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Ambleside's Method of Bible Study

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Consider with me how Scripture is commonly studied; particularly, how it is studied in community. While much of what I suggest applies to individual Bible study, the focus is small group study. Throughout the years, I've been involved in countless Bible studies of many sizes, shapes, and forms. These studies may be classified into five varieties:

1. Bible study as soft data mining.
2. Bible study as serious data mining.
3. Bible study as self-expression.
4. Bible study as lecture
5. Bible study as shared attention to God's Mind.

In what follows, I will describe each of these varieties of Bible study and suggest that the fifth form, Bible study as shared attention to God's Mind, is optimal for small groups. Then, I shall provide a brief description of how such a study might be conducted.

Bible Study as Soft Data Mining

In the fall of 1977, I was a junior at Louisiana State University and leading a Bible study in one of the freshman dorms. Each week, we'd gather with our Bible in one hand and study guide in the other. Opening the study guide to the week's lesson, perhaps entitled "Prayer," we would find an inspirational introduction and several subsections, each titled with a question, such as "How Should We Pray?" Each subsection contained either a series of incomplete statements containing blanks with an adjacent verse cited in parentheses. For example:

- When you pray, go into your room and _____ (Matthew 6:6)

Or, there might be closed questions (questions that required a very specific short answer), also with an adjacent verse cited in parentheses. For example:

- To whom should we pray? (Matthew 6:6).

The task given to participants was to look up the verses and record the right answer. As the intended answer was almost always self evident, rarely was there any serious engagement of the text itself. The study was in fact not so much an exploration of Scripture as the systematic unfolding of the ideas of the author of the study guide.

Now, I cannot be anything but grateful for such studies, having no doubt of their positive impact on countless lives. They have a certain catechetical utility, efficiently disseminating fundamental biblical truths. But, like my freshman level sociology class, which was all about getting the right answer on the test, I can't help but believe that this method misses something important. It seems more informative than formative. Identifying the correct answer would at times generate tangential conversations, such as difficulties experienced in maintaining a consistent prayer life or the personal significance of maintaining a consistent prayer life. And, I suspect that the more spiritually formative parts of our time together were the tangents in which we connected on something more than just the right answer, as important as the right answer might be.

Bible Study as Serious Data Mining

Serious data mining is usually an individual task, the pastor in his study or professor at his desk. But, I have seen small groups attempt something of this process, and it often goes by the name of “Inductive Bible Study.” In popular usage, the phrase “inductive Bible study” often seems simply to imply a thoughtful, systematic approach to understanding the meaning of a scriptural text, and there can be no objection to this. It’s the use of “inductive method” in the technical sense, as applied to Bible study that I question.

In 1859, James S. Lamar wrote a book entitled *Organon of Scriptures or The Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation*. “Organon” is the Greek word for “instrument” or “tool” and is the name given to the collection of Aristotle’s six works on logic. In 1620, Francis Bacon published *Novum Organum* (New Organon), in which he proposed a new system of logic, an early form of the scientific method that he believed superior to Aristotelian logic.

In Lamar’s “Organon”, he joins Bacon in his critique of “the old method of philosophizing” and asserts Scripture is to be studied by means of an inductive method consistent with that of Bacon. What Bacon did for the study of nature, Lamar sought to do for the study of Scripture. In other words, just as a chemist applies his reason by means of the inductive method to draw conclusions from experimental data, so Lamar claims “The Scriptures admit of being studied and expounded upon the principles of the inductive method.”

The question we must ask is: Does the kind of autonomous, left-brain, rational method that has worked so well in the study of nature also apply to the study of Scripture? Given the success science has had in explaining the workings of nature, it is tempting to hope for a similar method. None-the-less, when applied to Scripture, the inductive method proves itself to be inadequate, for two reasons:

First, we are not principally rational creatures. We are relational creatures. Almost invariably, our relational commitments trump any allegedly neutral, objective commitment to a rational method. Thus, those with strong relational ties to communities that advocate infant baptism find strong biblical evidence for infant baptism, while those from communities that advocate adult baptism find strong biblical evidence for adult baptism. Likewise, those with strong relational ties to communities that advocate the cessation of charismatic gifts find strong biblical evidence for this, while those from communities that recognize the continued operation of the charismatic gifts find strong biblical evidence for their belief. Occasionally, based upon personal Bible study, an individual comes to the conclusion that her prior way of thinking has been in error. But, when this does occur, it almost always is anchored in two things:

- First, a measure of emotional pain, as old understandings are found to be inadequate to deal with the exigencies of life. For example, Martin Luther’s angst regarding sinners before a righteous God was answered by a new understanding based upon Romans 1:17, “The righteous shall live by faith.”
- Second, a relationship with someone from outside of the person’s original community, as Augustine’s relationship with Ambrose, Bishop of Milan.

The main point is that relational commitments and emotional allegiances always trump deductive or inductive reasoning.

Second, Christians believe that God is the author of the Bible. Like any author, God has in His mind, ideas that He seeks to communicate to the mind of the reader or hearer of his Word. Thus, Bible study is something qualitatively different from a scientist studying nature. It is the process by which one mind seeks to understand the communication of another mind. There are skeptics among us who believe that communication between two minds is not possible, but this cannot be the position of a Christ follower. We hold that as persons created in the image of God, we can know the mind of God, “This is eternal life that you know the only true God” (John 17:3); even if imperfectly. “We see through a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). But is the way

we come to know the mind of another person principally a rational process, analogous to the way a scientist understands nature, or is it something quite different?

Development of a systematic theology might be accomplished by a method of systematic reasoning. It certainly was for Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. But for most of us, even in the case of systematic theology, to the extent that we have learned systematic theology, we have learned it neither by a deductive nor an inductive process but by a catechetical one. A trusted community member instructed us, the instruction made intuitive sense to us, and thus we accepted it.

We humans have the capacity to know the mind of another person. Although our knowledge of another's mind is usually (but not always) mediated through a set of sense experiences, this knowing the mind of another is not strictly speaking a rational, inductive process. For example, some months ago I was on a plane taking off from Washington Dulles airport. The light of a bright setting sun shone through my window, striking the face of the passenger in the seat immediately in front of me. He looked back, grimaced at the sun and turned forward. I reached up and shut the window cover. He turned, smiled and said, "Thank you."

Two things stand out: First, I clearly understood something of the other person's mind. Second, it was much more a relational-intuitive process than a rational one. Even though, afterwards, I could give a rational explanation as to how I came to understand my fellow passenger's desire, it doesn't change the fact that my coming to know was based on a relational-intuitive process not a rational one. If this is a representative example of how a human mind usually comes to know another human mind, then it is likely the way a human mind comes to know the Divine mind. And, if we examine our experience, we find this to be the case.

I am absolutely convinced that God loves me. But the way, I came to this conclusion was not a rational, inductive one. It was intuitive and relational. I was fifteen. It was a Sunday evening and my parents had just returned from a marriage retreat that would transform their lives and the life of our family. As they walked in our front door, I can honestly say that I've never seen two people more in love. My father caught me up into his arms, held me close, and said "Son, I love you." I have no prior memory of him holding me that way or saying, "I love you" in such a manner. That night lying in bed, tears coming down my eyes, I kept thinking, "My dad loves me. My dad loves me." Then, the thought came to me, "Perhaps God loves me, like my dad loves me." Immediately I knew it to be true. Raised in a Christian home, I never doubted the fundamental Christian doctrines. But, from that moment, I knew something of the mind of God towards me in a way that I had never known before. That I can give a rational Biblical defense of the doctrine of the love of God, does not change the fact that my coming to know was a relational and intuitive process not a rational one. If we each consider how we have come to know what we know of the mind of God, we will find that it is principally through this kind of relational-intuitive process. Scripture states, "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you," not "Reason and you will understand."

This does not imply that thoughtful, systematic study of Scripture is unimportant. Our relational-intuitive capacity to know another mind is inhibited by human finitude and weakness. Thus, we humbly engage in an ongoing process to understand ever more clearly. And, as my wife has made absolutely clear to me, knowledge of another's mind is best facilitated when one is humble, patient and careful to understand both the meaning and context of another's words. Likewise, in attending to the mind of God, if we are careful to discern the meaning of scriptural words and the historical context of a passage, we will gain a clearer understanding of the ideas he wishes to communicate. Thus, I've found my limited knowledge of New Testament Greek to be very helpful. And, great riches can be found in the insights of scholars who have spent a lifetime studying the historical, cultural context of Scripture.

Reason does have its essential functions. When our intuition suggests more than one understanding of a text, we engage a rational process to evaluate the pros and cons of possible

interpretations, seeking to discern that which is most plausible. Finally, Scripture exhorts us, be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). What we know of God, we should be able to rationally justify, but such justification is secondary to the relational-intuitive apprehension of his Mind.

Bible Study as Self-Expression

The Bible study focused on self-expression usually begins with the reading of a Scripture passage followed by some form of the question, “What does this mean to you?”

In most things of life there is the possibility of erring on the left or erring on the right. If the error on the right is to understand Scripture as a data set to be processed through a rational inductive process, the error on the left is to understand Bible study as primarily a forum to explore one’s own thoughts and feelings. Such groups make the mistake of focusing on personal reactions to the text rather than on discernment of God’s thoughts, feelings, and actions.

It’s worth noting that in human relationships, the lack of proper attention to another’s mind quickly leads to relational breakdown. When my wife is sharing her heart and mind with me, it is a mistake for me to focus on what I think or feel about her words. She insists that my primary focus be on understanding her. And, she is right to do so. For me to do otherwise is to respond not to her but to my own internal processes. True, there is a time for me to explore my reactions to what she is saying, but that time is only after I have gained some understanding of her mind.

In like manner, it is important to examine our reactions to a Scripture text, but that examination must be secondary to attending to the mind of God. Perhaps counter-intuitive in a narcissistic culture, any personally meaningful Bible study must begin not with what I think, feel and do but with what God thinks, feels and does.

At times, groups convened for this kind of study have proved to be very helpful to the participants. But, in my experience, the helpful component was rarely the actual study of Scripture, but rather the presence of an attuned, caring community.

Bible Study as Lecture

Lecture implies a single teacher doing the great majority of the talking. Most of us have on occasion heard a powerful, life-changing message. We left seeing as we had not seen before. But to be transformative, a teacher/preacher must clear a very high bar. He or she must:

- Possess a greater understanding of the ideas presented in any Scripture passage than the majority of those in the room.
- Be able to effectively communicate those ideas, in a manner that holds attention, while overcoming our cultural ADD, without degenerating into showmanship that sacrifices knowledge for hype.
- Be sufficiently wise to suggest relevant personal application.

No wonder inspirational teachers are either extraordinarily gifted or spend an enormous amount of time in preparation. While perhaps a pastor possesses the necessary gifting or is able to spend the needed time, is it realistic to expect the leaders of small group Bible studies to do so? I think not. There are far too many Sunday school classes led by committed, well-intended teachers, but those attending do so out of a sense of obligation rather than of inspiration and personal growth.

There is a second problem with lecture. As helpful as an inspirational, idea rich lecture may be, lecture does have an inherent liability. For most of us, it encourages mental passivity. If we consider the last time we heard a sermon, even a very good sermon, and we inquire as to the extent of our mind’s activity; we will likely discover that the great majority of the time our mind

was quite passive. Even if our attention did not drift, which likely it did, there was little active questioning on our part, little active seeking to know and to understand. We sat waiting for some idea to strike us or for something the preacher said to impress us.

Our passivity is perhaps a cultural artifact born of spending far too many hours in front of a mind numbing TV screen or in schools where the class work is sheer drudgery. We can think back to the Puritan preachers in colonial Massachusetts, who preached for hours to highly attentive congregations who would return home for lunch and a lively discussion of the morning's sermon. But such is not the case today, and we must recognize the inherent weaknesses of the culture in which we live. Relatively few of us are strong at giving proactive attention to a lecture. Thus, in addition to good preaching, we need the kind of Bible studies that require us to think and consider. Is this not the model of Jesus in the Gospels? At times He provides the crowds with an inspirational lecture, and at times he invites a smaller group to think, consider, and dialog.

Bible Study as Shared Attention to God's Mind

Having explored both the limitations and the potential fruitfulness of four different forms of Bible study, I would like to suggest a method that:

- Invites all to actively engage God through Scripture.
- Understands Scripture as God's communication to the reader/listener and scriptural studies as an opportunity to know something of the mind of God.
- Takes seriously the relational and intuitive nature of knowing the mind of any person, including God.
- Affirms that all persons, regardless of academic background or ability, are bearers of the divine image and thus, capable of profound insight into the mind of God.
- Provides a safe forum for the examination of initial intuitions; affirming, challenging and/or clarifying them by a return to the text and through the shared insight of others.
- Creates space for the insights of Bible scholars.
- Allows for the exploration of the personal significance of a text within a supportive community,
- Promotes attention and active mental engagement.
- Makes use of memory's power to combine important perceptions according to their associations and the way this associative function can be greatly enhanced in a group.
- Facilitates supportive, relational bonding through a shared process of coming to know God and one another in a deeper way.
- Cultivates emotional-relational-spiritual maturity.

In summary, it is a method in which the participants give shared attention to God's Mind.

As an essential component of the education offered at Ambleside schools, this method has been used in countless classrooms from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Parents have adopted the method and found it transformative for family devotions. Sunday school teachers have also found it helpful and have replaced the standard curriculum with this method, discovering that adults and children delight in actually studying the Bible.

The Ambleside Method requires a study leader, but he or she is not a lecturer, the expert, or the one to give the final word on a scriptural passage. In fact, the leader should be "slow to speak and quick to hear." Apart from the "Setup" (which I discuss below), when the leader speaks, he or she should almost always be making an imperative statement, "Jack, please read the next six verses" or asking an open question, "What do these verses tell us about the human condition?" Declarative statements should be rare and under no circumstances should the leader do more

than thirty percent of the talking. The leader has three responsibilities: maintaining the atmosphere, promoting an Immanuel focus, and facilitating an engagement with the text.

Maintaining The Atmosphere

Just as there is a physical atmosphere in any social setting, there is also an emotional-relational atmosphere as well. It surrounds us. We breathe it in and it has a powerful impact. Even as a healthy physical atmosphere promotes physical health, so a healthy emotional-relational atmosphere promotes emotional-relational health. If a Bible study is to be truly life giving, it must be conducted in an atmosphere that promotes life.

The fruitfulness of any lesson is directly proportional to the quality of the relational atmosphere. When the relational atmosphere is positive, the relational circuits of our brain turn on, and our whole brain works in an optimal way. Research suggests that a positive brain operates about thirty percent more effectively than a brain that is negative, neutral or stressed. An optimal atmosphere is indicated by the presence of:

- Bright smiling faces.
- Curiosity, a desire and delight in knowing.
- Free and joyful participation by all.
- Peaceful, well-ordered progress through the lesson.
- Attentive listening by all to all.
- Inspiring ideas bouncing from one person to another.
- Empathy, emotional attunement with one another.

To a large degree, the group leader establishes the atmosphere. The baseline will be set by the leader's ability to:

- Embrace all who come with joy.
- Remain in a high joy state regardless of whatever emotional messiness might appear.
- Keep the group on task peacefully.
- Maintain focus on what God is saying through the Scripture.
- Include the weak as readily as the strong.
- Avoid becoming the focus of attention. (When it becomes about the leader, the atmosphere deteriorates.)

Promoting an Immanuel Focus

This method of Bible study is not a rational-inductive process. It is a relational-intuitive attempt to apprehend something more of the mind of God, while staying relationally connected with a supportive community. Thus, it is essential to begin the study by spending a little time focusing attention on Immanuel, God with us. There are several ways to do this, but all require silence, eyes closed, and focused attention.

- **Appreciation** – Each member of the group is invited to remember a time and a place when he or she felt appreciation, to enter again into those feelings of appreciation, enjoying as many details of the moment as possible. And from the position of appreciation, each silently expresses thankfulness to God.
- **Centering prayer** – Each person selects one of the names of God that is particularly meaningful; for example, Father, Abba, Jesus, or Comforter. Silently, with each exhaling breathe, the divine name is internally spoken, any anxiety is released and attention given to the presence of God.

- **Interactive Memory of God** – Each person remembers a time and a place in which he or she experienced God as very near, enters into the memory as fully as possible, and enjoys again the presence of God.
- **Interactive Presence of God** – Each person reaches out with his or her awareness and connects with the presence of God, spending a few minutes enjoying God's loving presence.

Many persons do not have a history of strong interactive connections with God and may struggle with experiencing God's interactive presence. Therefore, it is always better to begin with appreciation or centering prayer. If after several group meetings, the leader elects to suggest focusing on interactive memories or the interactive presence of God, it is best to explain that for some this may be difficult and to offer the option of returning to appreciation or centering prayer. After the group has some experience with the various forms of Immanuel focus, the best option may be to allow members of the group to choose the method which best facilitates their own awareness of God's presence.

After two to three minutes of Immanuel focus, a member of the group should be asked to pray orally, inviting the Lord to be present during the Bible study and to speak to each through the Scripture.

If during the course of the study, there is a sense of confusion, discord or disconnect from Immanuel. It is always appropriate to pause and spend a few minutes returning to Immanuel focus before continuing the study.

Engaging the Text

There are five components to the Bible study itself

- A Well Chosen Text
- Setup of the Text
- Reading of the Text
- Narration of the Text
- Response to the Ideas of the Text

A Well Chosen Text – While all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable, not all Scripture passages are equally accessible or equally rich in relevant ideas. And, not all translations are of equal literary quality. Bible texts should be chosen that are both idea rich and comprehensible by the group. And the Bible translation used should be of high literary quality. Our minds are attracted and better adhere to beautiful language.

Setup of the Text – The Setup is a four to seven minute introduction to a Scripture passage for the purpose of preparing minds to engage the text. But, it is NOT an explanation or summary of the text. When a leader explains the text, he establishes himself as mediator between the text's author and the other members of the study; thereby damaging the capacity of each individual to have his or her own relationship with the text and through it, the text's author (God). In so doing, the leader is standing in the place of the Holy Spirit, whose job it is to "guide to all truth" (John 16:13).

A good setup facilitates understanding so that members of the study can fluently engage the text. It will possibly, but not necessarily include several of the following:

- **Review of the prior week's lesson.** "In last week's study, Jesus used the metaphor of a vine and branches, would someone tell us what we learned about our relationship with the Father?" Note: Apart from what might be necessary for the current lesson, it is always better for the leader not to be the one who gives the review, even if no one else can remember. After all, if they didn't remember after spending an hour on the topic, why would they remember your summary?

- **Description of the setting.** “In this week’s study, we find Jesus in a room with His disciples. He has washed the disciples’ feet. Judas has left to betray Him. In a few hours He will be arrested, tortured, and killed. In this context, Jesus shares His heart with His closest friends.”
- **Clarification of any important or potentially unknown words.** “In the text, we are about to read, the words ‘command’ or ‘commandment’ appear five times. These words imply a directive that carries with it the expectation of obedience. Commands are not suggestions. They are demands. In verses eighteen and nineteen, the word “world” is used six times. In this context it does not mean the physical world, rather Jesus is referring to the world system, its culture, values, powers and ways of doing things.”
- **Clarification of any important or potentially unknown references or metaphors.** “In the middle of our passage, Jesus talks of bearing fruit. What does it mean to bear fruit?”

During the setup, members of the group will be paying careful attention to the leader’s nonverbal communication. Is she interested, expectant, enthusiastic about engaging the Scripture? If so, others will catch her enthusiasm. If not, others will catch her malaise.

Reading of the Text – The text is to be read orally, a segment at a time, with all following along on the printed page. The length of each segment is dependent upon the complexity of the text and the capacity of the group members to hear and assimilate. In the beginning, it’s better to start smaller, perhaps a paragraph at a time of Jesus’s teaching, three or four paragraphs if He is telling a story. As proficiency is gained, segments can be lengthened. The goal is to keep the mind working hard enough that it must give focused attention, but not so hard that it gets confused and overwhelmed.

It is essential that each segment be read once and only once. Bibles are then turned face down, until time to read the next segment. Generally, there is no looking back. The reason is that we have a lazy streak. If we know we can look back, we will plan to look back, and we will not give the text the same focused attention. We must get the text off the page of the Bible and into our minds. Knowing we can look back hinders this process. If a few points are missed, it is not a concern. In the process of narration, all will have opportunity to access what was overlooked.

Narration of the Text - Narration is the art of telling back what has been read using the author’s language, sequence and detail. It is not a summary nor is it a commentary. It is an attempt to repeat what was heard. There has been a significant amount of research on narrating or telling back, and it is well established that when we narrate, we do a much better job of assimilating the text, understanding the text, and remembering the text. Narration can take different forms:

- Oral narration – An individual is asked to retell as much as he can of what the author wrote as close to the author’s words as possible. The rest of the group is then invited to make additions or suggest anything that might be more accurately stated.
- Partner narration – The group is divided into pairs. One member of each pair tells back the passage to his or her partner. The partner then makes additions or suggests anything that might be more accurately stated.
- Written narration – Each member of the group retells what has been read in a written form. Several participants are then invited to read what they have written. Finally, a general invitation is given for additions or suggestions as to what might be more accurately stated.

It is essential to make the distinction between narration and a summary (a personal synthesis of the author’s words) or commentary (a personal reflection on the author’s words). Time for synthesis or reflection comes later. First, the text must be assimilated; the text must be gotten from the printed page into the mind of each person. The more complete the assimilation, the

more accurate will be the synthesis or relevant the reflection. Narration is a retelling of what the author has said using the author's language, sequence, and detail.

Sadly, some persons can experience a rather high degree of performance anxiety when invited to narrate. This is an unfortunate artifact of an educational system, in which those who do not perform adequately experience toxic shame. Performance anxiety inhibits brain functioning, and the person struggles to narrate at all. When this happens, the group's response must be one of joyful acceptance and reassurance. The struggling person must be encouraged to tell back something, whatever is remembered even if only a few words. And equally important, the leader must not shy away from weakness. The weak must be called upon as joyfully and as frequently as the strong. If this is not done, even in a misguided attempt to be gracious and not make the weak uncomfortable, it will backfire, sending a subtle message to the entire group that in this gathering, weakness is not welcome.

At times, the group's narrations will indicate that some key idea or central point was missed or the meaning was unclear. Such situations are best handled by the leader simply stating, "I think we missed something. "Tom, would you read verses eighteen and nineteen for us again?" After Tom reads, the leader asks, "Now what did our text say?" Two things are important here:

- First, that the leaders not give the correct answer, to do so places the leader as the mediator between the text and the other members of the group.
- Second, that this be done rarely and never for trivial matters.

This leads to the question of what to do when someone gets it wrong.

- Healthy groups are able to self-correct. One person states, "Jesus said, 'You are my friend if you lay down your life for me.'" Another responds, "I think what he said was, 'You are my friend if you keep my commandments.'"
- If it's trivia, it's trivia. It really doesn't matter if the text said, "bear fruit" or "produce fruit." Obsessing about trivia contaminates the atmosphere.
- Use discernment. There is not a test at the end of the Bible study. The Holy Spirit is the primary teacher, and He has His timeline. Insisting that everyone immediately get it right can do more harm than good.

Response to the Ideas of the Text

After one or more segments of the text have been assimilated, taken from printed page to mind, there is the opportunity for each person to be embraced by the ideas of the text and to respond to them. It is essential to remember that our minds are not highly engaged by mere information, even true information. What our minds seek is increasing understanding, a deeper way of seeing, Ideas with a capital "I" unfolding and expanding. Information is static. Once stated, there is little more that can be thought or said. Ideas multiply thought; they unfold and expand within the individual and the group. They provoke deeper ways of seeing and invite deeper questions. Ideas ping around the room, building from one person to another, each adding a slightly new insight.

"That in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself" is a wonderful truth. Consider how this truth might be treated as a piece of mere information. The leader asks the closed question, "According to 2 Corinthians 5:19, what was God doing in Christ?" The reply is given, "Reconciling the world in Christ." Correct answer, and there is nothing left to be said.

Contrast this with treating 2 Corinthians 5:19 as a beautiful idea, something potent and fertile. The leader asks the open question, "What does Paul mean when he claims that in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself?" If the atmosphere is safe and persons are free to fully explore and share their thoughts, immediately each mind starts searching and integrating all that is known about Paul, Christ, the needs of the world, and reconciliation. The mind draws from past Scripture study, what has been learned from others, and what has been personally

experienced in an attempt to understand the mind of Paul. A member of the group suggests an insight, someone else adds, a third adds still more. Ideas are know pinging around the room. Minds are highly engaged, actively considering, deepening understanding and personal relevance. Notice this is not fundamentally an act of self-expression, an attempt to know what I think about the passage, it is an attempt to know the mind of Paul and to know the mind of the Holy Spirit who inspired his writing.

Closed questions seek short, specific answers that are either correct or incorrect. For examples, in a study of John 15:7-20, the following closed questions might appear:

- What was the commandment Jesus gave His disciples?
- What did Jesus appoint His disciples to do?
- Why did Jesus say the world would hate his disciples?

There is a single, relatively simple, definite right answer to each of these questions. In contrast, a study would be far more fruitful if the leader asked open questions such as:

- How do we understand the relationship between abiding with Jesus and keeping the commandments?
- How are the ideas of abiding, love, commandment and joy bound together?
- What's the difference between the kind of joy Jesus is talking about in this passage and the adrenaline based thrills one might have on a roller coaster ride?
- If we are people of love and joy, how is it that the world could hate us?

Notice the difference between the closed and open questions. The former expect a single, relatively simple right answer, while the later seek to engage ideas, to ponder and to understand more fully. They invite our minds to engage with one another and with the mind of God.

Perhaps the biggest problem with closed questions is that in groups dominated by closed questions, the strong become stronger (at least in appearance) and the weak become weaker. Closed questions invite those with a specific skill set to shine. Individuals with focused academic attention and strong short-term memory get the right answers first. They are tempted to feel superior and establish their identity in the group based upon performance. Those who are slower and less accurate tend to feel inferior, lacking significant opportunity to contribute. Something of a counterfeit spiritual hierarchy develops to the detriment of all.

In contrast, once any latent performance anxiety is overcome, open questions promote an atmosphere in which every person's contribution is valued, and therefore every person senses himself or herself to be of value. Time and time again we have seen five year olds offer remarkable insight into the significance of Scripture.

Use of open questions is not the only means of response to a text, but it is the most important tool. Other kinds of response include:

- Compare and contrast
- Summarizing
- Developing a set of questions the author might be asked
- Identifying the most challenging ideas of the text
- And many more.

The essential thing to note is that any fruitful opportunity for response to the text will make use of memory's power to integrate a broad array of associations. It will not be limited to recalling a certain cluster of words (the right answer) from short-term memory.

Contaminants

There are a number of things that can have a toxic effect on the atmosphere, inhibit engagement with the mind of the Divine author, or disrupt relational solidarity. Among these contaminants are:

- **The Talkie-Talkie Leader** – When the leader talks too much and dominates center stage, most accept this familiar stance and become passive. When the leader gives an explanation of the meaning and significance of the text, most become passive. Our thought process follows something like this: “If the leader will give the right answer, why should I think for myself?”
- **Debate** – As a general rule, when one starts debating, either with another or with one’s self, the listening ends. There are appropriate forums for the systematic evaluation of the pros and cons of opposing positions, but this is not one of them. And, it is remarkable how frequently just listening and reflecting leads to clarity.
- **Narcissism** – Bible study is not therapy. While it can be quite therapeutic, the focus is not on the thoughts-feelings-desires of the individual. The focus is on the text and on what God is communicating. This will often result in an inflaming of holy thoughts-feelings-desires and conviction regarding unholy thoughts-feelings-desires. The sharing of such responses to the Word is powerful and appropriate. But, this is very different from autonomous, narcissistic self-preoccupation. Should a participant in the group become inappropriately self-preoccupied; the leader should gently refocus on the text and what God might be saying. Of course, if a member of the group is in crisis, the group may need to shift focus to the need at hand. But, this should be a rare occurrence.
- **Indifference to Others** – Those in the study group should be at least as interested in the insights and reactions of others as in those of their own. When members of the group are more interested in talking than listening, in thinking their own thoughts than hearing the thoughts of others; something has gone quite wrong. This will destroy the atmosphere of a group and must be gently confronted. “I get the sense that we are more interested in talking over one another than in listening to one another. Has anyone else noticed that? If so, what do you think it is about?”
- **Harshness with Weakness** – If the group is together for any length of time, personal weaknesses will be revealed, from ignorance to emotional immaturity to blatant sin. To be a life giving community, the group must handle weakness well. And, in this, the group leader will invariably set the tone. While weakness is not be indulged, the weak must perceive acceptance and be embraced.

The goal of the method of Bible study just described is to maximize personal growth by facilitating a relational-intuitive encounter with the mind of God mediated through Scripture, in the context of a high joy, supportive community. While the formal, academic study of Scripture is certainly of great value, I have argued here that for most of us most of the time, Bible study should be an opportunity to know (in the sense of personal knowledge) something more of the mind of God. And, I have suggested a method that many of us have found helpful in accomplishing this in private devotional times and group Bible studies.