

GOSPEL OF MARY STUDY GROUP

We use the friendly Bible study method developed by American Quakers Joanne and Larry Spears. This approach is like the story of the blind men describing an elephant. One is touching an ear, one the trunk, one a tusk, one a leg and another the tail. Each has their own equally valid perspective, and together their combined impressions build up to give a greater picture of the whole elephant.

The method has been developed to -

- Recognize personal experience as a central part of our spiritual lives.
- Recognize the equality of all participants in the study process. Remove the centrality of an authority figure as leader, thereby affirming that a spiritual dimension works through everyone.
- Recognize the availability of continuing revelation in our spiritual lives.
- Affirm the connection of the text to our lives.

No prior study or knowledge of the text is needed by anyone.

We welcome members of any or no faith. A group reflecting a diversity of viewpoints provides a stimulating variety of both spiritual experience and understanding.

No reading is necessary prior to the group study. Members may be stimulated to read further to search out solutions to particular problems which the study raises. They may or may not want to report back briefly to the group.

Have a notebook and a pencil available

Every week, we will read through a section of the gospel, and then focus more closely on a few selected lines. We each consider these lines in response to five set questions, and then we share our insights together.

Each person needs to have in writing the following five questions which are to be answered in the silent period each time we meet.

Each person can answer at whatever level of background they bring. There are no single answers which capture the totality of any passage. Our various different viewpoints come together to form a collective understanding.

The five questions addressed in each study session are:

A. What is the author's main point in this passage? (MAIN POINT)

Focus on what the author says. "What is the author saying about God/Reality. This is not the time to share the ideas of a commentator, minister, priest, or other authority figure. The search here is for the main point the author was making in this passage and the author's understanding of God working in our world. It is easy to respond with what we would like for the author to have said. It is easy to express our own ideas on the subject. However, the target of the question is what the author actually said.

B. What new light do I find in this particular reading of this passage of the text? (NEW LIGHT)

The focus here is on each member's new insight, observation, or understanding during this particular reading of this passage on this particular occasion. Each reading can bring some new or renewed insight. That insight may be small or great. It may be a new understanding of a word or phrase. It may be a new way of seeing a particular problem that this passage triggers in a member's mind.

C. Is this passage true to my experience? (TRUTH)

The focus here is on comparing the message of the text passage with each person's experience in life. Our spiritual journeys are "experimental" as we search toward fuller understanding. Our personal experience and our community experience are sources of authority which we bring to the study to understand and supplement the text.

Recognition that our present understanding of the passage is not consistent with our experience may require reassessment of the meaning of our experience, deeper study of the meaning of the passage, or recognition that our individual spiritual journeys, as with those of the author, are searches in the dark in which full clarity is not given at every moment.

D. What are the implications of this passage for my life? (IMPLICATIONS)

The answer to this question may provide implications for living at any of several levels of spiritual life. The center of the question is, "What difference, if any, does the passage make for my life?"

E. What challenges, difficulties or problems do I have with this passage? (PROBLEMS)

Here we identify problems of language in the text, of interpretation, of meaning, or of applying the text to our lives. These problems may generate interest in seeking answers from other sources during the days before the next group meeting. Problems can be identified without being solved. This question reminds us that study of a passage is a continuing process. Like life, understanding is never complete at any one time. It is a continuing dialogue between the text and life.

1 At the beginning of the session, we will read aloud several translations of the passage to be studied. A translation cannot reproduce in English all the meaning of the original text. On finer points and on some surprisingly major points, significant differences exist between one translation and another. The English words chosen to translate the Coptic or Greek are important reflections of the translator's perspective. By using several different translations, it will quickly become apparent that translators are human.

(If this is a large Zoom meeting, we may at this point divide into smaller break out groups)

2: Move into group silence. Individuals begin at their own pace to reread the passage silently and to write answers to each question.

3: After 15 or 20 minutes of silence and the completion of written answers, in turn, around the circle, individuals read aloud their response to one question at a time. After each person's response to the first question has been shared, pause for a moment of silence. Then move around the circle again sharing the responses to the second question and so on until everyone has responded to each question.

This is the sharing of our insights. The accumulating benefit of these insights around the circle is consistently remarkable, sometimes extraordinary. There should be no extensive discussion during this time of sharing. There should only be short comments or questions for clarification of the individual responses for the remainder of the group. Clarity is important.

At all times, in all groups, the movement around the circle should be preserved. Everyone must have opportunity and time to speak to every question in turn so that the combining wisdom and insights are sensed by the group.

All answers are accepted and helpful. Each person may "pass" at any time on any question, with only the caution that something that seems obvious or trivial to one person can be a wonderful new insight to another. No one needs to feel pressured to have an answer if there is none for that person at that time.

The only leadership needed by the group is one person who determines the time to begin oral sharing. This person should also maintain the movement around the circle. Keep moving around the circle so that everyone has a chance to answer every question in sequence. Movement around the circle must be fast enough to keep within the time limit.

With experience using this text study method, the members will see that insights will grow during the sharing. People who join the study with no feeling of insight will find the passage opening to their understanding through the insights shared by others. As the discussion proceeds, new insights will occur which far exceed the sum of the initial individual insights. An apparently superficial comment can be the key to great openings for others in the group.

Adapted by Ella Rozett and David Curtis for our purposes. Original article on "Friendly Bible Study by Joanne and Larry Spears <http://www.read-the-bible.org/FriendlyBibleStudy.htm>

- We share our written responses to the questions in turn, each reading out their answer to the first question, then when everyone has responded to question 1, we move onto question 2.
- This is not a test or an exam, there are no right or wrong answers, but rather a sharing of different viewpoints and insights.
- Allow a time of quiet between contributions so that what has been said can sink in.
- It is fine to just 'pass' if you don't have an answer.
- Be aware of sharing the time so that everyone who wants to can contribute. Just read out what you have written down, without adding more.
- Don't respond directly to a previous contribution. We're not debating, although sometimes a pattern or theme may emerge across several contributions. There may well be time at the end of your group session for discussion and sharing.
- Listen hospitably. This is not an exercise in analytical or critical thinking! Even if you disagree with what's said listen charitably, seeking to understand where the other person is coming from rather than looking for weak points or errors.
- Confidentiality: Don't repeat or discuss other people's contributions unless you have their explicit permission.