

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

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Profile of the group

This Anglican Bible study group came into existence three years ago in Belhar as a share and support group and still seems to be more comfortable with sharing personal experiences than being involved in strenuous Bible study.

The leader of the Bible study group is a former teacher and she seems to be comfortable with both Afrikaans and English. It is interesting that despite the fact that only one Afrikaans translation was utilised, as opposed to two English Bible translations, most of the discussion was conducted in Afrikaans.

Most of the twelve members of this group are middle-aged females, with only a sprinkling of older males and young male participants were conspicuous by their absence. Females conducted all of the readings from Scripture, and with one exception, middle-aged members did all the Scripture readings. In fact, the few younger members present made almost no contribution whatsoever.

The group dynamics of this Bible study group seems to boil down to the following: in matters of Bible study they seem to depend heavily on the input of the leader and a few of the more senior members; but there is spontaneous participation from different members when the discussion involves the sharing of one's personal experience of the grace of God that intervenes in the lives of the needy.

The Bible study itself centred on the leader who patiently tried to guide the discussion in ways she saw fit. Members responded to the input of the leader in a somewhat haphazard way, since they usually take their own life experience as point of departure.

Bible study 1: Matthew 13: 53-58

The first Bible study started off with three consecutive readings from Scripture. Two English translations (RSV and KJV?) framed the reading from the one Afrikaans translation (1933/1953 version). Each reading from Scripture closed with the characteristic Anglican liturgical refrain: "Hear the Word of the Lord ... Thanks be to God." After the conclusion of the reading of Scripture, there was an uncomfortable silence. The first attempt at stimulating some discussion entailed the rhetorical question: "Questions needed to be posed and answered – in the time of Jesus and today." The rest of the Bible study was a stop-start affair that struggled to get most of the members involved.

Little attention was given to *the text itself*, other than to repeat the question suggested by the text: "Who is Jesus?" emanating from verses 54-55: "Where did this man get his wisdom ... is not this the carpenter's son?"

Some attention was focused on the *world behind the text* when the group explained the distrust with regards to Jesus by referring to his humble parents and lack of training as a Pharisee or scribe. In the closing stages of the Bible study the leader of the group referred to the virgin birth of Jesus and posed the following question: If his family knew about the extraordinary nature of his conception, why would they be so amazed at his wisdom and

power? The miracle of the birth of Jesus ought to have been enough proof for his own family and inhabitants of his hometown to trust and accept him as the Son of God.

The most important *interpretative strategy* of the group is based on the personal association with the characters in the biblical text. The life experience of members in the Bible study group, of not being respected by their own family or immediate context, resonates with the lack of recognition that Jesus experienced in his hometown.

The identification of analogous situations therefore seems to be the primary strategy to appropriate this meaning of the text – the influence of the *world-in-front-of-the-text* seems to be of prime importance. As Jesus the prophet was criticised by his own people, so do modern ministers suffer from a lack of respect and recognition by their own congregations. In this regard the leader of the Bible study remarked: “We take our ministers today for granted...” and linked it to the statement by Jesus that is still often quoted: “Prophets are not without honour except in their own country ...” (13:57). There was a prevailing awareness of themselves as people who also suffer from a lack of recognition, as was the case with Jesus in Nazareth. Several members referred to the fact that one’s own community will accept a stranger’s point of view far easier than a statement from one of their own people. Another example of the importance of the interpreter’s own context can be gleaned from the remark: “Is more expected of us today, who did not have the opportunity to experience Jesus like the people in the Bible.” During the concluding part of the Bible study a middle aged lady tried to provide answers to the current lack of trust in Jesus: “We do not have time for prayer and that leads to a lack of trust... ask the Bible and you will get an answer, but today we do not have time for the Bible...” Another middle-aged female confirmed this lack of engagement with prayer and Bible study: “Wisdom and power comes from God alone.”

This choice of interpretation and appropriation strategies seems to be rooted in the history of the Bible study group as a share group. Relevance is determined by a certain equivalence of experience “then” and “now” and this naïve analogy seems to be the most significant *heuristic key* involved in the interpretation of the text in question. This “naïve analogy” is well illustrated when the leader pointed out that Jesus had no formal education and that it contributed to the incredulous reaction by his hometown’s people. Today people also find it easier to accept the point of view of someone who studied at a university or technicon.

The *group* itself seemed to be at ease and relaxed with one another and the teacher who took the lead during the Bible study, did her level best to keep the discussion going. This group still exhibited the characteristics of a share group, but seemed out of their depths as a Bible study group. The general attitude amongst the members of the Bible study group ranged from initial uncertainty about what to do, to eventual embarrassment at the growing lack of response from the different members of the group. In the end the Bible study reached no conclusion and simply petered out when it ended with an embarrassed giggle by the leader.

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

The research group provided the following input to the Belhar Anglican group for this Bible study:

Why do you think were the people of Nazareth so angry with Jesus (verse 28-29), especially if you compare that with their response in verse 22?

The translation of verse 22 is problematic. Joachim Jeremias, the well-known New Testament scholar argued that the attempt, later in the chapter (verse 28 & 29) of the same crowd to kill Jesus is the key to understand this text. Most translations interpret the Greek word for “being amazed” (*thaumazo*) in a positive sense. However, amazement can also be negative. Another translation of verse 22 may be: “They were amazed (i.e. extremely upset) about his (far too) gracious words.”

Why would this be? Jeremias argues that the crowd was angry because, in quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2, Jesus stopped before the beloved reference to the vengeance of the Lord. The crowd was upset because they were convinced that the prophecy could only be fulfilled if the day of vengeance arrives when God would punish Israel's enemies. Instead, Jesus said that the prophecy is fulfilled today. Jesus therefore focused on the period of grace that has arrived instead of a period of vengeance.

Do you agree with Jeremias? How have you interpreted this text in the past? In what way is the text relevant for us today?

The second Bible study also commenced with three readings from Scripture that followed the same pattern of the first Bible study. There was an obvious lack of enthusiasm amongst the members of the Bible study and it took some convincing to get the reading from Scripture going. Two of the readings from Scripture were concluded without the liturgical refrain frequently used in the first Bible study.

There was also a numbing uncertainty how to respond to the input read before the Bible study and to the section in Luke that was obviously similar to what was read during the previous week. No explicit reference was made to the additional input during any stage of this second Bible study.

Some attention was given to the text itself. After several prolonged periods of silence, the leader introduced the topic of grace. When even this input was met with meagre response, she illustrated grace by referring to the "good news to the poor... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (4:18-19). All of this was brought under the rubric of the guidance of the Spirit (4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me"). The leader drew specific attention to the reference in 4:22: "(they) were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." She then stated: "Amazement can go two ways." Positively it can serve to express appreciation for the son of a carpenter to have such wisdom. Negatively, it might allude to the conviction that a person with such a humble background as Jesus cannot be trusted. During the course of the discussion a suggestion was made that the group should read again what was written in the corresponding section in the gospel of Matthew. So at least some attempt was made to compare the passage in Luke with the passage discussed during the previous Bible study. The last example illustrating some engagement with the text refers to the well-known statement in 4:24 "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." After some prompting by leader, other group members seemed to agree that jealousy was the main reason for the rejection of Jesus by his own hometown.

As in the first Bible study, scant attention was paid to the *world behind the text*. Amazement is shown that the uneducated Jesus was able to teach with such wisdom. The application of the group amounted to the conclusion that education leads to respect and that this is as true today as it was in the time of Jesus. Here some elements of the honour-and-shame culture in the New Testament is appreciated – probably since it also applies to the Bible study members' own circumstances.

The importance of the *world-in-front-of-the-text* became apparent when the reference to the grace of God led to the group being sidetracked by a discussion on how people in general tended to postpone their commitment to turn away from sin to a time just before their death or just prior to the final judgment. The leader then tried to refocus the discussion by asking: "Are we not afraid to apply Scripture today?" Then the leader pleads with the group: "Do not wait till Judgement day, turn back now and be saved, accept Jesus as Saviour! Make use of the grace that is given to us now." The contemporary context of the Bible study group seems to be filled with temptation. One of the few responses by a male member of the group illustrates this perception: "The devil waits for you in your own place." This is advanced as a reason for the lack of faith and trust in Jesus amongst people today.

It is significant how some members spiritualised the reference to “the poor” by equating it with a lack of faith and not of material possessions. One statement might indirectly refer to lack of material possessions when one of the female members remarked: “We do not know the Bible all that well due to our poverty. Fortunately people who can read are sent to preach about the Living God.” One of the very few remarks made by a young female member of the Bible study groups can be mentioned in this regard when she reacted to the passage in Isaiah 61 on bringing good news to the poor: “We do not think about those in need. The Lord speaks to us through the poor.” A elderly male member applied the responsibility to the poor to his own circumstances by explaining: “You must see those in need like in the Parow subway where you have to contribute to the needy.”

The discussion throughout the second Bible study was also characterized by prolonged periods of uncomfortable silence, when it seemed as if the *group* had very little idea what to do next. During this Bible study the leader valiantly tried to get some discussion going. At a certain stage the leader exclaims: “Tonight I must again do all the talking!” These attempts were to little avail up to the point when a very shy member shared the miracle how her sick sister took ill and recovered after a surgical operation in a remarkable short space of time. Immediately the whole group was energised and became actively involved in proceedings, although the discussion had little direct bearing on the Bible study itself! This suggests that this Bible study group for all practical purposes still functions best as a share and support group.

A few concluding comments on the second Bible study may suffice here:

- This share group orientated Bible study group used own life experiences to come to grips with the seemingly analogous passages of Scriptures that were read during the Bible studies. One example would be the naïve analogy: “Then and today you need money to study...”
- Emphasis was placed on the perception that the fulfilment with the Spirit of the Lord enables one to perform miracles. As the Spirit enabled Jesus, so will the Spirit enable us to do wonders in the present world. It is significant that the reference to the miraculous healing of the sister followed directly on the discussion of powerful working of the Spirit. Taken as a whole, miracles take place due to a number of reasons: faith and prayer leads to miracles, whilst the Spirit enables miracles – if not always immediately (traces of an evangelical pneumatology?).
- The Second Coming seems to play an important role in the group’s theological frame of reference – this is both a day of judgment for the wicked and a time when the Scriptures will be fulfilled. There is some concern that a false perception of the Second Coming leads to the postponement of the crucial commitment to accept Jesus in faith (echoes of an evangelical soteriology?).
- The healing power mentioned with regards to the “recovery of sight to the blind” (4:18) is understood in an ethical and religious way. As the category of “the poor” is spiritualised by some members of the group, so blindness is seen as an indication of the lack of ethical and theological insight and not of physical blindness.
- These observations seem to lead to the conclusion: believe and have faith in God and you will receive what you have asked for. A similar logic led to the next conclusion that a lack of faith leads to the realisation that you will not receive. Ergo: faith makes you strong; but unbelief will disempower you. The group concludes: “Although we are like Thomas, we have to dig deeper and have faith.” One may speculate about the possibility of an evangelical soteriology and spirituality surfacing in this Anglican Bible study, but much more probing will be needed to substantiate such a claim.