

Bible Study

a dynamic approach from Switzerland

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this article appeared in the IFES Review, April 1987



Definition

The expression 'Dynamic Approach' indicates a holistic process of Bible study which focusses both on the reader (not only in his individual situation but in his life in community), and on the biblical text as it stands. It comprises three main steps.

- a) A process of 'projection' (usually facilitated by a game). The purpose of this is, first, to help students articulate, and therefore face up to, their own preconceived ideas - the values and assumptions they already hold about God, the world and themselves. Only when these habitual patterns of thought have been exposed and acknowledged can students become truly open to the fresh impact of God's Word on their lives.
- b) A Bible study in two stages, using a partly inductive, partly dynamic method: first, observing the text in its literary and historical context, and secondly, working out the interpretation.
- c) A time for appropriation, during which group members allow the message of the text to confront their own life situation and relate its challenge to their own attitudes and behaviour.

Origin of the method

In the seventies several people in Switzerland were involved in ecumenical Bible training for adults. They sensed the need for group Bible study conducted on a sound pedagogical and theological basis.

These Bible study trainers were rediscovering the possibility of reading the Bible not only as individuals but as a redeemed community called to live by the gospel. Then they sought to work out how Jesus encountered people and crowds, by studying several Gospel texts. They established a pattern of Bible study, the main aim of which was to promote a real encounter between the readers and the biblical text, so that the message might strike them with fresh force both as individuals and as a group.

Two members of the GBU staff at that time, Ninon Guignard and Christian van den Heuvel studied this method and adapted it to their work among students, starting from a biblical basis. They called their method the 'Dynamic Approach of Bible study'.

The assumptions behind the method

The Dynamic Approach starts from the idea that the text of the Scriptures witnesses to God, who is seeking men and women so that they may pass from captivity to freedom, from fear to confidence and faith, from death to life. Human beings are called to live confidently and in creative relationship with themselves, with others and with God, in Jesus Christ. Through His Word, God by His Holy Spirit confronts men and women, challenging their previous understanding. By exposing themselves to Scripture, people take the risk of gaining new insights about their own identity and their environment and of being willing to change their actions accordingly.

Secondly, the Dynamic Approach is geared to a varied group of people and the richness or poverty of relationships which exist among them. Why this? Because the biblical texts themselves witness to the various communities in which people met with the living God. The record of God's dealings with these communities and individuals down the years challenges us to enter by faith into a relationship with Him. The historical distance between them and us necessitates our endeavouring in the group study to understand the historical context of these texts in order properly to appreciate the intention of the writer. Otherwise we may run the danger of jumping to premature conclusions about the meaning of the text. Only by this careful process of interpreting the text in its literary and historical context can we properly understand its implications for our relationship with the living God today.

Thirdly, we as readers bound to our own worldview cannot be neutral or objective a priori when we come to Scripture. We tend rather to resist teaching which challenges our pre-conceived ideas and usual ways of thinking. The group itself tends to preserve the status quo and expends much energy in avoiding potentially disturbing questions. We find it difficult to listen obediently to an uncomfortable message. Our temptation is to find in the text what we already know or to bring into it the meaning of other similar scriptures. It is easy to miss the intention of the writer speaking to his original audience, and then to do a superficial and reassuring study, which brings nothing new to our lives. In this context, it is our responsibility carefully to consider the text with all its differences from, and similarities to, our own situation.

But the 'success' of our study will depend more upon our readiness to open up and let God challenge our assumptions, than on our believing in some magical property of the text to speak to our needs, or on the amount of thinking we could spend on the study. The message of the text will develop its creative vitality, when it confronts us on how we live

- our feelings and beliefs. If we are humbly open to Scripture in this way, we shall be less vulnerable to hearing only what we want to hear (making what Dr Packer calls a 'presuppositionally conditioned interpretation') and more receptive to fresh, disturbing challenges from God's Word. If we don't expose ourselves to the full force of the

message, we shall be tempted merely to derive moral principles from the text and apply them to our individual lives. As a result we shall reinforce the moral standards of the group without allowing room for life to spring up. These considerations lead us to stress a basic rule in Dynamic Bible Study: we need to respect the two protagonists in God's communication process: the reader in his life situation and the text in its context.

Hence the importance of the teaching method used in the study. The introductory 'game' becomes the dynamic means of facilitating the connection between the essential message of the text as it would have struck the original readers and its decisive message to the group now, to which members then develop a creative response.

Example of Dynamic Bible Study on Luke 18:1-8

Plan for a one and a half hour study with a group of 10 to 20 people.

Preparation of the study: before the meeting.

- The Bible Study Servant (BSS) will make the biblical text available to the group on a sheet of paper so that they may write or underline freely on it.
- After careful personal study of the text, he decides on the key questions he wants to put to the group in order to progress in the study.
- He then prepares the game or tool chosen to facilitate the process of projection into the study and works out the rules in order to communicate them clearly.

Projecting into the study

- The BSS introduces the text and explains what a parable is.
- Verses 1 to 5 of the passage are read.
- The BSS then proposes that the group should write an open letter to the judge on the widow's behalf, explaining her situation and asking for justice to be done. (Divide the group into small groups of four at most and allow them 10 minutes to draft a persuasive letter.)
- Each group reads its letter aloud in turn.
- The BSS makes the participants aware of the feelings they have expressed through their letters: hope, aggression, discouragement, humility, etc...
- He discovers the essence of the Parable with the group by asking the question, 'What does that story illustrate?' (vv 2-5).
- He collects the various answers and writes them on a board.

Observing the whole text: inductive procedure.

- The group reads the whole text together.
- The BSS asks the question 'Why did Jesus tell this parable to his disciples?' (cf v 1 and the context of the coming of the Kingdom of God (17:20-37), and the coming of the Son of Man (v 8)).
- Then he asks: 'What did Jesus ask his disciples to pray for?'
Possible answer: to ask God for His Kingdom to come (cf 'Our Father...' ie to ask God to bring justice through His reign (Luke 1~:2-4)).
- He now turns the attention of the group to the rest of the text:
'Why did Jesus ask them always to pray and not lose heart?'
'What difficulties did the disciples have with the question of the reign of God?'

Together the group makes a list of the problems the disciples may have had at the time when Luke wrote the Gospel:

For example:

- The Christians may have lost heart because the coming of the Kingdom of God had not yet happened.
- The question arises about God's goodness: why did He leave His disciples? Is it not scandalous that He let them wait before bringing justice?
- Is God unjust? Is it still possible to believe in Him?
- Is it not easier to give up fighting, when they get no immediate answer from God?
- In these questions there may be one 'connecting point' linking the meaning of the text to its relevance for us.

Interpretation

Question: 'What does the evangelist want to communicate to his readers?'

The BSS may suggest an interpretation drawing together the points made through the observation process. Luke relates a teaching of Jesus on prayer; the context is the longing for the coming of the reign of God (or for the Day of the Son of Man). As the disciples do not yet see it coming, they may lose heart, doubt the reality of God's promise, and give up hope, lacking the courage to battle on until that day comes.

1. In such a situation there is but one response which will strengthen the disciples: to pray to God in every situation of life, so that His Kingdom of justice may come (cf the Lord's prayer in Luke 11:2, 'Father, may your name be honoured, may your Kingdom come...') This prayer is central to the Christian faith, that is the reason why it should always be prayed. It is as central as the demand that the widow addressed to the judge: unless she asked for justice she would be destroyed by injustice; so she keeps on asking, until she sees justice done to her.
2. Even when we know that praying for the coming of the reign of God is first priority in the life of a disciple, we still need something to hold on to in prayer: so the evangelist stresses, through Jesus' words, the willingness of God to see justice done to His people, and, says the text, He is even prompt to do it. In the parable, the judge was motivated by nothing more

than his desire not to be disturbed, so he answered the widow. God has bound Himself to mankind in Jesus. How differently He receives the cry of His children in distress! So the disciples' prayer for God's reign to come promptly is based first on God's love for His chosen who appeal to Him day and night. Therefore, knowing God's love in the time when God's reign is not yet present made them able to stand firm in their faith through difficulties and fears.

Jesus' ultimate saying about faith in verse 8 is a question asked of every disciple: in view of the sure coming of God's reign of justice do we hold fast our faith in a loving God and engage ourselves in the battle for justice? Or do we give up, losing our ability to pray and work for God's reign to come?

Appropriating the meaning of the text

The group should now have a fairly clear understanding of the message of the text. But people need time to apply the challenge of what they have discovered to their usual ways of behaving and thinking. This application time belongs first to them. During this last part of the study the BSS should make room for silence and for sharing the impact of God's Word on members' lives, through various means.

He may propose some questions to participants and give time for silent reflection. For example:

What new thing have I learned as far as my practice of prayer is concerned? What may I hope for? What should I do as a consequence? What should be the prayer of our group? What do we long for? What shall we agree to ask together of the Lord?

Then) according to the time available, participants may share their response to the impact of the Word with the rest of the group. This can be done in different ways, eg by creative activities like writing a sentence or a poem, doing sketches, drawing, etc... If there is a need for the group to pray together, the BSS will encourage people not to hurry into prayer using their usual formulae, but to express what they feel and what fresh discoveries they have made through the study. Make room for diversity within the group.

Conclusion

The quality of the study depends mainly on the willingness of the BSS to be open to the fresh impact of the message of the text and on his attention to the needs of group members. His role involves:

Before the meeting:

- Preparing a careful exegesis of the text.
- Knowing the historical context and the aim of the writer.
- Thinking out a good teaching method which will involve the participants.
- Writing down the key questions.

During the study

The Bible Study Servant serves the group. He proposes definite objectives. He gives precise indications about how to proceed; he draws conclusions which

help the group to progress. He may propose an interpretation of the text, staying open to new insights contributed by participants. In the third part (appropriation) the response to the Word is a group activity. The role of the BSS is to help people express themselves truthfully and respectfully to one another, so that each person feels that he has been understood.

Ultimately, the BSS is responsible for mastering the use of pedagogical tools proposed to the group. These tools must facilitate openness to one another and to the Word of life; they are only a means to that end -not the core of the study by themselves.

Here are some examples of such games:

- communicating with the use of pictures (photolanguage).
- the game of confrontation: each little group identifies with a character in the text, then argues with the others to defend the interests of their character.
- Role play.
- Writing a letter to an imaginary person.
- Expressing one's understanding of a text through drawing.

It would be possible to devote a whole paper to the subject of games which encourage identification and openness in the context of Bible study, but this is not the purpose of this article. I refer to books about games and pedagogical techniques in the bibliography.

In conclusion, the keys to a 'successful' Dynamic Bible Study are:

- a willingness to examine our pre-suppositions and have them challenged.
- a genuine desire to meet God in His Word and let Him confront, and, if necessary, change our previous understanding of ourselves and of life.
- finding the all-important connection to bridge the gap between the original context of the message and the present situation of group members.
- good preparation on the part of the BSS.
- and, undergirding all these things, a strong conviction that God Himself calls us to a radical encounter with Himself, one another and ourselves as we study His Word.

Bibliography

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(For English speakers, there are some excellent ideas in Creative Ideas for Small Groups in the Christian Community John Mallison (Scripture Union UK, 1978). (Ed)