

## Lesson Books Make Poor Bible Students

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The typical Bible student sits down on Saturday night, picks up his lesson sheet for Sunday morning and begins looking in the appointed Bible text for the answers to the questions on his sheet. The intent of the questions is usually twofold: (1) to provide a basis for an orderly class discussion, and (2) to direct the student's mind to principles in the text that he otherwise might have missed. While these reasons are sound and lesson booklets with questions are helpful for group discussions, the results can make some very poor Bible students.

There are a number of things that make Bible study valuable, rewarding, and even enjoyable that lesson books tend to destroy. Let's face it, for most Christians, filling out a lesson sheet is anything but enjoyable. In fact, at times it is downright irritating, not to mention boring. Look again at our typical student filling out his lesson sheet on Saturday night.

First, this student rarely actually studies the text. Instead, he reads the text for the express purpose of finding the answers to the questions in his lesson. He may even read only isolated verses that the lesson sheet has directed him to see. He is not connecting with God, he is connecting with the teacher who wrote the questions. He is not seeing all that God wanted him to see in the word, he is seeing only what the teacher wanted him to see.

Second, when the student finishes the lesson sheet, he believes he has finished the study of the text. There will have been many more things he could have discovered from the text that the lesson sheet was not designed to reveal, but since his eyes were only trained on answering questions he has missed valuable insights from the word.

Third, *firsthand* discovery is the key ingredient to enjoyable Bible study. When a Bible study *method* takes away from the joy of the Bible, we do not spend the time in the word that it deserves. I have never found the Bible boring, but I have often found Bible study lessons boring. Simply answering questions about a text does not encourage firsthand discovery because the questions limit the study to only those things the *teacher* has seen or found important. It is the same with studying a commentary. Commentaries direct our attention to what someone else has discovered and therefore is less meaningful and delightful.

Fourth, the student tends to study *topics* from the text because that is the focus of most questions. By studying questions in a topical format, the structure of the text and the way the Holy Spirit went about revealing His message is missed. Much of the enjoyment in Bible study comes from the *way* God revealed His will, not in just *what* He said.

The imperfection of answering someone's questions when studying a text becomes especially noticeable among teenagers and young adults. For these people, this Bible study method becomes their first introduction to the Bible. For most, it ends up to be a less than exciting experience. Young people naturally conclude that since the Bible study method is not enjoyable, the Bible must not be enjoyable. Worse, they learn in a fixed and mechanical way often without understanding of the big picture, instead of seeing the spirit of the passage as they gather facts and draw personal conclusions. I remember the first time I decided to read the Bible for myself instead of reading to answer questions. Suddenly God and God's word came to life as truth after truth was revealed that I had never seen in years of studying lesson sheets.

Shall we then throw out all lesson books? No, lesson books still fulfill an important purpose in group discussions. We simply need to add two ingredients to our group studies: one has to do with the responsibility of the student, the other with the responsibility of the teacher.

The student must spend time in the text for the sake of the text. A photo-copy of the text with colored pens and pencils are the best tools a student has. With only the text and his pencils, he looks for all that he can find, enjoying the firsthand discovery of the Bible's precious truths. As the student marks his text and makes notations of the things he sees, his mind is freed to see even more. At first, to the unpracticed student, this process will seem a little uncomfortable. He might ask himself, "What should I look for?" The answer is, "What do you find interesting?" And, "What is the main point God is revealing here?" The repeated admonition is, "Look, look, look," and if you think you have seen all there is, look again! Using this method, with a little practice Bible study will be a thrill! Plus, once the student has studied the text, the questions will be easy.

But the teacher also has a responsibility. The teacher must not use class time to just go over the questions. The teacher must first ask for what the student was looking for: "What was the main point God was revealing here?" And, "What did you find interesting in this text?" From these discoveries, personal applications will then follow. This will not only make for lively discussion, everyone in the class will be more concerned with what God has said than the answers to questions. The questions will certainly come up during the course of the discussion, but the questions will not limit discovery of all that is in the text.

With a little effort and change in method, we can be as the psalmist who said, "*Oh how I love your law, it is my meditation all the day!*" (Psa.119:97)