

A 'THICK DESCRIPTION' OF TWO BIBLE STUDIES BY THE STRAND ANGLICAN GROUP

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Bible Study 1: Matthew 13:53-58

Profile of the group

The group, which met on 7 March, 2001, consisted of five members though they indicated that other members were not present owing to the short notice given for the meeting of the study group that evening. The leader of the group was a female in her sixties, possibly older, in whose house the group met. The notes provided with the transcript indicate that the normal leader of the group was overseas. The rest of the group consisted of two males (one of whom was the leader's husband, I suspect) and two more females (one of whom was the wife of the other man in the group, I suspect). All were probably in their 50s or 60s. The group had a multi-racial composition (coloured and white).

The Bible study group was formed out of an Alpha-group that had been run last September by the local Anglican Church. The group had never before undertaken a Bible study in which they read directly from the text and then reflected on it without the assistance of a guide book or guide questions. This situation posed some problems since the recording of such an inexperienced group seems to have caused varying degrees of uncomfortableness among the group's members, especially from the stand-in leader who was unsure of what was actually expected of the group and expressed concern about this.

Bible Study Procedure

The group began with prayer by the leader in which she asked for illumination in their Bible study. She proceeded to ask one of the male members to read the text. She then gave her own view about the central meaning of the text, following this up by asking one of the women what she thought when she read the verse. From this point onwards people made contributions on a fairly random basis, though the leader spoke more times than any one else by a fairly wide margin. Apparently she seemed to feel that it was her responsibility to keep the group moving forward.

The following break down of the times each individual spoke is instructive since it shows that the leader and one other female member of the group spoke almost twice as often as the remaining 3 members. (The two actually spoke 65% of the total occasions in which different individuals spoke.) A quick examination of the transcript shows that the two dominant women speakers, 1 and 3, also dominated in terms of the volume of what they said per individual time spoken by a considerable degree. (Using a rough line count, they spoke 74% of the volume of what was said.) That the dominant members of the group were women is something that might not be expected in many church contexts in South Africa.

	<i>Number of times spoke</i>	<i>Lines of Text Spoken</i>
Speaker 1 (Leader, female)	30	56
Speaker 2 (Male)	13	13
Speaker 3 (Female)	22	36
Speaker 4 (Male)	13	17
Speaker 5 (Female)	2	2

Description of the Interpretation of Matthew 13:53-58

The actual discussion around Matt. 13:53-58 focused on limited number of issues. The group leader began by trying to direct the group to the seemingly problematic relation between Jesus and his hometown (though it might be argued that her initial comment would have been more appropriate in relation to Matt. 12:46-50 which deals with the reaction of Jesus' family to his activities). She then ventured a possible explanation herself by suggesting that it was Jesus' ability to perform miracles that led to the people of Nazareth being jealous. The second individual to speak, speaker 3, was asked to comment by the leader but struggled to find a direct response to what the leader had said. She introduced a new reason for the possible disaffection of Jesus' hometown citizenry, namely, the fact that they were all Jewish, but Jesus did not comply with the Jewish law. The logic of her comment is convoluted because she offers as a reason for her assertion that Jesus did not keep the law, the fact that he performed miracles. Somehow the mention of miracles leads her on to introduce Herod (presumably Herod Antipas mentioned in Matt. 14:1) into the discussion as one who was interested in Jesus' miracles.

The leader, in trying to get the discussion back on track, asked for information about where Jesus had been performing his miracles prior to his visit to Nazareth and this seemed to lead to an attempt to contextualise the Nazareth incident. After the redirection speaker 4 raised another issue regarding the social origins of Jesus, identifying him as a peasant, and suggesting that this was why the people of Jesus' hometown were not impressed with him. This caused several people to reflect on the humble origins of Jesus versus expectations of people regarding the socio-educational level of religious and political leaders among the Jewish people. Jesus was eventually give a "C grade" rating by the group which was agreed to be the lowest possible one, and this was then used to explain why the people of Nazareth were so astonished with Jesus. The group then moved on to reflect on Jesus' transcendence of his "C grade" origins by reference to his boyhood visit to the temple (Luke 2) in which he demonstrate abilities that went beyond his age and social origins.

The leader then redirected and tried to bring some closure to this line of discussion by suggesting that possibly one of the issues at Nazareth was a lack of trust in Jesus because of his origins. Speaker 2 then related the lack of trust to the lack of faith that is mentioned in the text as the reason why Jesus was unable to perform miracles in his hometown. The leader then used this as a basis for summarising the Nazareth incident and the original problem she had raised around Jesus' problematic relationship with his hometown.

A reference to Jesus' wisdom by the leader in her summary led speaker 3 to suggest that the hometown people wondered from where Jesus got his knowledge. The way in which she put this suggests that she equated wisdom with knowledge, but in any case it led to a Christian affirmation on the part of several group members that it is Jesus' divine origins that give him his exceptional wisdom / knowledge.

In response to the discussion, the leader interjected the modern day issue of faith into the conversation by suggesting that our inability to hand over our problems (the leader does not actually make clear what it is she is referring to but on the basis of the context she seems to have problems or cares in mind) reflects our inability to trust that Jesus can solve them, just as the people in Nazareth did not trust Jesus.

Somehow, the next shift in focus was to Jesus as an ordinary man (perhaps based on his earlier rating as "C grade"). The ordinariness of Jesus was seen as accounting for Jesus' ministry being directed towards ordinary people, but obviously this is moving

completely away from the text on which they were suppose to focus. But they came back to the text through a catchword association when someone mentioned that Jesus came for people like carpenters. Since Jesus' father was referred to as the "carpenter" speaker 3 picked up the names of the family members mentioned in the text but then jumped to Matt. 12:50 and its reference to those who follow Jesus being his family. The women in the group then raised the point that the sisters of Jesus from his human family remain unnamed, unlike his brothers, at which point the leader came to the conclusion that she had never previously thought about Jesus' sisters names, but unsurprisingly she does not ask why this should be.

The final point made by the group is back to the old theme of Jesus being "C rated" in terms of origins but being far superior to this on the basis of his knowledge.

Analysis

The discussion above should make clear that this group really was not able to find a systematic approach to the text nor, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, did they do very much to explicitly relate the text to their own lives with two exceptions. The leader took up the issue of lack of faith / trust implied in the story and related it to contemporary Christians in a very non-specific way, and there was interest in the ordinariness of Jesus with which they identified at a psychological level because of their own perceived "social ordinariness." It is difficult to say that there was a conscious interpretive mode present, but this is perhaps not unexpected since the group had never tried to do a Bible study based on reading and reflecting on a biblical text and they did not have a leader with any real experience in directing a group, never mind a Bible study. Nevertheless, they did try to generate some meaning from the text by focusing on why Jesus should be rejected by his own hometown. At times their reflections made the impression of following a stream of consciousness.

If this group were to become a functional Bible study group they would seem to need two things rather desperately. First they need some training in the process of reading and reflecting on a biblical text, and second they need someone who has the confidence to lead the group and keep the group directed towards the text and unravelling its meaning.

Bible study 2: Luke 4:16-22, 28-30

Group Profile

The group for this study remained the same five people that were present at the meeting of the previous week with the same woman taking responsibility for leading the group. As with the previous week there was a clear sense on the part of the leader that she was only doing this because there was no one else available to do it. At the beginning the group leader somewhat rhetorically asked who was going to talk (i.e., direct the group this week) and later she indicated that she wished another woman known to the group could be present because she would know what to do with the questions given to them as a guide for the study. All of this did not bode well for the quality of the Bible study.

Bible Study Procedure

The study began with the group leader asking speaker 3 to open with prayer. The leader then asked the woman who had participated least the previous week to read the text from Luke. She then began by introducing the handout sheet that she had received from the

research group. The research assistant provided the group with the following typed handout:

1. Please read the text in the way you would normally do.
2. What in the text is particularly striking for you? Is there something that you do not understand?
3. What would you say is the message of the text for you in your context today?
4. A bit of background.

How do you think we may respond to the message of Luke 4 for us today?

One possible response is from the Jubilee 2000 campaign. This is an international initiative to address the massive problem of debt in the third world. Many poor countries are forced to use a significant proportion of their national budgets to fund debt repayment, leading to a constant net outflow of money from poor to rich countries. The notion of “Jubilee” is a reference to the “year of grace” mentioned in Luke 4:19 and the year of Jubilee prescribed in Leviticus 25.

One may therefore argue that the Jubilee 2000 campaign is one attempt to apply the message of Luke 4 in the world in which we live today. In response to this somewhat controversial campaign, some people argue that third world debt should be cancelled, while others maintain that debts should not be incurred in the first place (i.e. that financial responsibility is important).

What do you think? How should we respond to the message of Luke 4 for us today?

There was little response from the group either about what was striking or about issues needing clarification. Eventually someone pointed to the use of Isaiah 61 in Luke and asked why Jesus had used this passage. Oddly the conclusion of several members of the group was that it was an accident in that Jesus had simply read what was given to him. (They obviously overlooked the fact that Jesus chose the text from Isaiah for some particular reason.) Overall the group spent a disproportionately large amount of their time trying to understand what it was that the research group was expecting them to say. The slip of paper was passed between the leader (speaker 1) and the speakers 2 and 4 from the previous week as they all struggled to understand what was “expected” of them with out much success. This cast a negative spell on the Bible study session as the group seemed to be both bemused and frustrated.

The participation patterns were very different this week from the previous week. The leader continued to be very prominent but the woman speaker 3 from the previous week participated very little. Instead the male speakers 2 and 4 carried much of the discussion this week.

Description of the interpretation of Luke 4:16-22, 28-30

One of the things which was notable by its absence was any discussion of the relationship of the text from Luke 4 to the text that they had read the previous week. The connection simply never came up. Rather than beginning with a thoughtful discussion of the meaning of the text, which they seemed to take as being self-evident, they began with the question of the texts applicability for their contemporary world. The leader of the group at first struggled to find the connection between the Jubilee 2000 campaign and Luke 4:19. But with the help of speakers 2 and 4 they began discussing the problem of debt release and its importance. Speaker 4, a white male, wanted to know why money had been lent to poor countries in the first place. If it was for food he could accept this, but he was worried that the money had not reach its intended beneficiaries, and later came back to the fact that

debts for food were acceptable but not for wars or for the benefit of wealthy members in poor countries.

The leader and speaker 2 tried to bring the discussion back to the text. Speaker 3 pointed to the healings mentioned in Isaiah 61 and related this to forgiveness and the “healing” of Zacchaeus. Speaker 2 went back and read Leviticus 25 for illumination. But the discussion soon came up against the need to “perform” for the research group and the leader could only say that they had been given a difficult task with this passage - something that she was to repeat several more times during the Bible study. The fact that a long silenced followed her first comment about the difficult nature of the task seemed to be indicative of the confusion and lack of insight into how to deal with the guidelines that they had been given and the text itself.

Speaker 4 eventually indicated that if the captives in Luke 4:18 were Christians, as he seemed to think, then this changed things. He interspersed his thoughts on this with a line of reasoning that suggested that the Bible expects people to help themselves since the proverb in Luke 4:23 says “Physician heal yourself.” He eventually arrived at the conclusion that if leaders were really Christians and everyone took up the Christian faith then all the world's problems would be solved, that is, Luke 4:18 would be fulfilled.

Speaker 2, a coloured male, reflected on the fact that during the apartheid period many people asked for handouts for the poor but money did not actually get to the poor since middle persons kept it for themselves. Speaker 4 immediately took this as a reference to Allan Boesak.

Speaker 3 sought to spiritualise Luke 4:18 by seeing blindness as a moral/spiritual problem. The leader picked up this theme by talking about turning a blind eye to street children, but speaker 4 (the husband of the leader) was having none of this since Luke 4 had nothing to do with street children but everything to do with a perfect world where everyone is a Christian in his view.

In summarising their study, the leader indicated that she felt that they had sufficiently pulled the passage apart.

Analysis

If the first week's session was sub-optimal but at least a reasonable attempt by inexperienced people to read and reflect on a biblical text, the second week's study was almost disastrous. This group is a living testimony to the importance of either natural or trained leadership in a Bible study meeting. Lacking either type of leadership, the group was largely rudderless, a problem probably compounded by their complete lack of experience in text based Bible studies. There can be no doubt that the questions which they were given for the study of Luke 4 rather than helping them proved an obstacle since they, like so many students, tried to work out what they were supposed to answer and as a result their discussion was superficial and lacked coherence for the most part.

In my view, this group should not be given a very prominent place in the research project because they were not an established Bible study group and they lacked the leadership necessary to carry them through to some sort of coherent approach to the passages that they were asked to read and discuss.