

“DISCIPLES OF CHRIST”

Studies in COLOSSIANS

St Faith’s Church Narrabeen

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Disciples of Christ- Studies in Colossians

(St Faiths Small Groups Term 4- October to December- 2013.)

Last term our studies looked at part of the gospel of Matthew. We saw that when Jesus was first acknowledged or recognized as The Christ”, The Lord, The Son of God, he immediately began to teach his disciples about his Mission and theirs. He said that he would build His Church, the new Israel, the new “People of God”. And he clearly showed his disciples that unlike the Israel of Old, this new community would be faithful to God, reflecting His character in the world. So the disciples task, till his return, was to ‘make disciples of all nations’ , and to be ‘teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you’.

We feel that the Holy Spirit is leading us to focus on this area over the next few years. Part of our Parish Mission is to be ‘radically committed to impacting the world with Christ’s love’. We are not strong as a whole on bringing the love of Christ to people, in leading them to know Christ’s love and forgiveness and renewal personally. So, we want to major on equipping our members more in this area.

We recognize that God has gifted us all, by his Holy Spirit, with very different gifts and abilities. Some of us are evangelists, outgoing in personality, and already able in expressing the gospel message. Others of us are very, very shy, and not confident in speaking of Christ. But, under God, we want to help all our members to use whatever gifts God has given us in these areas to the full. So, this term we are asking all groups to do a little training in some basic skills.

First, in reading the bible and praying with another individual. I recognise this will be a very threatening idea for some of us, and that is Ok. You will be able to just listen in to others having a go at this. But I would urge all to try to do this, at the appropriate point in the program. Your group leaders will help with this, I trust.

Second, we want to work together at knowing what to say, when asked about our faith. In this letter to the church at Colossae, the apostle Paul writes- “let your conversation be seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone”. (ch 4v 6) In our studies this term, we want to use the letter as a way of developing some basic answers that each of us can give to those who ask us about our faith.

Third, we will discover much in this letter about the mindset that a disciple of Christ must have. When Jesus called his first disciples to follow him in his mission to build His Church, he warned them that they would need to learn to ‘take up their cross daily, and follow’. There was to be a dying to this world, for the disciple. Similarly, Paul in this letter speaks of the Christian like this- ‘Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your

life is now hidden with Christ in God'. (Colossians 3v2- 3.) We will explore what this means in practice, over the term. In doing so, we trust that God will better equip us to serve our Lord Jesus, and His Mission, here on the Northern Beaches of Sydney. (see appendix 1. For an outline of our Vision and strategy at present.)

Kerry Nagel, October 2013

Praying for people who don't know Christ yet

Group member	Praying for...
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.

Praying for people who don't know Christ yet

Group member	Praying for...
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.
	1. 2. 3.

Prayer points

Study 1. Letting God Speak. - Colossians 1:1-14

1. Preparation- if you have time, before your group meeting read the article in Appendix 2 “The Swedish Method”.
2. Catching up. Take time at the start of your meeting to catch up, and discuss any feedback from the ‘Vision session’ from the previous week. Fill in your prayer lists of non-christian contacts, and pray.
3. Getting started. Read through the following passage out loud .

Colossians 1

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

2 To God’s holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, **4** because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people— **5** the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel **6** that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace. **7** You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, **8** and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. **9** For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will

through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, **10** so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, **11** being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, **12** and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. **13** For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, **14** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

4. Now, allowing about 10 minutes, read through the passage again privately. As you go, mark on the page what strikes you, and questions and applications you notice, using the following symbols. Try to find one thing in each category-



A light bulb: This should be something that 'shines' from the passage—whatever impacts you most, or draws your attention.



A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: A personal application for your life.

5. Now summarise the things you found in the spaces below.



A light bulb: list here the things that 'shine' from the passage—whatever impacts you most, or draws your attention.



A question mark: List here the main things that you found difficult to understand in the text, or a question you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: List here any personal personal applications for your life, that you feel God putting on your heart as you read this passage.

6. Come back together as a group. Invite each member to share just one 'Light Bulb' subject that struck them. Discuss.

7. Invite each member to share just one 'Question Mark' subject that puzzled them. Discuss.

8. Invite each member to share just one 'arrow- personal application' subject that struck them. Discuss.

9. Pray together about what you have learned.

10. If you have time, discuss how you thought this method worked. What were the advantages and disadvantages of the method?

11. **Preparation For next Week.** It is important that in preparation for next week, group members read the article in Appendix 3 "Ministry of the Pew".

Study 2. "Ministry of the Pew" - Appendix 3

1. Preparation. Read the article in Appendix 3. "Ministry of the Pew", before your group meeting

2. Getting started.

Think of a time when you attended a gathering where you did not know most of the other people present. (E.g. visiting another church or small group, or perhaps a party or work event) How did you feel? What did you do when you arrived? Why? How were you treated by others? How long did you stay? Why?

Discuss.

3. Read Colossians 3v16-17. What are some principles for church life from these verses? Discuss briefly.
4. How would we as church members express our reasons for attending church or Small Group? (consider the article in Appendix 2. "Ministry of the Pew",. If you do not attend a church meeting, but only Small Group, then consider the questions as they apply to group meetings)
5. How do these reasons affect what we do in church?

6. Why should we think about where to sit in church?

7. What is our attitude toward bringing others to church? Why?

8. What practices in your church meeting last Sunday might have confused or 'alienated' non-Christians? Why?

9. What else from the article above challenged you? What will you do differently, as a result of what God has shown you here?

10. What are your plans for your ministry from the pew?

11. Project- Next Sunday carefully observe who in church is 'left out' in some way.

12. Pray together about what you have concluded.

Study 3. “Reconciled” Colossians 1:15-23

1. Catching up. Take time at the start of your meeting to catch up, and pray. Discuss any observations about the church meeting you attended last week, in the light of last week’s study. What steps did you take, to welcome a newcomer, for example?
2. Getting started. This week, we will again try the ‘Swedish Method’ that we used in week 1. Read through the following passage out loud, in your group .

Colossians 1

15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. **16** For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. **17** He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. **18** And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. **19** For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, **20** and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. **21** Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. **22** But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— **23** if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

4. Now, allowing about 10 minutes, read through the passage again privately. As you go, mark on the page what strikes you, and questions and applications you notice, using the following symbols. Try to find one thing in each category-



A light bulb: This should be something that ‘shines’ from the passage— whatever impacts you most, or draws your attention.



A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: A personal application for your life.

5. Now summarise the things you found in the spaces below.



A light bulb: list here the things that 'shine' from the passage—whatever impacts you most, or draws your attention.



A question mark: List here the main things that you found difficult to understand in the text, or a question you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: List here any personal personal applications for your life, that you feel God putting on your heart as you read this passage.

6. Come back together as a group. Invite each member to share just one 'Light Bulb' subject that struck them. Discuss.

7. Invite each member to share just one 'Question Mark' subject that puzzled them. Discuss.

8. Invite each member to share just one 'arrow- personal application' subject that struck them. Discuss.

9. Pray together about what you have learnt.

Study 4. “Who is in charge?” Colossians 1:24 - 2:5

1. Catching up. Take time at the start of your meeting to catch up, and pray.
2. Getting started. This week, we will again try the ‘Swedish Method’ that we used in previous weeks. But, in preparation for doing this with a new Christian or non-Christian person God might put in your path, we are going to try the method one to one. So, at this point, break into pairs. (This may feel very threatening for some of us. Group leaders will need to guide members here.)
3. In your pairs, read through the following passage out loud.

Colossians 1 v 24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. **25** I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— **26** the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. **27** To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

29 To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

Ch 2 v1 I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. **2** My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, **3** in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. **4** I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. **5** For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

4. Now, staying with your pair, allowing about 10 minutes, read through the passage again privately. As you go, mark on the page what strikes you, and questions and applications you notice, using the following symbols. Try to find one thing in each category-



A light bulb: This should be something that 'shines' from the passage—whatever impacts you most, or draws your attention.



A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: A personal application for your life.

5. Now summarise the things you found in the spaces below.



A light bulb: list here the things that 'shine' from the passage—whatever impacts you most, or draws your attention.



A question mark: List here the main things that you found difficult to understand in the text, or a question you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: List here any personal personal applications for your life, that you feel God putting on your heart as you read this passage.

6. Still in your pairs, each person shares one or two 'Light Bulb' subjects that struck them. Discuss.

7. In your pairs, each person shares one or two 'Question Mark' subjects that puzzled them. Discuss.

8. In your pairs, each person shares one or two 'arrow- personal application' subjects that struck them. Discuss.

9. Pray in pairs together about what you have learned.

10. If you have time, come together as a group again to share key insights from the passage, and discuss how the exercise of reading the Bible one to one went.

Study 5. “Fullness in Christ ” - Colossians 2v 6-23.

1. Getting Started. When have you felt ‘judged’ by another person? What was it over? How did you feel? How did you respond? Discuss.

2. Turning to the Bible. Read Colossians 2v6-7. What do you think it means to have received Christ as Lord ? Discuss.

3. Read verses 8-15. From these verses, list the things that are said to happen to the person who has received Christ as Lord. Try to express each in your own words.
 - a)

 - b)

 - c)

 - d)

 - e)

4. What would you say is the key point in the above, for you? Discuss.

5. Read verses 16- 23. From these verses, and also verses 8 and 9, what is the key warning that Paul gives here? What is the danger Paul sees ?

6. List the reasons given for avoiding the false teaching mentioned. How do these apply today?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
 - d)

7. Getting Personal
 - a) How should we respond when other christians judge or condemn our behaviour? Discuss.

 - b) How would you explain to a non-christian friend the key consequence of being “in Christ”, using the passage from questions 3 and 4 above?

Study 6. “Raised with Christ ” Colossians 3:1-17

1. Catching up. Take time at the start of your meeting to catch up, and pray. In particular, discuss how your efforts to reach out to the non-christian contacts you have listed, is going.
2. Getting started. This week, we will again try the ‘Swedish Method’ that we used in previous weeks. Again, in preparation for doing this with a new Christian or non-christian person God might put in your path, we are going to try the method one to one. So, at this point, break into pairs. (This may again feel very threatening for some of us. Group leaders will need to guide members here.)
3. In your pairs, read through the following passage out loud.

Ch 3v1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **2** Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. **3** For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. **4** When Christ, who is your[a] life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. **6** Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.[b] **7** You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. **8** But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. **9** Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices **10** and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. **11** Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

12 Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. **13** Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. **14** And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. **16** Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. **17** And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

4. Now, allowing about 10 minutes, read through the passage again privately. As you go, mark on the page what strikes you, and questions and applications you notice, using the following symbols. Try to find one thing in each category-



A light bulb: This should be something that 'shines' from the passage—whatever impacts you most, or draws your attention.



A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: A personal application for your life.

5. Now summarise the things you found in the spaces below.



A light bulb: list here the things that 'shine' from the passage—whatever impacts you most, or draws your attention.



A question mark: List here the main things that you found difficult to understand in the text, or a question you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: List here any personal personal applications for your life, that you feel God putting on your heart as you read this passage.

6. Still in your pairs, each person shares one or two ‘Light Bulb’ subjects that struck them.
7. In your pairs, each person shares one or two ‘Question Mark’ subjects that puzzled them. Discuss.
8. In your pairs, each person shares one or two ‘arrow- personal application’ subjects that struck them. Discuss.
9. Pray in pairs together about what you have learned.
10. If you have time, come together as a group again to share key insights from the passage, and discuss how you might explain the key point to a non-christian friend.

4. Which relationships listed above are relevant for you? What principle is taught regarding each one, that you could apply? How could you do this? Be specific. List then Discuss your answers in your group.
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
 - d)
5. Pray about what you have learnt from this study, and in particular how you might apply this.
6. If you have time, read ch 4 v 7-18. What strikes you from this section about Paul's relationships with those he mentions? Discuss.

Appendix 1. St Faith's Vision 2014

A. General Over the course of this year, I have been discussing our Parish Mission Statement with our Parish Council and Staff. We have been considering what elements of the Mission we need to particularly focus on at present.

St Faiths Parish has seen some major changes over the last 10 years. Back in 2003 we consisted of three congregations, all meeting at our Clarke street site. There was an emphasis on the three congregations still being one community, with regular 'all Parish' events, so that people met across congregations. And our Parish mission statement reflects that desire in these words-

Our Parish Mission is to be: "A Community Transformed by Jesus' love, to be fully devoted to loving one another, and radically committed to impacting the world with Christ's love."

In 2013, we – the Parish of StFaiths, - is made up of seven congregations, (with associated small groups and other ministries of course). We can no longer speak of ourselves as one Community in the same sense that we could in 2003. This change has been necessary to allow growth, and any future substantial growth will require further changes like this i.e. planting more congregations. But we are still one community in the sense that we are bound by the above shared Mission. It speaks of what we all value, what we long to see developing in each of our congregations. And we are also a community in that we support each other at our different locations, in serving the Lord Jesus. Support each other in prayer, in sharing resources etc.

But what of the future? I have recently raised the point that I felt we needed to do better in the area of disciple making. I believe this comes under the heading of – being **radically committed to impacting the world with Christ's love- in our Mission statement**. We also make an impact as we love 'the world' as Christ has loved us- i.e practical care for neighbours. I think we are putting this into practice in various ways, as individuals and as a church (e.g The Cottage etc etc). But part of loving people must be sharing the gospel with those who live in spiritual darkness, and then helping those who respond to come to know Christ's love personally, and to grow as disciples. This, I think we all feel is a struggle. So, how to work more on this area.?

Our particular 'Mission Field' is first the Northern Beaches of Sydney, and in particular the area from Warriewood and Ingleside in the north, down to Dee Why and Cromer in the South. Perhaps our **Parish Vision** should be –

to see active disciple-making fellowships established in each Local community in the area (e.g. identified by the presence of a local Primary School), such that we can have a reasonable expectation that everyone living in each locality will know a local Christian, and be able to hear of Christ through that person.

If we think that is a right desire under God, then we need a **strategy** to get there.

First, we need to shift the DNA of our current congregational fellowships in that direction- being more outward-looking where members are personally active in disciple-making, being trained and mentored in this process. i.e. **'Disciples making disciples'**

Second, we need to reform our structures in our current church life, to reflect this aim.

Third, we need to re-orientate the job descriptions of our staff, to reflect this priority.

Fourth, we need to set forward plans with regard to property usage, budgets, future staff appointments, and whatever else we identify as necessary, around this Vision.

In a way we have already made some first steps in the direction indicated above, with regard to moving the focus of our current congregations. And this is entirely consistent with our existing stated aims and mission. Staff are working on developing teams of people who are active in Disciple-making. We have Colin Marshall coaching a number of our staff in this direction. We already have evangelistic programs (one-life, outreach events etc etc). Disciple-making is already happening. I am talking about seeing much more of it, and this being more deliberate.

In the medium term (say next two or three years, if God grants the growth we expect) this will mean we need to look beyond our existing congregations, and start discussing again whether we move some to larger venues and also deliberately plan to start new congregations in locations not served by the sort of ministry described above.

I say the 'medium term' because I do believe we need to see growth of our existing congregations before we seek to do this.

B. Vision 2014

Next year we are planning in term 1 to be part of a Northern Beaches wide Mission using the theme "Jesus is...." This will run from mid-March to Mid April, over four weeks. We hope this will put outreach firmly on our agenda for 2014. In preparation for this mission, both in term 4 this year, and in first term next year, we will be doing some simple training exercises in our small groups, to equip us to be part of the Mission. These include training in how to welcome new people to church, how to invite people to an event or church meeting, and also how to initiate a conversation about the Lord Jesus. All of these are designed to more effectively mobilise us all in serving Christ's Mission.

But alongside this, we want to work to make disciple-making more deliberate as part of our small group ethos or culture. This means encouraging small groups to be working together on how to reach out to friends and neighbours, making praying for this a regular part of group life. Also, we want to ask group leaders to work with their group members in planning activities to assist members in this area of reaching out with the gospel, as well. We realize that this is a major change from the current focus, where our groups are more fellowships that study the Bible together, and care for each other. We expect the change in focus to take time, and do not think it will be easy to make such changes, or that it can be done quickly. But we do believe that this is the direction the Holy Spirit is leading us to take at this time.

Because we are convinced that God is at work, we look forward with excitement to what he will do through us, in 2014.

Kerry Nagel October 2013

Appendix 2. The Swedish Method of Bible Reading

Author: Peter Blowes, CMS Missionary

<http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2009/01/the-swedish-method/>

Want to read the Bible with someone? Go Swedish, says Peter Blowes.

For 19 years, I worked in Argentina in a context where many university students were unaccustomed to reading. Bible studies in that country (with its strong Catholic influence and practices expressed in the current evangelical style) were often an exercise in glancing at a text and then using ‘authorities’ to prove a point. For example, a youth group would typically read a passage of Scripture, close their Bibles to discuss it, and then one student would then say, “My pastor says ‘X’”. Then another would reply, “But my pastor says ‘Y’”. The argument would then escalate as one and then the other would pull in higher authorities from around the evangelical world to justify their points of view. From rallies, television or radio programmes, they would cite evangelical ‘celebrities’ such as Yiye Avila, Carlos Annacondia, Luis Palau, and then, to clinch the argument, Billy Graham. What they were doing was a Protestant version of Catholicism: they appealed to a higher human authority to win an argument.

While I respect and support the place of Bible teachers, I wanted to break that dependence on human authority, and build confidence in *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone. But how could I do that without haranguing the students yet again on the sufficiency of Scripture, the importance of reading the Bible and the power the Bible has to fulfil all their spiritual needs? I wanted them to *discover* that God speaks his word, not be told that truth by me. Furthermore, to them, I was an insignificant person, socially and ecclesiastically, so my authority on the matter would not have counted for much!

I soon realized I was working with a postmodern generation. I found that what they needed, firstly, was motivation, rather than content: they had to be *motivated* to read the Scriptures, rather than be told that they must read them. In the sort of youth work I was engaged in, there are three classic motivators: music, food and sport. Conventional wisdom held that the way to do ministry was to gather the young people around, provide them with one of the above distractions and, at the appropriate moment, have someone address the crowd with a biblical message. I was determined to break out of that (ineffective) pattern and allow the word of God itself to motivate. My aim was to create an environment in which God’s word would be heard directly in an attentive fashion.

The invitation we issued was simple: “I would like to invite you to come and read the Bible with some other students”—nothing more, nothing less. The Bible was the only motivator. Fortunately in this overtly ‘religious’ culture, the invitation was received well: there were people actually interested in reading the Bible. For these simple, student-run ‘cell’ groups, we opted to study the Bible using the Swedish Method.

The Swedish Method

As far as I can tell, the name ‘Swedish Method’ was first attributed to this simple Bible reading approach by Ada Lum, an IFES staff worker and Bible reading enthusiast of many decades. She named it in honour of the Swedish student group where she first saw it used.

Starting a Bible reading group using this method requires a minimum of resources and preparation, and can be highly rewarding as it leads readers to confront the Scriptures directly.

Begin by praying, asking God to speak through his word. Then read a short Bible passage aloud (10-15 verses is ideal). Instruct each person to go back over the passage on their own while being on the lookout for three things:



A light bulb: This should be something that ‘shines’ from the passage—whatever impacts most, or draws attention.



A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question the reader would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: A personal application for the reader’s life.

They should write down at least one thing next to each item. Allow people time to savour the text and explore it at their own speed. This usually takes about 10 minutes in silence.

Afterwards, get each reader to share one of their ‘light bulbs’ with the group. Spend some time discussing these, if your group is keen; it’s always interesting to discover what has impacted different members.

Then, in the second round, ask them to share one of their questions raised by the passage. Often it is best to invite the person who raises the question to propose an approach to answering it, and generally encourage that person towards further investigation. Alternatively, any member of the group can respond to the question, provided the answer appears in the passage under consideration or in a previous section of the book that your group has already covered.

In the third round, ask each person in your group to share one of their applications as it applies to their own life. Then, to conclude, pray: invite people to lead in prayer as they please; no-one should feel pressured to pray. Invite a suitable person to close the time of prayer; this avoids embarrassment for newcomers, makes it clear when the prayer time is finished, and prevents prolonged, uncomfortable silences.

If your group contains fewer than five people, ask them to share two or three ‘light bulbs’, questions and applications each. You can then discuss these things according to the time available.

After the meeting, you may wish to address the questions again. However, in the meeting itself, it is important to seek to avoid arguing, falling into the trap of ‘sharing ignorances’ and imposing an answer by appealing to human authority.

The philosophy behind this style of Bible reading is to promote good observation of the text, group participation and self-guided discovery. Each person has the opportunity to discover for themselves what God says. In principle, no-one answers the questions unless they are about something simple, like the meaning of a word. The idea is that the questions motivate investigation on the part of the person who raised them. It is also important to avoid anyone 'grabbing the microphone' and jumping on the poor new person present; instead, it is impressive to witness the capacity that even non-Christians have to understand the Bible when God speaks to them!

Theological underpinnings:

The Swedish Method, as I have used it, responds to a number of theological principles that I learned from D Broughton Knox, who was, among other things, principal of Moore Theological College in Sydney from 1959 to 1985. These principles include:

1. The perspicuity of the Bible: the Bible is comprehensible, and its interpretation does not depend on experts or even authoritative interpreters (such as the dogma of the Roman Catholic church).
2. The notion held by Catholicism is that the church created the Bible; in Protestantism, we hold that it is the Bible which creates the church. This latter perspective must be true if we believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture or, as Broughton Knox was wont to say, in the "divine *expiration*" of Scripture, as words are exhaled, not inhaled. (The Greek in 2 Timothy 3:16 uses the term 'exhaled'.) Scripture was true from the time of its inspiration. The councils could not make it Scripture; the only thing they could do was exclude those writings which were not inspired. This perspective is easily observable in mission history following the discovery or gift of a copy of Scripture which was then taken back to a village or community, and where, as a direct result, a church sprang up. Accordingly, the Bible needs to be read in the vernacular language by people. When the Holy Spirit applies that word to their hearts, they respond. For this reason, we must pray that people read their Bibles and that, in their Bible reading (or hearing), God will open their minds and hearts.
3. The whole Bible is the counsel of God, so it is not so important which parts of the Bible people start with, but rather that they do so! The word of God is the supreme evangelist in this sense. The evangels (Gospels) are, of course, a great place for people to hear the gospel, or be evangelized, but it is not essential that they begin with them.
4. The Bible is addressed to its readers or hearers. In Matthew 22:31, Jesus, addressing the Sadducees, said, "[H]ave you not read what was said to you by God ...?". There is no logical problem in the fact that God had every reader of Holy Scripture in mind at the time of its 'exhalation'. This means that God's word is not only inspired and universally applicable, but also that, in it, God is speaking presently to every particular reader (or hearer) of his word. This is a very exciting notion! It speaks of the immanence (closeness) of God in his word. But in the same place, one person may be oblivious to the fact that God is personally speaking to another through his word. It is a case of the wheat and the tares growing together—of the kingdom of God doing its work secretly (Matt 13:24-30).

This point helps us understand the absurdity of the view that identifies the Scriptures solely as a 'witness' to the truth, or as simply 'containing' the word of God. God is perfectly capable of

revealing himself, and, as is the case in human relationships, he does this in maximum expression through words. This is even more conspicuously the case for us, being so far removed from the historical events of the Bible.

Adaptation

The Swedish Method of Bible study is very adaptable to different contexts because

- it requires no preparation
- it requires no trained leaders
- it gives immediate results
- it avoids arguments
- it doesn't cost money
- it is re-usable and repeatable
- it can be taught to others very easily
- with a little adaptation, it can be used with non-literate people, with the Scriptures being read to them
- it works just as well with large crowds (who share with their near neighbours) as it does with small groups
- it suits postmodern readers with its instant 'gratification' and emphasis on personal exploration
- everyone gets to express their opinions (which people love to do!), but those opinions are always tied to the text of the Bible
- it avoids 'Bible bashing' as it puts Christians and non-Christians on equal footing in the group before the word of God
- it avoids appealing to higher authority to win arguments
- it allows the word of God to speak for itself
- it teaches people the most difficult and most basic task in Bible reading: observing what the text actually says!
- it motivates investigation and thinking without being threatening
- it exercises basic skills in asking questions which are crucial to developing an adequate interpretation of Scripture
- it undermines anti-intellectualism without being overly intellectual (I still smile sadly when I recall the misplaced criticism I once received—that this approach was too intellectual!)
- it applies the Scriptures directly to the life of the reader from day one
- it teaches inductive Bible study inductively.

As with all Bible study, this approach seeks to achieve what Paul describes in Colossians 1:27-28: "the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

Limitations

However, the Swedish Method is not a fully developed inductive reading of the text. Instead, it provides immediate benefits, with people concurrently learning some of the basic skills of inductive study. Leaders are sometimes concerned that novice Bible students may miss the point of the passage, or its central message or application—which, after all, is not always an easy thing to spot, even for skilled Bible teachers. But my experience has been that practice

makes perfect: after only a couple of weeks, people's observations tend to improve dramatically as they become accustomed to the practice of letting the Bible speak for itself, rather than colouring it with their preconceptions or outside authorities.

Another limitation is that having readers find applications in the text does not always mean that these applications are actually applied. An accountability structure—such as reporting back the following week on the previous week's application point—has often proved useful in this area.

Taking it further

As the group grows in their familiarity with and skill in reading the Bible, the Swedish Method can be expanded to include additional symbols that draw out other aspects of the passage. Do not rush this process as it depends on whether group members have refined their observational skills. The expansion is not always easy, and the introduced concepts are much more open to debate. I have experienced good results when I've added them in groups who have completed at least a year's Bible reading.

The most common 'second generation' symbols are a set of circling arrows (to show how the ideas in the passage interrelate), a heart (to show the central idea of the passage) and a circle with an arrow coming out from the centre (to show the passage's innate central application). It is helpful to practise these without making any comments on who is right or wrong during the initial studies, as skill, competence and confidence are gained through practice.

I have also recently discovered an additional step that has reportedly led to the planting of thousands of churches in northern India. At the end of the Bible study, next to a speech bubble symbol, group members write down the name of a friend or relative who would benefit from them sharing what they learned from the study. Their aim is then to talk to that person before the next meeting. The norm and practice of sharing the 'good news' promoted by this step has had dramatic effects. Why not try it where you are?

Finally, inductive Bible study can be taught as the next step, and it will make a lot more sense to readers who are accustomed to careful observation of the text and the practice of allowing God's word to speak authoritatively for itself. We do not want half-baked theoreticians of inductive Bible study; we want competent practitioners. I have had the experience of students who could teach me a course in how to do an inductive Bible study, but who were unable to do one themselves. We don't want to train people to give courses in inductive Bible study; we want them to be reading the Bible effectively!

The results

The Swedish Method has been used in cell groups, church youth groups, talk preparation, personal and family devotionals, Sunday school preparation, and even in academic study at university.

As students have taken their questions to their pastors and other teachers, this has stimulated their pastors to pursue further investigation. Some pastors even end up preaching on the questions these students have raised! Having students motivated in the area of Bible reading has often encouraged pastors greatly as these students tend to approach the pastors with their questions arising from Bible study, rather than confronting them with the answers. It has also been far less threatening for pastors, and has led them, instead, to further investigation and

growth.

During my 19 years as a missionary across north-eastern Argentina, I think the Swedish Method had, possibly, the greatest impact out of everything I did—especially given that I had no regular public preaching platform! It characterized my ministry, along with two oft-repeated phrases: “That’s a good question” and “Keep reading your Bible” (a Broughton Knox saying that I adopted—to which my Argentine students have since added “carefully!”).

We occasionally need refreshing in our Bible study to renew our attentiveness to what God is saying. The Swedish Method approach is enjoyable, and hones our observation of the text. It has been useful in leading people to Christ: God speaks to them directly through his word without the ‘noise’ bystanders so often inject.

Try it with your home group or neighbourhood Bible study group. Invite your neighbours, relatives or your children to join you. You may be delightfully refreshed and surprised—and so might they.

Discussion Questions

1. Practice the Swedish Method of Bible reading together now. Read Ephesians 1:3-14 together and then follow with the following questions:



A light bulb: What ‘shines’ from the passage— what impacts most, or draws attention for you.



A question mark: What is difficult to understand in the text, or raises a question that you would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: What is the person application for my life.

2. Discuss together what worked well and what didn’t.
3. Share together any names of people you think that you could read the Bible with using this method. Are there people who you can help grow in their faith or people who you could introduce to the Bible by reading like this?

Pray together about these things.

Appendix 3. Ministry of the Pew

By Col Marshall

(From MTS Discussion paper of same name, see MTS website for source, used with permission)

The ‘Pew Prayer’

Some years ago a pastor, Ray Ewers, instructed me in the finer art of how to walk into church. To most people, this might appear to be a rather basic accomplishment requiring little or no tutelage. Perhaps a family with five toddlers would appreciate some advice, but most of us would never give it a thought. Ray’s instruction was very brief: “Pray about where you sit”.

Praying seemed like a great way to walk into church, better than grumbling about the full car park or feeling annoyed that the first hymn, Tell Out My soul, was sung to Tidings and not Woodlands. But most of all the things to pray about, why should I be concerned with seating position? After all, I sit in my pew every week.

Ray’s advice was based on a particular view of church. He saw church as a place where Christians go to work. Church is a gathering of God’s people to hear his word and respond in faith and obedience. In this gathering, we are in fellowship with each other, through the blood of Jesus, and, because of our fellowship, we seek to serve each other. We use our gifts and abilities to strengthen one another and build Christ’s church – ‘edification’ is the word often used to describe what goes on in church. All believers are involved in building the church. Because of this, we aren’t to see ourselves merely as part of an organisation called ‘St Hubert’s Church’, but as servants of God’s people, eager to meet the needs of others even if it means sacrificing our own.

Ray’s view of church was spot on. With this perspective, his advice to pray about my choice of pew makes perfect sense. If at church we are working to strengthen our fellow believers, where we sit becomes important since part of our work will be talking to our neighbour in the pew, welcoming people, helping each other understand God’s word and praying with each other.

The ‘Pew Prayer’ was a significant turning point in my understanding of what church is all about. It changed my reasons for going to church. The shift was made from being the ‘helpee’ to the helper, the served to the servant. Church is where we seek spiritual food and encouragement in order to become more godly; but church is also where we go in order to feed other people and encourage them. In God’s mercy, we become more Christ-like in the process, as like him we deny ourselves for the sake of others. But our purpose in gathering with God’s people is to strengthen them and build the body of Christ. We look for opportunities to assist the growth of the church in practical ways. There are numerous ways in which we can carry out the ministry of the pew. In this paper, we’ll look at some of them.

Bring others to your meetings

One of the obvious ways we can build the church is to invite others. The minister or the evangelism committee only has limited opportunities to attract others in to your church

meetings. The members in the pew, however, are in touch with hundreds of people in the community.

There are several reasons we balk at inviting people to church:

1. We think church is for Christians not unbelievers

Our understanding of church as a gathering of God's people to hear His Word tends to make church inward-looking and create a ghetto-like mentality which excludes people. We can easily think that church is only for the faithful. However, church is about growing in godliness and the God whom we serve is outward looking and concerned for the salvation of all humanity. The Word, which we meet to hear, is a message of salvation for all people and so we must seek out others as God has found us. Paul expected unbelievers would be in the church (see 1 Corinthians 14:22f). This gives us the happy dilemma of making church work for Christians and unbelievers. Over the years many churches have run separate services for believers and outsiders – a 'regular service' and an 'evangelistic service'. However, this solution is often based on the false premise, that preaching to Christians is fundamentally different to evangelising non-Christians.

But all Biblical preaching should be gospel preaching. Any and every part of the Word of God is ultimately instructing us in the gospel of Jesus. It is a too limited view of the gospel to think that it is only preached in a sermonette from John 3:16. To preach the Bible without being Christ-centred is to mis-preach the Bible. To preach the Bible in a Christ-centred fashion is to evangelise as you teach. If we preach the Word of God, the gospel of our salvation, the church will be edified in both the conversion of sinners and the godliness of believers. So church is always a scene of evangelism.

Our personal evangelism with friends and contacts is strengthened by this church-based evangelism. It is easier for new converts to commit themselves to church if they have already attended. The preacher can be more direct and confronting than in personal relationships. Through expository preaching they learn how to read the Bible and see the grand sweep of God's purposes in Christ. They see the unity and historicity of the Scriptures, which are impressive evidences for authenticity. They see the lives of other Christians, reassuring them that you are not a freak and removing prejudices against Christians and church, thus enhancing gospel communication. They also see, in concrete terms, how being a Christian will effect them. We can also capitalise on the teamwork of our church. Some are good at making friends with non-Christians, others at explaining the gospel, others at following-up new Christians.

2. We are embarrassed by our church meetings

We will only invite our friends to church if we are enthusiastic about what happens there. If the gospel is not being preached, there is no point bringing outsiders. We have to do all in our power to make sure our church preaches the gospel, or find one that already does. There are too many churches in our land that are not preaching the gospel and there is no reason for a Christian ever to be supporting one.

If our church is preaching the gospel but doing it poorly, in a way that is inaccessible to non-Christians, the members in the pew can often provide the motivation for improving things by their commitment to bring other along. Those who are gospel-minded will want to reexamine traditional service styles, if they see that these are a hindrance to

newcomers. But sometimes they won't recognise the problem until unbelievers are actually sitting in the pews. Only then do we start to see our meetings through the eyes of outsiders and we feel the healthy pressure to change what is alienating to newcomers. When we find church dull, boring and irrelevant, there is no way we will invite friends. If they do happen to turn up, we are desperately embarrassed, cringing over every fault and flaw in the meeting. On the other hand, if we find church challenging, exciting, enjoyable, meaty and worthwhile, we will want to invite our friends and neighbours to share with us.

3. We assume people won't come to church

As I write this, a Telstra technician is doing some work in our house. I should invite him to church to hear the gospel, but I can't imagine him coming. He wouldn't fit in; he probably lives too far away; he'll be suspicious of my motives; he's so frustrated with the job he would probably hit me - I've just talked myself out of making the invitation. I'm a pessimist.

Actually, Australians are far more willing to go to church than Christians are willing to invite them. It's harder for strangers like my Telecom man to accept, but those who share in other social events with us - our friends, colleagues, neighbours and relatives - will often come to church.

But we have to be optimists, not pessimists. Seligman, author of *Learned Optimism*, produces evidence that successful salespeople are optimists. However, the reason for their success is not that optimists have better skills in selling, but that they don't give up. Unlike pessimists, they keep knocking on doors and making phone calls because they believe in the product and that people should have it. If we are optimistic about people joining us in church, we will keep making invitations on the assumption that some will come. If we invite people often enough we are sure to get some along. My problem is that I become a pessimist after a few knock-backs.

Thinking Through 'People Work'

However, the ministry of the pew goes far beyond advertising and inviting people to hear the gospel. Once we make the attitude shift from passive pew sitters and receivers to active workers and givers, there is no end to the difference we can make to others and to the running of the meeting. All the suggestions below are of the informal type – things we can do at our own initiative. They are types of involvement that every congregation member can have. The key to people work is to observe what happens around you and respond to people's needs.

Think through your church meetings chronologically. What can we do before, during and after the meeting?

Before

1. Preparation

One of the great contributions is in our preparation. The minister should not be the only one preparing for church. We prepare by praying for the preacher, the musicians, the service leader, the Bible readers and the newcomers. We prepare by studying the Bible

passages so that we maximise this learning opportunity by being sensitised to the issues and questions in the passages being taught. Such preparation has other benefits. We are better equipped to enter into discussion with others if we have looked at the passage beforehand. It is also a great encouragement to the preacher to know that the congregation is eager to understand the Bible and willing to put in some effort. Preaching is hard work, both for the preacher and the listeners. An intelligent question, comment or observation upon the sermon is an enormous motivating factor for the preacher who, week by week, has to try and engage the congregation's minds and hearts in the Word of God. Those who sit in the pew can make a great contribution to those teaching from the pulpit.

2. Meeting visitors and newcomers

We enjoy meeting our friends at church, but we need to develop a nose for new people. We need to sit with them and help them feel comfortable in this strange place by introducing ourselves and explaining what is going on. We should greet the non-Christian friends of other members and introduce our friends to others. It's all about genuine hospitality. The way we welcome and look after people when they visit our homes should be a model for the household of God. And genuine, relaxed hospitality will slowly evaporate some of the prejudices held by outsiders.

Arriving early All of this requires that we arrive not on time, but early. That may be the greatest miracle of all.

During

1. Active listening

People in the pews have an enormous impact on those who are teaching and leading. Communication is always a two way process. Energetic listening through taking notes, making eye contact with the preacher, sitting at the front, laughing at jokes (even old ones) will spur on the preacher. It is very hard to preach enthusiastically to a sleepy, distracted, fidgety group. Our active listening will also infect others with enthusiasm for learning, just as our fidgeting will discourage them. Unbelievers will also pick up that these ideas are worth listening to if they see rows of regulars eagerly soaking up the Bible.

2. Singing

Similarly, those in the pew can be a great help to the singing and leading of music. It is everyone's responsibility to share in the corporate singing of the congregation. The music may be well chosen and played but if it is poorly sung it is disheartening. Our enthusiasm and gusto in singing the great anthems of the faith is of great help to those around us and those leading the music, even if we can barely hold a tune. Just pretend you're under the shower.

3. Logistics

Each member in the pew also has an important part to play in the smooth running of the meeting. The devil will use anything to distract people from hearing the Word of God. We mustn't rely on ushers to fix things. If the window needs to be opened, get up and do it. If the microphones are not right, signal to the speaker so the problem can be fixed before they continue without being heard.

4. Newcomers

Keep attending to newcomers' needs. If they can't find their way around the Bible or the service outline, or they don't have a Bible, or they need to find the creche, help them yourself. It is your meeting, not the minister's. It's all about being observant and outward looking.

After

1. Discuss God's Word

We have just heard the Word of God and we spend all of morning tea talking about last night's video. It isn't right and we know it, but many of us are just uncomfortable starting up 'spiritual' conversations. If you get the ball rolling, others pick it up. During your preparation and the sermon, think up some comments or issues to raise with others. Asking "What did you think of the sermon?" will usually put your neighbour into a coma, but making a specific comment like "I didn't know Abel was a prophet. What makes someone a prophet?" may generate a fruitful conversation. Even if the conversations don't always get off the ground, your enthusiasm for learning the Bible will be contagious and non-Christians will see that church is not dull and boring but fascinating and life shattering.

2. Pray with others

Use the suppertime to meet others and find out their concerns and pray quietly with them. This will look a bit weird to newcomers with pairs of bowed heads all around the building, but they will know that we love each other and trust God's providence.

3. Newcomers

Newcomers tend to leave fairly quickly so we have to move fast by identifying the visitor in our pew and offering them conversation immediately as the service ends. It's all very purposeful: making sure they are welcomed properly by meeting you and your friends, maybe introduce them to the minister and help them see how they can fit in the congregation. You may have to postpone catching your friends until after the newcomers have been cared for.

4. Stay late

Once you catch this vision of church you are always the last to leave because the opportunities to minister don't end until the last person leaves. Gone are the days of fitting church in between breakfast and brunch. Ministry of the pew takes time.

Prayer Points

