



Quaker Universalist Voice
**Friendly Universal
Scripture Study**
by Joanne and Larry Spears

Scriptures

Scriptures are bodies of writings identified by the authority of common assent to be most notable in illuminating the faith within a religious tradition. Scriptures are surrounded with other writings also considered notable in illuminating scriptures and faith.

This study method can be applied to any scripture of any religious tradition. This study method can be applied to more than one scripture. This group study method can be used for interfaith study of scriptures and scripture study within a single faith tradition.

Translations

A translation cannot reproduce in English all the meaning of the original text. On finer points and on some surprisingly major points, significant differences exist between one translation and another. The English words chosen to translate the Hebrew, Aramaic, Sanskrit, Arabic, or Greek are important reflections of the translator's perspective. By using several different translations of the scripture, it will quickly become apparent that translators are human.

Scripture study in which different translations are read sensitizes the members to how the choice of English words affects the meaning of the text. The translator's words point to the meaning of the original text, which, in turn, is an effort to point to truth as the author understood it.

This is a liberating insight to many, and it may transform a reader's antagonism toward the text and enable the reader to approach the text in order to understand the underlying truth.

History

People use their scripture as a source of guidance for experiencing and confirming the spiritual relationship in their worship and in their daily lives. People live with their scripture as part of their culture. Their own subsequent writings and speech are filled with scripture quotations and references, reflecting their commitment to careful reading and study of the scripture as a source of authority in their lives.

Present Understanding

Among people today, there is a wide range of views of scripture, from those who see the scripture as interesting historical documents to those who see scripture as God's words.

An increasing number of people feel the need for a shared study of the scripture. They seek an effective study method, which reflects their values and tradition and draws them toward the core of the scripture message.

Many people remember past scripture studies unfavorably as occasions, that encouraged sermonizing and authoritarian statements and discouraged questions. For these people, time spent in scripture study is remembered as fruitless for their spiritual lives and frustrating to the integrity of their own search for truth. Some are struggling with life and religion and working through childhood religious understandings, which have become inadequate to adult life. For many, the struggle to find or retain the core of faith, separate from childhood distortions and disappointments, is intense.

We all need the support and direction that a group study structure can host and a candid study method can provide. It is for those people who have been away from scripture study and who sense a need to turn in its direction that the following method for a scripture study is particularly shared.

Tests for Sound Scripture Study Methods

We should be able to apply insights from our traditions, personal experience, understanding, and standards to any scripture study method. The scripture study method should affirm that everyone can find spiritual understanding in the study process. Any scripture study method should support four important aspects of our traditions:

- First, a scripture study method should recognize personal experience as a central part of our spiritual lives.
- Second, a scripture study method should recognize the equality of all persons in the study process. It should remove the centrality of an authority figure as leader, thereby affirming the presence working through everyone in the open silence of those gathered together for the scripture study.
- Third, a scripture study method should recognize the availability of new insights and continuing revelation in our spiritual lives.
- Fourth, a scripture study method should affirm the connection of the scriptural witness to our lives in our present world.

These elements should be the central tests to apply to any scripture study method. These elements should be comfortably present in any scripture study process.

Universal Scripture Study Method

The process of scripture study suggested here--the method --meets each of these tests and is simple to use. This study method provides a structure for effective communication. The method suggested here has been arrived at through years of experiment. It is a tool that enables people to initiate and take part in productive exploration of the scripture and their lives.

It takes effort and practice to see the benefit of any scripture study method. But, it is our experience that people invariably find that the sharing which grows out of this study method results in new understanding and deeper insight than may come from the use of many other methods. We suggest the full use of this format before trying variations.

Nine Steps in a Scripture Study Group

Starting a scripture study group can be a simple matter of following nine easy, specific steps:

1. Gather a group that can commit one hour a week for six weeks.
2. Choose a section of the scripture to start.
3. Study only a single, small unit each week.
4. Review the study questions.
5. Read the passage aloud.
6. Start in silence.
7. Make notes of ideas that answer each question.
8. Share the answers orally around the circle.
9. End in silence.

STEP 1: *Gather a group that can commit one hour a week for six weeks.* Gather together at least three, but not more than eight, interested people with any religious or spiritual background. No prior study of the scripture is needed by anyone. Members need not have ever picked up the scripture before to participate fully in this scripture study.

A person with extensive scriptural background can be helpful to the scripture study process, but should not be seen as an authority figure in this study. All participants are equal. A group reflecting a diversity of viewpoints provides a stimulating variety of both spiritual experience and understanding.

Ask each person to make a commitment of one hour per week (regularly every week) for six weeks to study the scripture. Each scripture study should last one hour from start to finish.

A prompt starting time assures completion in one hour.

Ask each person to bring at least one translation of the scripture to the study session. A variety of translations is helpful to group understanding. Ask that each person bring only the scripture and a notebook. Other reference books may be

consulted after the study, but these books distract members from the scripture itself during the group study.

No reading is required prior to the group study. Members may be stimulated to read further to search out solutions to particular problems, which the study raises. They may or may not want to report back briefly to the group. However, no study or time outside the group is needed or expected.

By using several different translations of the scripture, it will quickly become apparent that translators are human. A translation cannot reproduce in English all the meaning of the original text. On finer points and on some surprisingly major points, there can be significant differences between one translation and another of the same text. The English words chosen to translate the words of the original language are important.

Scripture study in which members read from different translations makes the members more sensitive to the choice of English words and the change in meaning when alternate words are used. The text of scripture itself is an effort to point to truth as the authors understood it. The English words of a translator point to the meaning of the original text. This language challenge alone is a liberating insight to many, and it shifts the study effort from an antagonism between the reader and the text to a cooperative partnership between the text and the reader to understand the truth underlying the text.

Have paper and a pencil available for each person. Many will find a notebook useful to maintain the sequence of their study notes for future reference. All notes are private, except as their contents may be shared orally by each person within the group.

STEP 2: *Choose a section of the scripture to start.* Decide as a group which section of the scripture the group would like to use to begin the study.

- In the Christian tradition, one of the first three gospels of Matthew, Mark or Luke, or a letter of Paul, like I or II Corinthians or Philippians, is a good choice.
- In the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Psalms or one of the prophets, like Jonah, Amos, or Hosea, is a good starting point.
- In the Islamic tradition, suras 1, 87, or 93 are recommended choices.
- In the Buddhist tradition, Dhammapada is a good choice.

It is our experience, however, that after some practice, this method can be used successfully with any section of any scripture of any tradition.

STEP 3: *Study only a single small unit each week.* To begin, choose just one sentence, verse, or other small unit in the chosen section of scripture, to be followed each week by the next unit in the selected section. It is important not to skip around among favorite passages. It is essential to take a small portion for each scripture study session.

Scripture study is a spiritual discipline of holding lives accountable to the texts of the religious tradition over lifetimes. As the scripture study continues through the weeks, discussion will develop as themes emerge, which link each session to the discussion in previous sessions. It is harmful to spiritual understanding to try to cover too much material. The goal of scripture study should be deeper understanding of the spiritual life tradition to which the passage points or describes.

This scripture study method reflects the view that there is greater insight available through focusing full attention on small amounts of study material than on large amounts of material. Remember that each sentence or section is an extract from a larger work. Each section does not necessarily give the true flavor of the whole content or reflect the major underlying themes. Being sensitive to group indications that a particular text is not consistent with their personal experience may indicate passages which need to be set in a larger context. References can always be made to the complete scripture as each section is studied.

At first glance, there may not appear to be much to discuss in just a sentence. We are culturally conditioned to cover as much material as possible to complete an assigned task. Resist this temptation. Scripture study group members often feel frustrated when each member talks about different parts of a long passage. A common focus on a sentence provides a focus for deeper insights.

STEP 4: *Review the study questions.* At the beginning of the first few study sessions, each person should write down the five questions (listed below), which are to be answered in the silent period each time you meet (see Step 6). In the first session, and to a lesser degree in the following sessions, each question should be explained as in the text below.

When participants understand the questions, they will need to write down only the abbreviations (For example, MAIN POINT or "Mn Pt," in Study Question 1) as a reminder of the question. After two or three weeks, group members will be so familiar with the questions that they will not need to be reminded of the questions.

Each person can answer at whatever level of background they bring. Assure everyone that there are no single answers that capture the totality of any passage.

Scripture study is like the group of blind people describing an elephant, each from a separate viewpoint of experience. This scripture study method contributes the viewpoints of each person to our understanding of a shared reality. Stress the value of hearing each person's views and seeing the passage through each person's eyes. Each person's view is important to each study.

The five questions addressed in each scripture study are:

- 1. What is the author's main point in this passage? (MAIN POINT)**
- 2. What new light do I find in this particular reading of this passage of the text? (NEW LIGHT)**
- 3. Is this passage true to my experience? (TRUTH)**
- 4. What are the implications of this passage for my life? (IMPLICATIONS)**
- 5. What problems do I have with this passage? (PROBLEMS)**

1. What is the author's main point in this passage? (MAIN POINT)

This question helps each member focus on what the author says. It often helps to state the question again in another form: "What is the author saying about reality?" Each person addresses the text directly in a relationship formed between reader and author.

This is not the time to share the ideas of a commentator or other authority figure. The search here is for the main point the author was making in this passage and the author's understanding of the reality in our world. It is easy to respond with what we would like for the author to have said. This question seeks clarification of what the author is saying.

It is easy to express our own ideas on the subject. However, the target of this question is what the author actually said. To help those who may be unsure and timid about scripture study, remind the group again that a variety of responses can help the group see the whole of the passage more clearly. After one or two sessions, this will be easily understood and liberating to most participants.

2. What new light do I find in this particular reading of this passage of the text? (NEW LIGHT)

This question provides opportunity for the working of any spiritual presence in our silence. This question reminds us of the continuing insights and disclosures in our lives from both unfamiliar and familiar passages. The focus here is on each member's new insight, observation, or understanding during this particular reading of this passage on this particular occasion.

Each reading can bring some new or renewed insight. That insight may be small or great. This answer may grow with more and more ideas as the

group works through the passage with other questions.

The new light is something that is seen now, but had never been seen before in quite this way. It may be a new understanding of a word or phrase. It may be a new way of seeing a particular problem that this passage triggers in a member's mind. It may be the last in the sequence of questions answered in the silence. It may be triggered by a comment made by another group member. It may grow with more and more points as the group works through the passage.

3. Is this passage true to my experience? (TRUTH)

The focus here is on comparing the message of the scripture passage with each person's experience in life. Our spiritual journeys are experimental as we search toward fuller understanding. Our personal experience and our community experience (past and present) are sources of authority that we bring to the study to understand and supplement the scripture text.

Initially, this question may come as a shock. Few of us have lived in traditions in which we have been allowed to question the truth of the scripture. Yet, we are accustomed to answering this question, if not with the scripture, with other written materials in our personal and vocational lives. This question is often a freedom experience and consistently will open up new insights for everyone in the group.

Recognition that our present understanding of the passage is not consistent with our experience may require reassessment of the meaning of our experience. It may require deeper study of the meaning of the scripture passage. It may provide recognition that our individual spiritual journeys may contrast with those depicted in the scripture. These are the result of continuing searches in the darkness in which full clarity is not given at every moment.

4. What are the implications of this passage for my life? (IMPLICATIONS)

The answer to this question may provide implications for practices in living with others at any of several levels of spiritual life. The center of the question is, "What difference, if any, does the passage make for my life?" This question provides opportunity for reaching from the text back to our lives. It brings the role of ethics and daily living practices to our attention. This holding together of faith and action is central to our religious traditions.

5. What problems do I have with this passage? (PROBLEMS)

Here we identify problems of language in the text, of interpretation, of meaning, or of applying the text of scripture to our lives. These problems may generate interest in seeking answers from other sources during the

days before the next scripture study.

Problems can be identified without being solved. This question reminds us that study of a passage is a continuing process. Like life, understanding is never complete at any one time. It is a continuing dialogue between the scripture text and life.

STEP 5: *Read the passage aloud.* At the beginning of the scripture study, after being sure each person has understood each question and before starting the study, ask one person to read aloud the passage to be studied. Let all ears hear the sound of the passage.

Ask all members to follow the text in their translations. If translations differ substantially, ask that contrasting translations of the passage be read aloud. This will often stimulate thinking and insight if the passage seems particularly difficult or without apparent meaning.

STEP 6: *Start in silence.* Move into group silence. After minutes of quiet, individuals begin, at their own pace, to reread the passage silently and to write answers to each question. This is the time for the group members to work in the silence. Each person focuses on the scripture text in silence, then moves to rereading and writing when ready.

The duration of the silence is flexible to the desires of group members. Take time to settle into the stillpoint and linger there until each member starts the silent reading of the passage and answer the questions.

STEP 7: *Make notes of ideas that answer each question.*

Note taking is personal. Notes are personal words or phrases that remind you of your responses to each of the five questions in the scripture study. These notes help you to share your insights around the circle in STEP 8.

STEP 8: *Share the answers orally around the circle.* After a time of silence and the completion of written answers, or as soon as everyone seems to be ready or nearly ready with written notes addressing the questions, explain the sharing procedure.

In turn, around the circle, individuals share aloud their response to one question at a time. After each person's response to the first question has been shared, pause for a moment of silence. Then move around the circle again sharing the responses to the second question and so on until everyone has responded to each question.

This is a process of sharing our insights. The accumulating benefit of these insights around the circle on each question in sequence is consistently remarkable, sometimes extraordinary. There should be no extensive discussion during this time of sharing. There should only be short comments on, or questions for clarification of, the individual responses for the remainder of the

group. Clarity is important.

At all times, in all groups, the movement around the circle should be preserved. Everyone must have opportunity and time to speak to every question in turn so that the combined wisdom and insights are sensed by the group. Smaller groups can be less firm than larger groups in structuring the sharing of responses to each question without digressing.

Remind everyone that all answers are accepted and helpful. Each person may pass at any time on any question for any reason, with only the caution that something that seems like the obvious or the trivial to one person can be a wonderful new insight to another.

The only leadership needed by the group is one person who determines the time to begin oral sharing. This person should also encourage the movement around the circle.

Keep the responses moving around the circle so that everyone has a chance to answer every question in sequence. Movement around the circle must be fast enough to keep to the one-hour time limit. It is important that everyone feel confident that the study will not take a whole morning, afternoon or evening--one hour only.

Encourage each person to write something on the paper in response to each question. If, after serious consideration, there seems to be nothing to write for any one of the questions, a pass is always acceptable. Sometimes, we are so unclear that even a tentative response seems impossible. No one needs to feel pressured to have an answer if there is none for that person at that time.

With experience using this scripture study method, the members will see that insights will grow during the sharing. People who join the scripture study with no feeling of insight will find the passages opening to their understanding through the insights shared by others. As the discussion proceeds, new insights will occur that far exceed the sum of the initial individual insights. An apparently superficial comment can be the key to great openings for others in the group.

STEP 9: *End in silence.* End the study with a short period of silence. It may provide the occasion for breaking silence with a message or simply providing the conclusion in the stillpoint with which the scripture study began.

At the end of six hours over a period of six weeks, each person must be free to discontinue or continue the scripture study. Each person should make a conscious decision. It is best not to begin this kind of study as a seasonal study of any one religious tradition. Choose a time when there is not an obvious seasonal end in order to permit natural continuation if the group wants a continuing scripture study.

It has been our experience that, after six studies, one hour per week, with every member participating every week, most people find the study so helpful they want to continue. When the group decides to continue scripture study, they should always meet regularly even if only three members can attend a particular session.

Skipping sessions, even for very good reasons, diminishes the pattern and commitment to the group work together. Like other spiritual disciplines, no matter how good the results, it may be hard to get going again if there are too many interruptions. The expectation must be that every week there will be a one-hour scripture study and the group always meets, even if, after the initial six weeks, some must occasionally miss an hour.

Conclusion

People are seeking to renew their spiritual lives and understanding within their religious tradition of their scripture. A scripture study method can be consistent with the testimonies of that spiritual tradition. This can be an extraordinary scripture study method in its results. Through scripture study our lives are deepened and renewed.

For further information about this scripture study method, please contact:

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The comparable study methods *Friendly Bible Study* and *Friendly Faith and Practice Study* are also available from Quaker Universalist Fellowship at universalistfriends.org

Friendly Universal Scripture Study Bookmarks

Friendly Universal Scripture Study:

6. What is the author's **main point** in this passage? (**MAIN POINT**)
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