

action bible study

: A GROUP-PROCESS METHOD

by Bill Smith

The Bible is the supreme literature mediating to us our historical identity. Continuous exposure to it subtly infuses the controlling images of the Christian way.

Action Bible study is systematic exposure to the Church's mother literature with one eye on the text and the other on the mission question. Who is to do this? Persons, groups, groups already in being, action groups (task forces) as they reflect on their action—hopefully the whole congregation as it plans, acts, evaluates, and reshapes itself and its planning for further action.

What does action Bible study look like? As we found we could not lay out the planning process as a lock-step, rigid structure, but could only list the components, so our action Bible study must be flexible but inclusive of these *elements*: an ever-present consciousness of the world, the gospel, and the congregation's own life; an intention to let the Word of God illumine the church's present mission action; discussion about the original meaning of texts; confession of conscience where the Word moves members to word their sins and the church's failing (to provide forgiveness that cures the infection, heals wounds, and releases energies for positive action); sharing of insights new and old; and openness to guidance in planning and acting as a group, as a congregation, and as persons. Action Bible study gets everyone in on the whole process—as it were, designing and building and flying and landing the plane. The method

fosters an atmosphere of search, openness, quiet contemplation alternating with passionate engagement, resulting in rewards and satisfactions. It understands that people act on pictures in their heads and that those pictures are more perceptual than conceptual; so the method seeks to expose the inner depths to the essential biblical imagery, rather than simply squeezing the Bible for ideas. Marfacs on what seizes his imagination; what gets the attention of his psyche and spirit gets him, no matter how much trouble his rationality may have in trying to construct logical patterns.

Here we must be content with an approach to four passages of Scripture, just enough to give the feel of this style of exposure to the Bible in contemplation of missionary action. Each passage stresses one of the four master images of the Church in the New Testament, images through which the Church must ever understand itself and God's Mission if it is to strive to be faithful to its reason for being and to be loyal to its Lord.

Here, then, are the passages, one for each major image of the Church:

First Peter 2:9-10: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Second Corinthians 5:17-20: THE NEW CREATION

Gospel of John 17:14-26: THE FELLOWSHIP IN FAITH

First Corinthians 10:14-31; 12:7-17: THE BODY OF CHRIST

EXPLORATION—Let the group choose an image, then try to keep in mind, throughout the session, all the elements of action Bible study. If the group thinks following the stages too mechanical, remind the members of the purpose of musical exercises: to develop neuromuscular patterns (good habits and sharpened skills). First order, then freedom.

SUGGESTED PROCEDURE—This process should not be used in a hurried fashion: an hour and a half should be minimum. The passage to be studied should be selected well in advance so someone may do some homework on the background. Eight should be maximum size; if there are many more than that, divide into small groups for phases 2-4 (as in the schedule herewith). The time should be structured something like this:

** I wrote this before the current women's movement. The generic "man" is currently—and may continue to be—called "sexist language."*

(This group Bible study process has been extensively used in the UCC "MORE" and "The Local Church in God's Mission.")

OVER

15 minutes

Phase 1: *What did the passage say to its day?* Reading of the passage aloud to the assembled group. Comments on the background of the passage by group member who has studied it in advance—the group responding with questions for clarification.

Divide into small groups of seven or eight.
(Aim: conceptual life—facts and ideas.)



20 minutes

Phase 2: *How does the passage prick our conscience about our lives and the life and mission of our church?*

Silent study, then sharing in discussion.
(Aim: moral-ethical life.)



20 minutes

Phase 3: *What new light has come to us during this session?*

Silent study, then sharing in discussion.
(Aim: perceptual life—what we see, perceive, grasp.)

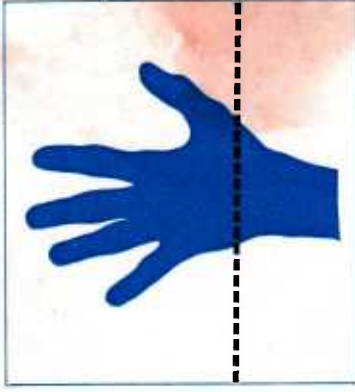


20 minutes

Phase 4: *What can we do and what should we do in the light of God's dealing with us in this session?*

What attitudes, habits, courses of action do we see now as needing changing, in our lives and in the life and mission of our church?

Silent study, then sharing in discussion and decisions.



remainder of the time

Phase 5: Full meeting (the groups together) for the final wrap-up. Decisions for action.

Expression of feelings and concerns left over.
(Aim: the life of action.)

This procedure, with many variations, has been widely used and found to be extremely useful in stimulating honest sharing. The periods of silence, during which persons may jot down thoughts that come to them, are especially important. Out of the silence, words take on meaning. The crucial dimensions are (1) the opportunity for each person to wrestle in the group with the deeper meanings of the passage and allow the Spirit to address him through it, and (2) the orientation toward action.

some resources

Books and Articles

- Barth, Marcus. *The Broken Wall*. Judson, 1959.
- Blauw, Johannes. *The Missionary Nature of the Church: The Biblical Basis of Mission as Seen in the Writings of Modern Theologians*. McGraw-Hill, 1962.
- Elliott, Willis E.; and Willard W. Wetzel. *The Pastoral Letters*. United Church Press, 1964. This uses "Action Bible Study" for one whole section of the Bible.
- Robertson, E. H. *The Bible in Our Time: Methods of Bible Study*. Association, 1962.

Yale University *New Haven, Connecticut*

THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
409 Prospect Street

JAMES E. DITTES
Psychology of Religion

December 21, 1967

Dr. Willis E. Elliott
Division of Evangelism
United Church Board for Homeland Ministries
287 Park Avenue South
New York, N.Y. 10010

Dear Dr. Elliott:

After all the fuss of getting a book in and out of press, your letter provides refreshing reminder-- about the first I've had--that the whole point of writing it was to try to communicate with persons. (I suspect that this sense of being in genuine communication with a genuine person will not characterize the relationship with all of my reviewers.)

My feeling about the relationship of my proposals with your very intriguing "action Bible study" goes something like this: If a group were using your procedure and the discussion still got bogged down, it seems to me that there would be much firmer basis for focussing on and perhaps interpreting the difficulty as resistance. There would also be much greater degree of group commitment and sense of group identity which would facilitate the kind of group self-reflection that I had in mind. And if the group used your procedure and didn't get bogged down, then, happily they don't need my book.

I would be more than content with the characterization of saintliness-shrewdness you detect and am rather astounded at the Yale News Bureau photographer managed to communicate this to you.

Regards to Jerry.

Sincerely,



James E. Dittes