

Bible Study: Methods, Materials, Personal Reflections

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Bible study with college students is something which I am learning about all the time. But the more things change, the more they stay the same. As my friend, the Preacher, has said, "That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So, there is nothing new under the sun."¹ So, I write this article for the journal with absolutely no pretense that anything new is to be said.

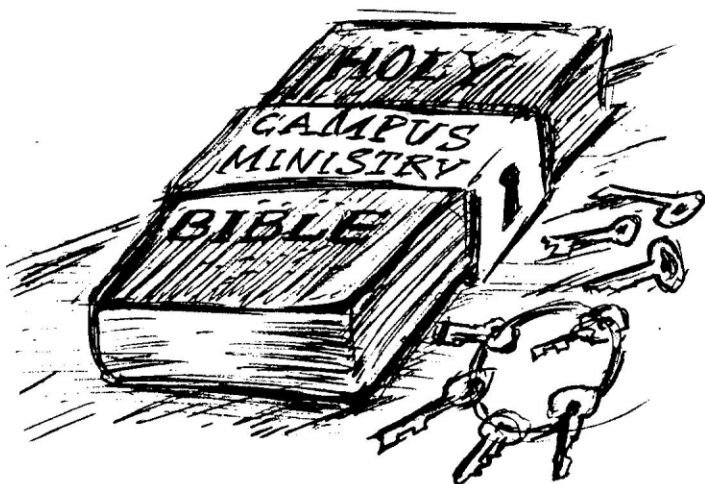
The week after I was asked to write this article, three pieces of mail came across my desk concerning materials for Bible study. The first piece was the 1987 *Student Ministry Materials Catalog*. In this catalog, National Student Ministries (NSM) materials are organized according to the three main emphases of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC): REACHING PEOPLE, DEVELOPING BELIEVERS, STRENGTHENING MISSIONS. Noticeable in this lineup is the virtual absence of materials under the heading of the third emphasis, STRENGTHENING MISSIONS. Here, only one piece is listed, the Bible study by Dr. Kyle M. Yates, Jr., *Jeremiah*. (This points out the difficulty of balancing all student materials with convention level emphases.) The emphasis REACHING PEOPLE has four pieces listed. If numbers represent strength, the area NSM materials are the strongest is DEVELOPING BELIEVERS. Thirteen different items are listed in this category. These items range from small tracts and short Bible study booklets to extensive three-ring binder materials for discipleship.

To these materials published by NSM can be added the many other materials from the Sunday School Board, as well as other publishing houses. One can choose to augment, supplement, and/or replace NSM publications. Many do. I personally use NSM materials by default. I generally have neither the time nor the energy to dig up other material. The NSM material is fine enough; students seem to respond well to this material. While some of the material can be superficial, that is

not a grave fault — it is the result of the writing restrictions and the parameters of actual use on the campus. For example, students seem best to respond in small group settings. Such settings disallow the use of information-loaded approaches (such as lecture, common in college classrooms). By the time you have allowed Bobby, Deb, John, Amanda, Susan and Ken each to illustrate lesson points with individual life experiences — the hour is up! But for what is lost in the amount of information conveyed, that much and more is gained in the networking of relationships that build that illusive but powerful phenomenon of social cementing typically called “fellowship.” As any campus minister knows, the presence of fellowship can transform a “ho-hum” Baptist Student Union into an exciting, dynamite unit that truly can impact a campus for Christ.

This brings me to a point about the concept of Bible study with college students. I came to Alabama straight from pursuing a terminal degree at a Southern Baptist seminary. Say the words “Bible study,” and I was jumping to my shelf to pull down my Greek text, commentaries and plethora of dictionaries, *ad nauseum*. “Exegesis” was my call to arms.

What misdirected energy! In student work, I had to learn to move from exegesis to experiences, from the profound to the personal. Personal problems. Daily frustrations. Challenges. Confusion. For students, sound exegesis just was not an



immediate felt need. Belaboring the nuances of an aorist verb form was not such a biting issue that Ron, the business major, lay sleepless in his dorm bed over it. A seminarian, perhaps. But not a college student in the middle of final exams.

I hope not to be misunderstood. I would not betray my seminary education by suggesting solid Bible study can be built on shoddy exegesis. *You* may burn the midnight oil putting the finishing touches on the Biblical groundwork, but your student who just lost grant money and will have to drop out of school next quarter could care less. What I am implying is simply what I think I have learned in a few short years: Bible study in the campus setting needs to be more needs-oriented than information-loaded. That is why, it seems to me, that materials pirated from sources such as *Serendipity* seem to take root so easily and successfully. Also, I have observed myself and fellow campus ministers modifying existing material we are using precisely at the point of meeting needs and making personal applications. Personal applications in the college setting perhaps is part of the reason for the greater success of the *Parables* material over the less well-received sequel, *Jeremiah* (not the Old Testament setting). *Parables* had specific, college-focused concerns built into the material as an integral part of the presentation. The drive to reestablish collegiate-specific curriculum in Sunday School materials is tacit admission that needs-oriented formats are the ones that actually work well and to which the folks at the grass-roots respond.

What point is to be made with this “needs-oriented” evaluation of Bible study in the campus setting? Basically, I now have an initial distrust of those materials that do *not* seem to be strong in needs applications. In my earlier exegetical battles, I discarded out of hand all topical Bible study approaches. The topical Bible study was a travesty of interpretation in my own thinking, and I was embarrassed to be associated with such material. After all, they were the scourge of Biblical work, being “superficial.” Such an attitude on my part pretty well dispensed with the available material! But this thinly disguised academic snobbery discounted unjustly the proper place of topical approaches in the campus setting. I know you knew that already, but this was a great discovery for me! The question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

became for me. "Can anything good come out of the topical method?" But now I think I am beginning to see why the topical approach is, hands-down, the clear winner in use on college campuses: *topical approaches are particularly adapted to needs-oriented applications.*

Of the weaknesses in the topical method one could mention a certain lack of focus, a blurring due to taking too many texts. Another weakness is a "leveling" process which makes all the Biblical writers "say the same thing." But such weaknesses can be addressed and corrected. The danger of the first weakness is the preeminent problem of "prooftexting." The danger of the second weakness is distortion of reality (with the result that issues and answers are painted a surrealistic black and white). However, neither one of these weaknesses and associated dangers is inherent to the topical methodology (as I once thought). I have learned to discriminate between a particular writer's critical skills, or lack thereof, and the topical methodology he may happen to be employing. So much bad topical methodology was out and about, I overlooked the truly fine material. *Parables* by Peter Rhea Jones² restored my confidence in topical methodology. One may note as well other methods blended into this work.

This personal reflection on my changing attitude toward the topical methodology is something of an Augustinian confessional on my part. More costly to me, and to you as well, is the trouble of implementing *any* material. At this point I am more convinced that the methodology chosen is ancillary to the application skills of the Bible study leader, be it student or campus minister.

A telephone survey across our state revealed campus ministry programs using the typical NSM materials, with supplementation of some Bible study materials from discipleship materials. Quarter system schools have the most trouble implementing most NSM publications, which seem grossly biased to the semester, traditional (non-commuter) campus. Ten to twelve week materials regularly are chopped off to four to six weeks. One campus program writes their own material for each year! This is ideal, as needs applications conceivably would receive the greatest emphasis and sharpest focus. In this program, a student writes the Bible studies over the summer,

using devotional books, sermons in local churches, seminars at state conferences and other sources. The campus minister reviews and edits the material, and it is then copied for Bible study groups to use as a guide.

Besides the NSM catalog, two other items came my way. One item was a publication by Serendipity Press called *The Gospel of Matthew*.³ Eleven Bible studies are written around various topics (e.g., "Goal Setting," "Forgiveness," "Risk Taking") and uses the typical Serendipity approach. This booklet is out of a series of group Bible studies called "Serendipity New Testament For Groups." It looks simple enough, but the ease with which the natural, opening questions set up the Biblical background in each Bible study is deceptively smooth. Usually, such questions must be phrased carefully, or they will fall flat. I was wondering why in the world we as Southern Baptist campus ministers couldn't come up with our own quality, small group material? Do we need wait on NSM? Or borrow from Serendipity? We have the Biblical expertise and years of collective campus ministry experience. I would like to see us do something creative, perhaps in a Serendipity style. What we do not have is the money for such a project. Perhaps ASBCM or regional groups can produce new pieces with financial assistance from NSM and state directors.

1. Eccl. 1:0. *New American Standard Bible, Reference Edition* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1973, published by A. J. Holman Company, Division of J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, New York).

2. Peter Rhea Jones, *Parables of Jesus* (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1985).

3. Lyman Coleman, et al, *The Gospel of Matthew in the Serendipity New Testament For Groups* (Littleton, CO: Serendipity Press, 1986), a special edition printed for promotional purposes.