

One-to-one Bible studies with international students

Why do one-to-one Bible studies with international students?

Hebrews 4:12 *'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'*

AIM: to help them discover the truth for themselves as the Holy Spirit reveals it to them through the Word of God, so that they will be excited about the Bible, apply it to their lives and want to find out more.

What are the advantages compared with a group Bible Study?

- Just one person – can answer their questions and look at passages that relate to where they are.
- Regular – can really get to know them and can build on previous studies. If they are busy one week they don't miss anything.
- Less danger of them getting left behind because of the language being too difficult or because of not having enough Biblical background.
- Less threatening – they feel more free to say what they really think.
- Flexible – you can fit round their timetable.
- They can't avoid answering questions – they have to say something

Needs to be done in the context of a genuine friendship - relaxed and friendly - we're not preaching at them.

Each person is different so each Bible study will develop its own format.

How to get started – practical considerations

1. WHICH INTERNATIONAL(S)?

How to build a genuine friendship:

- Spend time together apart from Bible study
- Ask questions (not just superficial) and listen to the answers
- Share your own life with them – struggles and joys
- Genuine interest in Christianity
- Same sex (very important, especially if Asian)

2. HOW OFTEN?

- Regularly e.g. once a week
- Ideally same time each week

3. FOR HOW LONG?

- 1 - 1 1/2 hours, but try to keep the formal study part to 1 hour
 - It's better they leave interested and wanting to find out more than that you go on until they're bored.
 - People are usually busy, we mustn't take up too much of their time.
- Time limit initially of e.g. 8 weeks (hopefully they will want to continue beyond this)

4. WHERE TO MEET?

- Your house/room? Their room? A church room? Somewhere neutral? Probably best to invite them to your home unless you live a long way apart and they don't cycle etc.

5. WHAT TO STUDY?

This will depend on who you are reading with:

- With people who've not really read the Bible before it's usually best to start by working through a gospel (gives continuity)
 - LUKE or JOHN are especially good.
 - MARK not good with Muslims.
 - Choose suitable passages (not too long), and encourage them to read for themselves the parts you don't cover.
- With those who've read a lot of the Bible before and know the gospel stories well ACTS can be good
- For new Christians JOHN or ACTS is good or the course 'Just for Starters'
- For young Christians one of the Epistles (EPHESIANS/COLOSSIANS)
- If they're only here for a few more weeks think carefully about which passages will be most helpful for them (you don't have to stick to one book).
- If you're not confident preparing your own studies then you could try using something like 'Passport to the Bible' (but you will still need to do your own preparation).
- Do they have their own Bible or do you need to buy/borrow one for them - make sure you're using the same version - Good News is easier if they struggle with English.

Preparing Bible studies

The best Bible studies are **well prepared**.

1) Start by praying for your preparation and the study and the person you'll be reading with.

2) If you're using a study guide or commentary then you will almost certainly have a better study if you prepare the study for yourself first, before looking at the study guide or commentary

3) Make sure you understand the passage yourself and think about what its main points are.

- Our Bible studies will be dull if we don't consider the context of the passage. We need to ask '*Why was it written?*', '*What were the issues being dealt with?*'. To get a feeling for the context we need to read the whole book or the relevant section. *How does the passage fit in with what comes before and after?* Help them to see how the passage relates to previous passages you've studied together.
- We need to think '*What are the questions I want to ask about this passage?*', '*What are the things in this passage that I really don't understand?*'. Use commentaries to help you understand and then think about how you can help them to understand.

4) Make sure you understand the whole passage (even if there are parts you don't intend to focus on, since they may ask questions).

Communicating meaning and applications

1) Look through the passage and note down any words or phrases you think they will find difficult to understand. Think of a simple explanation for each one.

2) Think very carefully about what questions you will ask in advance. Find the simplest way of phrasing your questions and think of alternative ways of expressing them in case they don't understand the first time.

- PREPARATION: A question to get them thinking about the main ideas in the passage before reading it.
- OBSERVATION: 'Comprehension' type questions (What happened?)
- INTERPRETATION: 'What does it mean' type questions (Why did it happen?).
- APPLICATION: 'How should we respond to it' type questions.

3) Avoid questions where the answer is just yes or no.

4) The big advantage of a one-to-one study is that you know in advance who you will be reading with and can really tailor the study to them and their needs. So in your preparation it is very important to think carefully about the person you'll be reading with:

- Consider what their religious background is and what they already know about the Bible – this will affect how easily they will understand the passage and how they might misunderstand it. Think how you can help them to understand correctly.
- Try to see the passage through their eyes, especially if they're someone who hasn't really read the Bible before (what do you expect them to find strange/surprising/difficult to understand, what questions do you expect them to ask?). Think how you will respond to them if they do react as you expect.
- In any passage there are likely to be many different points that you can draw from it, so think carefully about which are the things that are likely to be most helpful/relevant for the person you'll be reading with and focus on those things.
- Think about the kind of person they are and how you can help them to get inside the passage. Encourage them to imagine they were there and to think how they would feel/react/respond etc. and be ready to pick up on and develop the things they say.

Preparing Bible studies for Christians

APPLYING THE BIBLE TO DAILY LIFE

When preparing Bible studies for non-Christians the aim is usually to help them understand what the passage is saying about who Jesus is, what he has done for us and how we can respond to him in repentance and faith.

This is also true for Bible studies with Christians (we all need to be continually reminded of the Gospel message). However with Christians we want to help them see how the passage applies to how they live out their faith day by day.

For example, with a non-Christian we might note that the passage shows that Christians should tell other people about Jesus, and we may ask them why this is the case and what they think about it. But with a Christian we would want to take this much further and help them to think about how they can be telling their friends about Jesus and what sort of response they might get from their friends etc.

It is likely that there are several points of application coming from different parts of the passage. There are two ways of bringing them out:

- 1) Work through the whole passage asking observation and interpretation questions to make sure they understand what the passage is saying, and then at the end ask application questions to help them see how it applies to them.
- 2) Work through the passage asking observation and interpretation questions and slot in application questions as they come up in the passage.

The advantage of (1) is that you can make sure they understand the passage before discussing the applications (which makes it easier to cover the main points in the time available without getting to distracted by any one application).

The advantage of (2) is that you can deal with issues as they arise in the passage, which can lead to a discussion that flows more naturally.

In either case we want them to leave the study:

- a) Clear about what the applications are.
- b) Clear that these applications come from the passage, and not from our ideas or church traditions.

DISCIPLING CROSS CULTURALLY

With Christian internationals we're seeking not just to help them to understand the Bible, but to disciple them and help them grow in Christ. Most of them will eventually return to their own country so we don't want to clone them into British Christians, we want to prepare them for Christian life in their own culture.

This means we need to understand:

- Their cultural background.
- The church situation in their country.
- Particular difficulties they might face as Christians within their country e.g. difficulty finding a job.
- Particular ways in which their Christian faith is likely to conflict with their culture e.g. ancestors.

We then need to help them think through these issues. However we need to remember that our understanding of their culture is limited so we must be slow to tell them what they should do. Rather we should teach them to study the Bible for themselves so that they can apply its teaching to their own situation.

Leading one-to-one Bible studies

General Pattern

Spend time socialising together before you start.

- Pray
- Briefly explain the context of:
 - The passage within book
 - The book within the Bible
- Read the passage (get them to read it if they're happy doing so).
- Allow them to ask about any words they don't understand.
- Ask your questions and discuss together.
- Pray

General points for leading Bible studies

- **Allow/encourage them to ask questions** as you go along. If you can't answer their questions tell them you'll think about it or find out and answer next time.
- **Listen carefully** to what they say and pick up on anything that's interesting. Allow the discussion to develop naturally and be willing to digress a little from your prepared questions
- But don't allow the discussion to drift too much from the main points of the passage - be able to bring the focus back to the main points of the passage.
- **Keep directing them to look at the text** - teach them to look in the passage to find the answers to your questions. Answer questions with the Bible as much as possible.
- **Ask what they think or feel about different ideas** - encourage them to be honest about their questions, doubts, feelings etc. if they are comfortable doing this.
- **Be gentle** - it should be a discussion not an argument.
- **With non-Christians, let the Gospel come up naturally** - don't give it to them too early just for the sake of it.
- **Avoid jumping about the Bible** too much but don't be afraid to look at related passages to emphasise a point or make something clearer.

Cross-cultural issues

- If English is not their first language then it's important that you use simple language as much as possible. Try to avoid Christian jargon like 'redemption' or 'atonement'. And if they use Christian jargon ask them to explain what they mean - they may be using words in a different way.
- Non-Christian internationals tend to be starting much further back than British non-Christians (especially if from Asia), they just don't have the same Christian background. This means you cannot assume that they understand words in the same way we do - you need to explain very clearly what you mean by things like 'God', 'sin', 'a relationship with God'.
- Don't talk for too long at a time in case they do not understand what you're talking about.
- Don't be afraid of silence – allow them time to think (especially if East Asian or if their English is not so good). If it's clear they didn't understand the question then repeat it. If they still don't understand try rephrasing it.
- Be aware that in many cultures (East Asian) it is considered very rude to disagree with someone so they may give the 'right' answers.

Pastoral care and sharing testimony

In a one-to-one setting it is much easier for people to share with us their doubts, fears, concerns, struggles, problems and difficult past experiences. It is important that we:

- Listen to them carefully and actively – ask questions that will allow them to say whatever they want to say without putting pressure on them to talk if they don't want to.

- Pray for them (and with them if they're Christians).
- Show that our love for them is in no way affected by what they tell us.
- Don't judge them.
- Respect their trust and don't gossip about them (although it may be appropriate to ask others to pray for them).
- Resist the temptation to tell them what to do.
- Do what we can to help them if appropriate.
- Don't allow them to become dependent on us.

It is also much easier for us to be honest and open with them about our weaknesses, struggles and difficulties. This helps them to see:

- You don't have to be perfect to be a Christian.
- They're not the only ones who struggle to live God's way.
- How God helps us through our difficulties.
- How Biblical ideas relate to daily life.

This can be a very powerful witness but be careful we don't spend too much time talking about ourselves!

Encouraging response

If our desire is to see people coming to faith in Christ, growing to Christian maturity and so bringing glory to God, there's a danger that in our enthusiasm we will put pressure on them to 'pray a prayer of Christian commitment' before they are ready for that.

And yet we do want to be encouraging them to respond to what they're learning. How can we do this in a way that doesn't make them feel pressurised?

- 1) We don't need to know exactly where they are in their response to the gospel. If we ask them directly 'do you want to become a Christian' or something similar they may feel they have to say 'yes' to be polite, so it's better not to ask
- 2) We just need to faithfully teach them from God's word and pray that his Spirit will guide us to choose the right passages and work in them to give them faith. We can leave the exact timing to him. Most people become Christians over a period of time anyway.
- 3) Encourage them to respond by asking them application questions indirectly:
 - 'Here's a question for you to think about...'
 - 'John wants us to think about how we respond to Jesus. Maybe you could think about that for yourself.'
- 4) Help them to understand what it means to be a Christian.
 - Some people think it's just believing the message in the Bible and don't understand the need to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour.
 - Others don't understand that if Jesus is my Lord that means I must give my whole life to him and obey him in everything.
 - Or maybe they think you have to pass an exam or be baptised before you are a Christian.
- 5) Help them to understand how they can become a Christian (but explain this is in case they want to be a Christian in the future, so they don't feel pressurised)

Lord Jesus, I admit that I have sinned and gone my own way in what I have thought, said and done. I admit that I have ignored you, I am sorry.
I need your forgiveness.
I want to turn away from all that I know is wrong.
Thank you for dying on the cross to take away my sins
I believe that you rose from the dead.
I receive your gift of forgiveness and eternal life.
I want you to be first in my life
Please come into my heart.
Come in as my Saviour to forgive me.
Come in as my Lord to teach me how you want me to live.
Come in and change me by your Holy Spirit.
Come in and be with me forever.
Thank you for answering my prayer.
Amen.

Our Attitude and Expectations

We should be humble

- expect to learn from them
- expect to make mistakes and learn from these

Over time we should expect to see response and growth, but don't expect instant conversions

2 Corinthians 4:4

'The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ'

2 Corinthians 4:6

"For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

It is God's job to convert - our responsibility is to tell them the truth, praying that God will open their eyes and bring them to faith.

If it becomes clear that their interest is purely academic and they are not responding in their hearts to what they're learning then it might be right to finish your studies together and encourage them to join a Bible study group instead.

It's a huge and exciting privilege to read the Bible with someone from another country!