
An effective Bible study method¹

by Dick Hohulin
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“How I wish there was a relatively simple and yet effective Bible study method available to share with our fellow Christians here in the Philippines!”

If your experience is anything like mine, your search for a Bible study method of this kind has more often than not resulted in frustration. The materials available are usually too sophisticated, too abstract, or not relevant for the intended audience.

In order for a Bible study method to be effective it must have at least three characteristics:

1. It must be relatively simple so that the student, regardless of his educational attainment, will be able to follow it.
2. It should enable the student to easily comprehend the basic truths contained in the Scripture passage under consideration.
3. It should enable the student to make a relevant and beneficial personal application of the truths to his life.

The Devotional Bible Study Method developed by Miss Grace Saxe fills all three of these qualifications and has proven to be exactly what we have been looking for all these years. The Devotional Method takes a given chapter in the Bible and asks questions concerning it, which the reader is to answer. I have included an eleventh question which incorporates the possibility of cross-reference input or study. The questions are as follows:

1. What is the principle subject or theme of the chapter? (For a more in-depth study, you may ask the participants to make an outline of the chapter showing how each paragraph supports the theme he or she has chosen.)
2. What is the leading lesson of this chapter?
3. Which is the best verse in this chapter?
4. Who are the principle persons in this chapter?

¹ This article is a revision of: Hohulin, Dick. 1983. ‘An Effective Bible Study Method’ *Notes on Literature in Use and Language Programs* 4:5-84.

5. What does the chapter teach concerning Christ?
6. Is there, in this chapter, any example for me to follow?
7. Is there any error for me to avoid?
8. Is there any duty (stated) for me to perform?
9. Is there any promise for me to claim? Also, are there any conditions to the promise?
10. Is there any prayer for me to echo?
11. Are there verses in other Scripture passages (cross-reference) that will help me to understand this chapter better?

At the time we returned to our home among the Ifugao for the dedication of the New Testament, we met almost every night with believers to fellowship and encourage them in the Lord. What a joy it was to see how eager they were to comprehend the truths contained in God's Word. This meant that we needed to study the Word together. But just sharing our own knowledge, we felt, was not sufficient. The believers needed a method that would enable them to study the Word themselves.

It was during this time that we introduced the Ifugao believers to the Devotional Bible Study Method. And the results were electrifying! All over the village, people were sitting in their houses reading and studying their Antipolo Ifugao New Testaments. They diligently made notes in order to be prepared for their Bible studies together.

At the first meeting, I went over the method with them, following my study of 2 Timothy 2. Then, everyone was instructed to read and study 1 Peter 1, following the same procedures. This was their assignment for our next meeting. Each participant was given a copy of the questions and the 2 Timothy 2 materials as a guide.

The following week, we met together and everyone shared the things they had found in their own personal studies. They loved it! Those who had worked hard excelled. Best of all, this approach really does get the participants into the Word and allows them to master the material to a satisfying degree.

This approach to the study of the Bible is both appealing and beneficial since it can be as simple or as profound as the person doing the study. We found that everyone had something to offer the rest of the group from their personal study. It should be noted that different people will give different answers to the questions. This is especially true of the first three questions. I have stressed that there are no wrong answers, although some may be better than others.

I have also shared this Bible study method with other translation teams in the Philippines, and a number have reported an enthusiastic response and a greater and more profitable use of the Scriptures among the people they work with.

So, if you are looking for Bible study method which minimizes the spoon-fed approach and encourages the individual to learn for himself, then I would recommend that you try this Devotional Method approach with the people you are working among. You may even find it a refreshing and profitable experience yourself.

Following is a back translation of my Ifugao study of 2 Timothy, chapter 2, using this method. You will notice that the questions are translated idiomatically. A good translation of these questions, like any other translation exercise, takes time, checking, and revision. Material enclosed in parentheses represents the English questions or a phrasing from my own initial study of this chapter in English.

One method to help us learn what is written in the Bible

This is an easy way to learn what a given chapter wants to teach because for each chapter we read, we will think about 10 questions concerning that chapter.

The first thing for you to do is to read, at least three times, the chapter that you have chosen to study.

The next thing to do is give answers to the following 10 or 11 questions concerning the chapter you have read.

1. When you consider the entire chapter, what (main thing) do you think the author wants to say or communicate? (What is the theme of the chapter?)

Answer: The way in which we prepare ourselves to work for God. (The preparation of the Lord's servant.) The above stated theme is supported by the following paragraph:

- a. The first is that we accept the hardship which comes to us (2:1–13). (Through practicing self-discipline)
- b. The next is that we will learn God's Word (2:14–18). (Through studying the Word of God)
- c. The next is that we do good (2:19–22). (Through practicing righteousness)
- d. The last is that we must help one another (2:23–26). (Through ministering to others)

2. What important thing does this chapter want us to learn and understand? (The leading lesson of the chapter.)

Answer: There is something we must do before God will honor us as trustworthy (2:15). Also, there is something else we must do so that God will help us to do good (2:21). (There is a certain standard (see #1) which the Lord's servant must attain if he is to be a faithful workman for God.)

3. Which verse do you like best in the chapter? (The best verse in the chapter.)

Answer: You must try with all your ability to please God. Use all your ability to follow/obey Him so that He will honor you. Don't be careless in teaching the way that is true so that you won't be ashamed" (2:15).

4. Who is mentioned in the chapter? (The persons in the chapter.)

- a. Those who are most important (principal). Timothy (2:1,6); Paul (2:9–10); Jesus Christ (2:8–10,12,19,22); God (2:7,14–16,19,21,24–25).
- b. Others who are mentioned (secondary). David (2:8); Hymenaeus (2:17); Philetus (2:17); Satan (2:26).

5. What is written in the chapter about Jesus Christ? (What the chapter teaches concerning Christ.)

- a. Jesus is the One who helps us (2:1). (There is grace in Christ.)
- b. As for Jesus, He is like a teacher of soldiers who follow him (2:3). (Christ Jesus is in the place of command having believers under Him.)
- c. He became a person (2:8).
- d. He died (2:8).
- e. He rose from the dead (2:8).
- f. He is the descendant of David (2:8).
- g. If he is the One people believe in, they will be saved (2:10).
- h. He is the One we pray to (2:22).
- i. He is our Lord (2:22).

6. Did someone do something good which would be good for us to imitate or follow? (What examples are there for me to follow?)

- a. The good thing we are to follow is Paul's custom of declaring and teaching that Jesus is the one in whom we ought to trust for help (grace) (2:1).
- b. The other example of Paul for us to follow is his encouraging his fellow men (3:3–6).

- c. Another example of Paul's for us to follow is his acceptance of hardship so that his fellowmen might be saved (2:9–10).
- d. We must not be concerned with the customs or lifestyle of those who are not believers, just like a soldier does not concern himself with the customs or lifestyle of those who are not soldiers (2:3–4).
- e. We will not be honored by God if we do not follow the custom of how one becomes honored, just like the customs and rules of an athletic event must be obeyed in order to win (2:5). (The athlete is not crowned except he obeys the rules of the game. As a Christian, I must follow God's rules if I am to be approved of Him.)

7. Is there an event or action recorded that we ought not to follow? (What error is there for me to avoid.)

- a. We must not stop following Jesus and we must not abandon Him (2:12).
- b. It is bad if we are not trustworthy to follow His way (2:13).
- c. It is bad if we argue about the meaning of talk or words because that is useless and it destroys the faith of those who hear (2:14).
- d. We ought not to stray from the way of truth concerning the resurrection of us believers (2:18).
- e. We must be careful of what we teach so that we will not weaken the faith of our fellowmen but instead strengthen it (2:18).
- f. It is bad if we follow the evil ways of young people (2:22). (Passions of youth)
- g. It is bad if we argue carelessly because the outcome of that is quarreling (2:23).
- h. We must not fight (2:24–25).

8. What command is recorded that we ought to follow? (What duty is there for me to perform?)

- a. We must teach trustworthy people who have ability to please God. We must also use all our ability to follow Him so that He might honor us (2:15).
- b. We must try with all our ability to please God. We must also use all our ability to follow Him so that He might honor us (2:15).
- c. We must not be careless in teaching the true way so that we will not be ashamed (2:15).

- d. We must stop doing evil and separate ourselves to do good so that we might be prepared for any work God wants us to do (2:21).
- e. We must do only that which is good. We must strengthen our faith in Jesus and love our fellowmen and be at peace with them (2:22).
- f. We must be merciful to our fellowmen. We must also be good and patient to teach those who oppose us so that they might be helped by God to repent of their sins (2:25).

9. Is there something which God has promised which we should believe? If there is, what must we do before we receive what He has promised? (What promise is there for me to claim?)

- a. We will live with Christ if we have died with Him (2:11). (See also Romans 6:2-4.)
- b. We also will reign with Jesus if we do not stop following Him (2:12).
- c. Even if we are not trustworthy in following His way, still He is to be trusted not to go back on His promise to punish evil people and to give eternal life to believers (2:13).
- d. There is no uncertainty that we are God's people for it is written "God knows those who are counted as His" (2:19). (See also I John 5:11-12 and John 10:28-30.)
- e. If we stop doing evil and separate ourselves to do good, we will be prepared for whatever work God wants us to do. God will count us as good so that we might devote ourselves to doing good (2:21).

10. Is there a prayer recorded which would be good for us to pray? (What prayer is there for me to echo?)

None recorded in chapter 2 but for any command or advice He gives us, it is possible to turn it into a prayer. For example, in verse 15 we could pray "Help us so that we might have ability to please you. Help us to use all our ability to follow you so that we might not be careless in teaching the true way and so not be put to shame."

Postscript

The teams in the Philippines who used this Bible study method found that some of the questions were more productive than others. Some were even eliminated. For example, the Balangao study was shortened to seven questions. In our Ifugao study, we eliminated question

number 2 since there seemed to be little to distinguish it from question number one. As you work with this Bible study, remember that languages and cultures will differ in their organization, discrimination, and investigation of data. Therefore, a good adaptation of this study method will result in a study which is unique for each language group.

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