

# The Hidden Assumptions of Small Group Bible Study

By T. David Gordon

One of the most prominent features of Evangelical life in the present time is the small group Bible study. Most Evangelical Christians either are or have been involved in a small group Bible study. Since this phenomenon is so widespread, it would be irresponsible for us not to make some attempt at assessing it. Although it would be impossible to evaluate the *results* of such small group study, it might at least prove helpful to evaluate its *assumptions*. While what follows is somewhat critical of the assumptions of small-group study, there are several assumptions, and several results, associated with small-group study, with which we are in entire agreement. For instance, the very fact that the *Bible* is being studied is a matter of significant agreement. Indeed, the Bible studied imperfectly might yield more edifying results than anything else studied more-perfectly, since the Bible is God's own infallible revelation.

## What Is Small Group Bible Study?

For our purposes, small group Bible study is not numerically defined. That is, small group Bible study does not exist wherever the Bible is studied by less than a certain number of people. For instance, if a large lecture hall were rented, and a well-known Bible teacher were invited in for a lecture on a particular topic, and if, for some reason only six people attended, this would not be a small group Bible study. It would be a large group Bible study, sparsely attended. A genuine small group Bible study is *intentionally* small, deliberately designed to stimulate and exploit the socio-psychological dynamics of small gatherings.

The small group Bible study, as we understand it here, attempts to foster *participation by each member, intimacy, sharing, and self-expression* within a non-judgmental arena. Even though most small groups have a leader, the leader is expected to facilitate, not dominate. If the leader prompts every observation in a Socratic fashion, then we do not really have a genuine small group.

## The Medium and the Message

Marshall McLuhan has made commonplace the recognition that the vehicle of communication always shapes and informs the message communicated, and, indeed, is itself something of a message. The invention of the printing press was not only a technological revolution, but a sociological and intellectual revolution as well. The printing press allows knowledge to be spread impersonally, by a medium other than the human voice. I can learn from Luther without having met Luther, and without having met anyone who has met him. Marshall McLuhan and other media ecologists have observed that what was true of the printing press is also true of the telegraph, the radio, the telephone, and, that most ubiquitous American medium, the television.

Our purpose is to attempt to evaluate the small group as a *medium* for communicating the message of the Bible. What unstated assumptions does the small group as a medium make about the Bible, about human nature, about truth? Our question is not a question about the articulated beliefs of the *individuals* who participate in such study, but rather about the *medium itself*.

### Five Assumptions of Small Group Bible Study

The following five assumptions are assumptions that the small group makes, *as a medium*. I do not suggest that all or any who are involved in such groups actually believe these five things, or even that they have consciously thought about them. They are assumptions implied *in* the medium, not necessarily assumptions of those *employing* the medium.

#### 1. Participation is as important as precision.

The very purpose of studying the Bible in small groups is to provide a non-judgmental context that encourages (or even requires) the participation of each individual. In large gatherings, people are more timid; in small gatherings, they are less so. In a small group, people will speak who would never speak in a larger group. In a small group, each individual is an involved participant. The standard prompt of the small group leader is, “What do you think about this verse?”

In such a context, the participation of each individual is an important, perhaps the most important, goal. Therefore, evaluative comments that might discourage such participation are

counter-productive. If the group is trying to get Marcia to be more involved, for instance, it will not likely secure such involvement by responding to her first comment by qualifying or correcting her. Our point is not that anyone involved in small group study consciously condones erroneous views, but merely that the medium itself is not conducive to critical evaluation. The medium does not make it easy to achieve both accurate, faithful interpretation *and* participation by everyone in the group. Social courtesy and the dynamics of the small group require that others either suspend judgment altogether, or at least not express it very clearly or forcefully.

In a large group, by contrast, critical evaluation of the speaker is expected. It is expected that the speaker will have exercised a great deal of critical discernment in the process of preparing the lecture. It is expected that those listening will be evaluating and testing what they hear. Since they are not required to participate, they are not required to refute the speaker, but only to raise questions of clarification to be sure they have understood the speaker (though, in some such settings, individuals are also permitted to rebut the speaker). Their presence in the group does not imply agreement with the speaker, nor does the large group require such agreement. The dynamics of the group itself do not require vocal participation of the audience, and so do not require the audience to choose between affirming and critically evaluating the speaker.

## 2. Every interpretation or insight has some value.

The very dynamic of the small group, which encourages active participation by each member, suggests that there is some value in any comment that might potentially be made. This cultivates an uncritical acceptance of virtually anything that might be said. Insightful comments, erroneous comments, and inconsequential comments are treated by the group dynamic in the same way. Each is listened to politely, and with a polite minimum of critical evaluation. Can anyone in such a context say even once, much less twice, what Paul does in Galatians 1:9, and 10, “Let him be accursed”? Could we respond to a good friend whose comment appears to “enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving” that he and those like him promote “deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1-2)? If it is hard to

achieve precision in a small group, it is even harder to refute outright error or heresy. If our timid friend Marcia has survived our initial corrections and qualifications of her first comment, what will happen if we respond to her second comment by saying, “Why Marcia, Pelagius said the same thing, and he was condemned as a heretic”?

### 3. The Holy Spirit does not give differing abilities.

The small group structure encourages, and perhaps requires, a degree of participation by each member. Negatively, this also requires a degree of non-participation by others. Indeed, generally speaking, the small group works best when there is a rough parity of participation by each member of the group. If this were not so, there would be a lecture by the most qualified member, followed perhaps by questions and observations by the others. There is a sort of interpretive egalitarianism inherent in the small group, as a medium, even though it is not necessarily the case that any participant actually believes this.

As a medium, then, the small group approach to Bible study does not easily accommodate the expression of spiritual gifts that differ. Paul teaches that God gives different gifts to different individuals, and, that among these is the gift of teaching. Further, Paul teaches that the health of the entire Church depends in part upon the proper *exercise* of such gifts. At the very least, this must mean that some are better teachers than others, and that their ability to teach contributes best to the Church’s growth when given opportunity to express itself. The small group, encouraging a parity of participation, is not a place for gifted teachers to express those gifts.

### 4. The Bible can be interpreted well without special aids.

Since the only resource that can be easily consulted in a small group study is the resource of other members, the very nature of the small group suggests that lexicographical, theological, and historical aids are not especially useful in understanding the Bible.

In terms of time alone, if a Bible dictionary article were passed around for everyone to read, this would consume far more time than if an individual were appointed to do such research ahead of time. And if each member of the group were given a particular assignment to bring to

the group, even this would not be as effective as having a single individual synthesize the results of all of the work beforehand. A single mind has the ability to analyze and synthesize, and then to communicate the most important results and conclusions to others. Passages can be read and re-read, and results of one part of research can be compared to other results. In a group, this process would be tedious beyond endurance. As a result, the small group, as a medium, tends to suggest that such work is non-essential, at least for its purposes.

#### 5. The Bible does not “interpret itself.”

The Reformers taught that the Bible, being inspired by God, has a unity that reflects its divine origin. As a consequence, their most foundational interpretive principle was that the Bible “interprets itself,” by which they meant that any given statement in the Bible is somewhat open-ended, and that the interpretive possibilities are reduced by comparing a particular passage to other passages. For example, “Judge not, that you be not judged,” (Matt. 7:1) could be understood as a polemic against critical analysis, unless read in light of other texts, such as “The spiritual man judges all things” (1 Cor. 2:15). In a sense, then, the entire Bible is the interpretive context for a particular text. Faithful interpretation consists, in no small measure, of considering other related passages when interpreting any particular passage.

This process of considering other passages, reading broadly through the Bible, can hardly be done by a small group. Since this comparative reading yields many dead ends, because many particular texts do not especially shed light on others, it would be extremely tedious for the group to do this work inductively together. If the small group appoints someone to do this work, then the small group loses its special dynamic, and becomes more of a lecture. If it does not do so, it is forced to reduce Bible study to what a particular text might mean *apart from* what the rest of the Bible says. This assumes either that the Reformers were wrong, or that there is value in studying the Bible wrongly. If the Reformers were right in perceiving this principle of comparing texts with the rest of the Bible as essential, then not doing so reflects either a disagreement with the Reformational view, or a willingness to study the Bible while avoiding an essential interpretive principle.

### Incompatible Assumptions

The small group Bible study faces two fundamentally incompatible assumptions. On the one hand, there is the assumption that the Bible should be *rightly* interpreted, that edification is enhanced by a *proper* understanding of the Bible. On the other hand, there is the assumption that a shared approach to interpretation will edify. This shared approach nullifies the benefit of specially gifted teachers, and diminishes the value of careful research and canonical context. Its commitment to every-member participation actually tends to work against the goals of accurate contextual interpretation. The historical and biblical contexts are reduced in importance, not because the *members* of the group deny their importance, but because the *dynamics* of the small group work in a contrary direction.

Evangelicals are in something of a dilemma. On the one hand, most Evangelical Christians find their small group Bible studies helpful and encouraging. On the other hand, they are committed to a high view of the Scriptures that would necessitate their being properly interpreted.

### Whither Small Group Bible Study?

I certainly believe in the importance of Bible study, and I certainly grant that there are many advantages of small gatherings of believers. In my judgment, the small group can be an especially fruitful arena for the discussion of the *application* of common truths or for *encouraging* such application. Such groups lend themselves well to the sharing of both failed and successful attempts at living the Christian life. They are well-adapted to testimonials of how others have applied generally-accepted truths. I also believe that small gatherings of believers for more expressly *social* reasons, with no other agenda, can be very edifying.

What I deny, therefore, is not that there is value in Bible study or that there is value in small gatherings; I affirm the value of both. What I deny is the compatibility of these two things, the small group and Bible study. The very nature of the small group and its dynamics tends to work contrary to Protestant assumptions about the nature of the Bible and how it is understood. The Reformers taught that the Bible was to be interpreted by the ordinary means of language and

history; the small group cannot permit these means to be employed, because it would imply that members of the group with knowledge of such matters have more access to a correct interpretation than other members. The Reformation taught that a text of scripture was to be understood within the context of the entire Bible; the small group cannot encourage such a belief without suggesting that those members of the group with greater knowledge of the Bible have more to contribute than others. The Bible teaches that the abilities to interpret and teach are differentially distributed; the small group (as a medium) teaches that the abilities to interpret and teach are equally shared. The goal of Protestant biblical interpretation is *truth*; the goal of the small group biblical interpretation is *participation*. Those who participate in small group Bible study should be very aware of the limitations of such an activity. There will be many gains in the area of mutual encouragement and social development, but few gains in the area of apprehending properly the biblical revelation.