal Discovery Bible study is an effective and enjoyable way of getting people to encounter God deeply in the scripture. It is not designed to train studiers in more sophisticated hermeneutical skills, but it does provide a solid first step in inductive study. It is highly transferable and accessible, and therefore is a good tool for lay teachers of the scripture.

Our hope is that all IVCF students, not just student leaders, will be trained in Communal Discovery leading. We would like to see IVCF alumni gathering folks in their churches, neighborhoods, and workplaces to sit before God in the scripture. Many students who led Bible study at Urbana are not student leaders on campus. We received strong feedback that leading at Urbana was a wonderful and fruitful experience for them. At the end of Urbana, we gave them a charge to take what they have learned about leading Bible study and use that to bless their churches. If we continue similar training and vision casting, IVCF can play a catalyzing role in a movement of the Word.

“But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty fold and sixty fold and a hundred fold.” Mark 4:20