

## Narrative Weave:

### A model of group Bible Study for postmoderns

Much of our Bible studies in InterVarsity involve leading students to look at narrative passages. Most of our "canon within the Canon" focuses in particular on stories of Jesus interacting with other people. The standard model for approaching Scripture in InterVarsity is the OIA model (Observation, Interpretation, Application). Yet, in our ministry, we have found that our central model is quite ineffective for our central material. In this paper, I want to highlight some of the shortcomings in the OIA model -- especially as applied to narrative passages -- and propose a different approach.

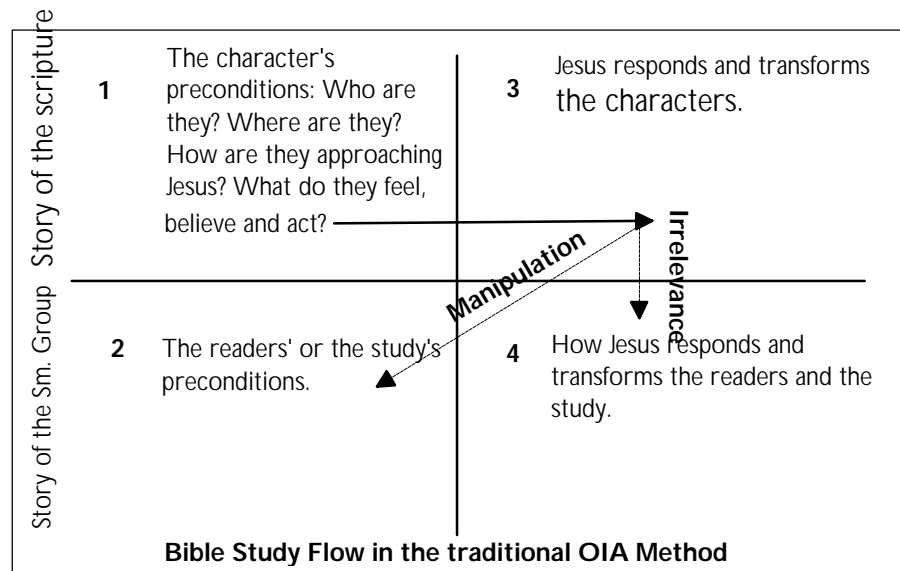
The essential nature of a Bible study is that there are two stories going on: the story unfolding in the scripture and the story unfolding in the lives of students in the Bible study. Think of a Bible study of a narrative passage as being composed of the four quadrants outlined in the diagram below. Up until now, we in InterVarsity have viewed a typical study in the Gospel, for instance, as having almost parallel processes. In the standard OIA model, we first notice who the characters are, where the story takes place, how do they come to Jesus, and what do they believe, want, or do. Then we seek to lead them next to see how Jesus responds to the characters on all those levels. This Observation stage represents the horizontal move through the story of Scripture (the upper half of the diagram). At the end of this move, we then hope to produce some sort of principle or truth to abstract from all this gathered data. This represents the Interpretation. Only until after the horizontal line has produced the Interpretation -- OIA adherents stress this progression strongly -- are we to connect the principle to the lives of those in the study. This represents the Application, the vertical downward move.

Often, however, we find the study ends before it gets to the application, or the application is a hurried and unsatisfying discussion. Or, we find that our students simply fail to connect their lives very powerfully with the Bible story. We have spent a lot of time coming up with great insights about the passage, but it is unclear whether lives are being transformed by an encounter with Jesus.

This is understandable, because in the OIA model, we are asking them to make one of two very disjunctive moves. The downward vertical move assumes that the students *have already identified with the character meeting Jesus*. This generally only happens with students with a strong Christian background who are used to reading Scripture with already the sense that this is their story also. But, this is rare enough with our evangelical students, much less with our typical Gen Xer. The only Gen Xer's who can follow our moves are those who have a strong "poetic" talent in approaching text -- also an increasing rarity for various reasons.

In many ways, the OIA method is thoroughly "modern" in assumptions: if we only pore over the data enough, we will be able to extract a universal principle from the story and apply it into their own situation. But the post-modern perspective resists this assumption. Indeed, the post-modern critique essentially argues one cannot truly hold a conviction without having first lived within the story or tradition which produced that conviction. This is why some students

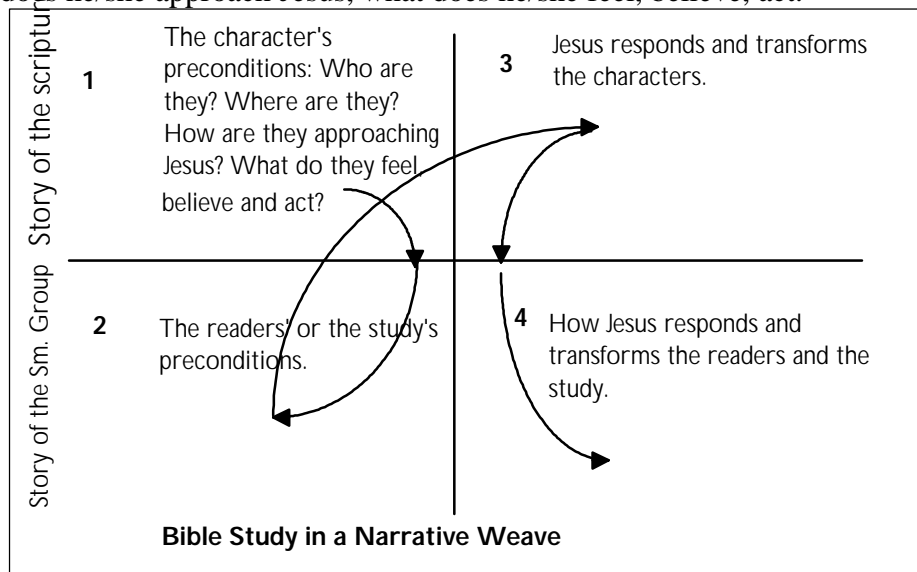
get baffled when we suddenly end our study with questions like "Where is Jesus touching you?" "What do you mean 'Where is Jesus touching me?', they question inside, "Jesus isn't touching me, all we've been talking about is how he is touching the leper." We are assuming what we actually need to be cultivating: the realization that their stories are inextricably wound up with the story attested to on the pages. And our OIA method actually ends up reinforcing their pre-existing suspicion that the story of Scripture is at best simply a roughly parallel story, at worst an irrelevant one. They fail to see that Scripture is their story, the convictions of its narrative their convictions.



Another move we can make is to ask them to spend much of the study moving on the top level (the Gospel story) and then suddenly ask them at the end in the application stage, "So, how are you like the leper?" This is also a very difficult shift for several reasons. We are asking them to shift the story level (from up to down) but also the stage of the story (right to left). Shifting the stage of the story is especially disjunctive because we are asking them, in essence, to go backwards in the narrative flow. Who wants to participate in a story that is essentially over already? To spend most of the study establishing the different levels that Jesus heals the leper and then to ask "how are you like the leper?" makes the student feel manipulated.

Students resent this question which moves in this downward diagonal move because the question takes the nominal form of open-endedness, but comes right on the heel of the closing of the story. In other words, they don't want to say how they really feel the identification because we've just finished talking in essence, about how one should feel, believe, act. Such a move really only works with people very comfortable being vulnerable, able to acknowledge at the outset there is this emotional, intellectual, or ethical disparity in their lives. Thus, in trying for "application," we are subjecting this generation of students to feelings of manipulation and lack of participation, or asking for vulnerability about their brokenness fairly early in a relationship -- a sure recipe for failure with Generation X. Little wonder that we have great difficulty moving people to the lower right quadrant: leaving the Bible study with their own life story transformed by an encounter with Jesus.

What I am proposing is that we need to pursue a strategy that weaves the two stories more organically and dialectically. We seek first to establish an identification between reader and a character. The identification can be of any dramatic element: who person is, where scene takes place, how does he/she approach Jesus, what does he/she feel, believe, act.



This identification is not simply free form association. This is because the main axis of the stories is not simply along the left side of the quadrants, where any vertical line is acceptable so long as a connection is made. Rather, we seek to shape the association by a sense of how the story will unfold; we need to respect the dynamic of the narrative. In other words, we don't want students saying, "I'm like the leper because I'm a rebel, an outsider seeking non-conformity with the bland rest of society." Such an identification, while technically valid if we only look at the left side of the quadrant, is ridiculous in context of the whole story (i.e. he is hungry for healing and eager to return to the rest of the society). But, since we don't want to take students all the way through the story before they participate in it, we must exercise leadership. We guide the identification so that it moves towards the reader's own pre-condition, but is also influenced by the gravitational pull of how the story will unfold -- both in terms of the characters' encounter with Jesus and how we hope the reader will as well (hence, the curve).

In asking the associative questions, it is important to avoid consistently asking "Gotcha" questions, questions that will inevitably provoke an answer which will be quickly proved "wrong" as we move into the next stage, the upper right quadrant. Again, the move back to the story is a curve, since we don't immediately jump to how Jesus changes, but go back partially into the characters' precondition as a way of easing into the story. The difference between a curving, looping movement versus straight, sharp movements may seem trivial, but it captures an important point. Each narrative move must be shaped by gravitational pull of where they are going and where they have been. It also captures the freer spirit of the movement: it is not a rigidly defined path, but rather an overall flow that we are after.

Perhaps the most powerful influence over the various curves is the central dramatic action of the story. The Gospel stories are all predicated on change, on the conviction that an encounter with Jesus transforms our condition. That change is what divides the left and right quadrants.

Thus, it is crucial to first identify that central dramatic action to shape the various moves we make. Every leader should have this crystal clear in her mind, able to sum up the passage in some key predicate clauses. So, for instance, we ask the opening question, "When have you felt alone and alienated?" because the central action will be Jesus reaching out and restoring the leper to community. In some ways, the most crucial move is from the lower left quadrant to the upper right. Here, we are hoping they have come on board the story enough such that they will be carried into an encounter with Jesus. Again, we curve back into the Biblical story gracefully, touching again the Biblical characters to reinforce the connection (i.e. after asking the association question, we spend more time observing the character more fully before getting into the action). This is where our traditional emphasis on "confusion-aha" would occur as we see Jesus surprising us in how he deals with our various preconditions.

If these previous moves have been successful, then the final move to the lower right quadrant (the readers' own encounter with Jesus) will be much easier. Over time, as students get used to the nature of how these two stories are interwoven, this will become more natural. In the beginning, however, we will need to guide, prod, and push most during this move. I feel like we need to think through more about strategies for this move. On the other hand, I do wonder whether matters are most out of our hands at this stage. Even people who identify with the leper may not necessarily want to be transformed the way the leper was; we cannot ultimately make people want to desire Jesus. Much of the success of this move is also dependent on what the reader has experienced in the fellowship/Bible study: has Jesus been ministered to them in real tangible ways that made a responding to Jesus (the way characters responded to Jesus) a real option? The real "prep" of our small group leaders is to make Jesus real to their study even outside the Bible study such that this move has plausibility.

I would like to point out several further points which are important to this model. I like to emphasize the curving, looping nature of our moves because it tends to see as the central gravitational point of the study as the center point. This is the "quadruple point" where all four quadrants coexist: when the two levels of story are blending, when people in both "stories" are encountering Jesus. At this point in the study, people are talking about how it feels to be "unclean" and yet touched by Jesus -- and it is not all too clear whether they are speaking imaginatively about the leper or personally about themselves. When this conmingling of the two stories has occurred, we have arrived at a decisive point of change and we want to keep moving back there, passing through there. In fact, the path of the narrative weave is not done once and for all in a given study, but most likely involves several passes through all four quadrants and the center point. That point especially is the place where, I believe, the Holy Spirit will be most active. I cannot describe that point precisely or statically, I certainly don't have a sure-fire method to get there; it is a little like happiness: we who have spent time there in Bible studies know its power, wonder, and goodness.

The second point is to emphasize that both stories are essentially corporate ones. Indeed, stories are only stories to the extent they are shared in communities. Thus, at every point, we especially want to look for ways for the group to fashion its own story: to identify ways that build community, to look even for ways to leave the fourth quadrant together (i.e. group application). The leader is providing the group with a road map and needs to signal that she will be leading

them. The weakness of the OIA model is that it claims not to have a preconceived direction (which is why we begin with just an essentially undirected observation stage focusing on "objective" traits like repeated words which do not signify a narrative flow), but in reality and practice the method secretly -- and usually not so secretly -- relies heavily on a leader's direction. Again, we are playing right into the post modern suspicions of the Gen X student. Instead, we need to tell students, "Yes, I've entered this exciting story and met an amazing man; come, join me on a return adventure. I'm not sure of the exact path and each time is not exactly like the others. I have a rough plan but the specifics depends on all of you. You will all have to help us get there... and the first step is to step into the story!"