

# Generation X and Bible Study Approaches

By Brian Housman, 1995

The Bible studies in the Boston area are marked by confusion. And that's how we like it. In fact, we explicitly teach our Bible study leaders that an important part of their job is to "exacerbate and, if necessary, create confusion." It is not, of course, our goal to obscure or evade the truth. Rather, we operate under the assumption that the best path to eventual clarity about the truth in a text comes through initial confusion. Over-familiarity with a text or habitual glossing over of difficult portions of it often lead people to the mistaken belief that they already fully understand it. Our strategy is to focus on those easily ignored difficult points, demonstrating that the meaning of the passage is not as clear and simple as it may originally seem. We hope that the resulting confusion will lead students to grapple more honestly and energetically with the text. Therefore, the conclusions they have reached by the end of a study should be more firmly believed. This Bible study method has proven very valuable in the past; in fact, many of us who are staff members in the Boston area attribute our high appreciation of the scriptures to its influence. However, if it is not modified, it is likely to diminish in effectiveness with the current student generation. Generation X's different appraisal of what is important and interesting will make it increasingly difficult to produce the same sort of transformative confusion.

Our use of confusion as the key to life-changing Bible study relies heavily on the notion that students approach the scriptures primarily from a rational point of view. Our ideal student places a high value on logical consistency. He requires above all that truth be reasonable, and his first priority is to understand the objective meaning of a passage. We imagine the driving question in the back of his mind to be something like "How does this passage fit together?" Therefore, we tend to create confusion by attacking prevailing interpretations of the passage from within the passage itself. We ask questions like "If we interpret it that way, how do you explain the use of this word?" or "How then do you explain this element of the story?" Our aim is to point out apparent logical inconsistencies, thus preventing students from interpreting the passage too easily. This action disturbs students with a rational perspective, provoking a response of increased attention until they arrive at a more satisfactory conclusion. Because of the greater effort required by the process and scrutiny given to the text, the truth eventually reached is retained more clearly and with more conviction.

The problem is the current generation of college students does not view texts from an essentially rational perspective. As Stanley J. Grenz states in his article "Star Trek and the Next Generation," "The postmodern mind refuses to limit truth to its rational dimension and thus dethrones the human intellect as the arbiter of truth" (p. 27). One manifestation of this devaluing of rationality is a far greater tolerance for contradiction. To someone raised in our increasingly postmodern society, "The world is not simply an objective given that is 'out there,' waiting to be discovered and known. Instead it is relative, indeterminate, and participatory" (p. 27). Students from this world view would not be very alarmed by the discovery of an apparent contradiction in a Bible passage. Not completely expecting this world itself to behave according to discernible laws, she is probably not surprised at all to find out that she does not understand God.

This difference in mind set between our leader and our student can lead to a very frustrating Bible study experience. The leader is taught that a fruitful Bible study depends upon a middle period of confusion, and he is taught to recognize that confusion as perturbation at an unexpected difficulty in objectively understanding the text. To produce that effect he asks a question, usually one which points to something within the text which contradicts the prevailing interpretation. Surprisingly, the student is not affected. Assuming she has not yet noticed the problem uncovered

by this question, he asks another question which addresses the same point from a different direction. When the student still does not seem confused, the leader begins to rehearse the entire line of thinking leading to the confusion point, more slowly and in more detail, always in the form of a questions. The students sometimes answers the questions and sometimes does not, but it is obvious that she is becoming less and less enthused as this line of questioning proceeds. The student, of course, noticed the apparent contradiction early during this phase of the study; however, she cares much less about it than the leader was trained to expect. She cannot understand what significance the leader attaches to this particular point, and as he continues she becomes more and more frustrated by his nit picking about what she considers a minor point. With so much time spent on an unsuccessful confusion stage and everyone's excitement about the study significantly diminished, the study ends after a quick, superficial application. The student leaves thinking, "Manuscript study is so boring and irrelevant. We spend so much time just focused on examining individual words and phrases that don't seem very important." The leader, on the other hand, leaves thinking, "These students simply don't value scripture very highly. They're lazy in their approach to the text, and they don't care about the truth which is uncovered."

This unfortunate misunderstanding between the leader and the student occurs because our method does a very poor job of accounting for the mind set of the Generation X student. Not only does it overestimate her appreciation of rational consistency; it severely underestimates the value she places on pragmatism. As Kevin Ford puts it in "Understanding Generation X,"

With our survival mentality, we want to know that God will make a practical difference in our own lives. . . we distrust ideologies, theology and other kinds of talk. We want a faith that works.

Furthermore, the student of this generation is unlikely to wait very much time before determining whether something is practical or not. She sees quickness and efficiency as the keys to her survival:

She hates wasted energy, because that's a luxury she know she can't afford. Wherever she sees useless tangles or time-wasting process, she looks for a quick bypass. When something works, she knows how to capitalize. When something doesn't work, she knows when to give it up (Strauss and Howe 32).

Our Bible study leader, by starting the Bible study with lengthy observation and confusion stages, is putting his worst foot forward according to the Generation X student. He is asking her to involve herself in a time-consuming process long before he demonstrates the practical value of the exercise. Most likely, she has quickly written the time off as a loss and decided not to devote any unnecessary energy to it. She will only answer questions when they do not take much thought and when she figures they will speed the process along so that she can move on to a more useful activity.

Although she does not respond well to our typical confusion-aha method, there is no reason to assume—as the leader is tempted to do—that the student places no value on scripture study at all. With the proper incentives, the student of this generation can be an insightful student of scripture. She needs assurance early in the study that the information will prove useful to her life. Just as easily as she will dismiss anything that seems impractical, she will apply herself vigorously to anything which seems relevant.

Although she is not drawn into an interested confusion by questions about objective meaning, the student in Generation X has a predisposition toward a type of confusion which is equally able to lead into an energetic study of scriptures. She is confused about the meaning of her life. From her childhood, she has been left to discover that meaning on her own. Parents and

teachers, if they were attentive at all, took an unstructured approach, giving her too much autonomy before she possessed the tools to use it. Even society in general gave no ready answers. Rather, the reigning deconstructionism threw responsibility right back in her lap: "Reality can be 'read' differently depending on the perspectives of the knowing selves that encounter it," society said to her (Grenz 27). In other words, our student has been made responsible for creating her own meaning in life. This task proves too large for her to accomplish herself, so she searches around for help in her endeavor. She searches for something which will give her an outside perspective. As Ford puts it, "We want a sense of connecting our story to a greater story which helps us cope with reality."

If we want an interested student of the Bible in this generation, we need only to demonstrate at the beginning of a Bible study that the passage we are studying is part of the "greater story" Ford mentions. One way this task could be accomplished is by starting the study with questions which establish connectedness between reality and the story of the passage. For example, before the passage is even read, the group could engage in a time of personal sharing pertinent to the topic of the study or a short discussion about society's prevailing notions on the subject. These exercises would establish a previous awareness that the Biblical topic about to be discussed is applicable to life today.

More important than these preparations for the study are the questions asked during the study of the text itself. During the observation stage, involvement with the text should be given priority over getting the facts all straight. The purpose of the observation stage is to lead students to look carefully at the passage. This task has typically been accomplished by asking informational questions like, "What are the repeated words?," "What are themes in this passage?" and the famous, "What did you notice about this passage?" The Generation X student will more likely be prompted to give due consideration to the text by questions about her relationship to it: "Which character do you associate with, and why?"; "What do you like and dislike about the passage?"; "Can you relate to the problem presented in this story?"; "Have you ever been in a situation like this?"; or "Put yourself in the place of one of these characters. How do you feel? Why do you act the way you do?" Such questions have several positive results: they demonstrate the relevance of the study to the student; they allow for varied answers, thus leaving room for wide participation; they give an opportunity for the student to let herself be known a little better; and they present an interesting way for her to observe the text.

When moving from these introductory questions, the leader can make two errors. The first error would be to disregard the answers and proceed with a standard confusion-aha approach. This error is made under the assumption that the relational observation stage is merely an entertaining variation, occasionally employed as a way to prevent boredom with the same old observation questions. Using the alternative observation questions in this way can actually produce more harm than good in the disposition of the Generation X student. If the rest of the study shows little evidence of having been influenced by the discussion during the observation stage, she will feel neglected (if she thinks the leader does not consider her concerns important enough to sufficiently address), patronized (if she considers that the leader has merely indulged an alleged need for her to "express herself"), manipulated (if she feels like she has been induced to participate in the study under the false pretenses that it would be relevant), or subjected to another waste of time (because none of the time spent on this line of questioning contributes to the usefulness of the study as a whole). If the relational observation questions are used at all, they should be used to lead into a different style of study.

The second error in building on the answers to relational observation questions would be to allow the student's personal interpretations or sentiments to completely dictate the course of the study. Although we want the student to know that the passage we are studying is relevant to her

life, we do not want her to think that the passage exists only to be used in the way which seems most meaningful to her. We intend the study to be transformative, not merely comforting or cathartic. The meaning and truth to be discovered in the text itself must be upheld if the passage is to be that greater story which interprets her personal story.

A successful study built from relational observation leads the student to take a closer look at the segments of a passage which interested her. Most likely, upon closer inspection she will find that the passage does not say to her exactly what she initially thought. Perhaps it offers her a surprising solution to a personal dilemma. Perhaps it offers a view of reality disturbingly different from the one with which she is comfortable. It is the job of the leader to insure that the passage is analyzed until an honest, legitimate interpretation is reached. In fact, it is the exact same goal as he had in this stage in the rationalist approach. The difference is that in this approach he is tackling a subjective rather than objective meaning. Just as the rationalist student begins his study of the passage with a pre-formed idea of how the passage fits into a scheme of thought, the postmodern student begins her study of the passage with an idea of how the passage fits into her experience. The Bible study leader's task is to promote the disentanglement of the passage from these previous notions so that it can stand on its own, bringing the passage into a place where it can critique the rationalist's system of thought and inform the postmodern's view of reality.

Although the goal is the same, the role the leader plays in bringing about that goal will probably be significantly different. The way a leader contributes to the study is one area of difference. In the rationalist approach, the leader contributes mainly by asking questions which prompt investigation and by summarizing; the student contributes by answering the questions. In the postmodern approach, the leader probably needs to be more of a repository of facts, Bible information, and rules for interpretation to aid the post-Christian, deconstructionist-trained students in their study. The students will probably offer plentiful metaphors, analogies, associations, and anecdotal support. Together, the leader and the student create an audience-specific language for describing what the passage is saying.

This sort of endeavor requires that the leader hold the reins of the study less tightly. In the rationalist study, the leader can be relatively certain the entire time of where the study will begin, where it will end, the path it will take, and how long it will take to get there. There are limited answers to questions like, "What are the repeated words?" The leader knows all the answers beforehand; and he knows that if he waits long enough he will get the answer he needs to lead into the rest of the study. With the relational observation questions, there is no way to know what answers will be given, how long those answers will take to be said, and on what path those answers will take the group into the middle of the study. The leader must cede some of his control of the flow of the study to the students. He must trust that as long as he prohibits invalid interpretations and unreasonable tangents, the discussion will eventually make its way to the main points of the passage.

He must also show greater flexibility over the mode of presentation of those main points. In a rationalist study, the student is behaving scientifically. Therefore, the leader can introduce or summarize the main point of a passage in a prepared form; if the scheme of thought is persuasive, this presentation will be appreciated by the student. In a postmodern study, the student considers herself to be entering a relationship with the text and the other participants. The ideas must be presented in way that does honor to that relationship by allowing the student's contributions to influence the way the ideas are framed. The leader must listen carefully during the study to the way the student is communicating so that he can adopt the language of the discussion in his own contributions and especially in his summary of the meaning of the passage.

Although the loss of control can produce extra anxiety for the leader, it is well worth it if he sees it though to the application stage of the study. During this portion of the study, the

postmodern student clearly outstrips her rationalist counterpart. The goal of the rationalist student has been to understand the text. Once he considers that task to be accomplished, his interest in the study begins to wane. He has not been trained to think that knowledge must be applied; it is profitable enough to gather it. The postmodern student, however, has participated in the study only because it will eventually prove relevant to her life. The application discussion is exactly what she has been awaiting. She will energetically give herself to thinking of repercussions for her life and the lives of people around her. In fact, she will probably think of applications more radical and more relevant than the example applications prepared by the leader. There is no guarantee, of course, that she will actually do everything that she says. Nonetheless, her willingness to discuss application demonstrates her awareness that the passage she has been studying calls for a personal, practical response.

The Generation X student does not possess the scientific curiosity which our current confusion questions are designed to pique. In using them, we think we are tapping into questions which already exist somewhere in the student's mind. Actually, we are wasting our Bible study time answering questions the student no longer has and trying to produce in her questions that do not naturally occur to her. The questions which do naturally occur to her are pragmatic questions, such as, "How is this passage relevant to my life?" The leader can encourage this interest by asking questions which lead her to associate with the characters and issues in the passage. This association becomes transformative when the student recognizes what the passage is truly saying about her own situation. When this process is successful, it leads to a vital application stage in which the satisfaction of Bible study is restored to both student and leader.

Perhaps not delved into very deeply in this paper, but relevant to the general topic:

- previous method designed for people with Bible knowledge, Sunday school interpretations
- manipulation and forthrightness in Bible study leading
- GenX cynicism about formulae and hidden agendas

### Reflection on Brian Housman's Paper

- Often the most powerful BSs are the ones where we construct as a group a common metaphor, and then apply the metaphor and its insights to our lives.
- Most powerful studies have been when I have prepared very thoroughly and have thought of relevant stories and have begun with those. When I have had little time, I can fall back on my understanding of the passage, but haven't thought as much about how to get people into the discussion.
- Lifeguides or Serendipity: they have their first question, which seems fake or like it is cheating: I am going to respond to this question in a personal way, and you make me think that everything else we will do is going to be contingent on or related to how I answer this question. Then, in the study, we just march ahead with what the leader was already planning to do. It doesn't seem sincere. My response: "I don't want to start with people's opinions, I want to start with scripture." But remember the goal is the same: submitting our lives to the text, not submitting the text to our opinions or experiences. But we need more strategies to do this.
- One way to do this: a free flow between study and application, rather than saving all the application questions for the end of the study. The early application questions buy people's attention (those who are evaluating the study pragmatically) and win a broader hearing, even if the more complete application topic is addressed later in the study. Charlie K:
- The problem with the entry questions: people soon learn that they will get nailed by answering the entry question in the expected way. If there is a trick to it, people will sense it, and not want to answer it. This obviously does not generate the kind of discussion that brings people into the text.
- The goal here is not to throw out confusion-aha but simply to add another tool to our chest. Even very gen-Xy students need to be able to deal with the complexity and confusion of scripture. We need both tools—association and relevance as well as confusion-aha. I want to be as sophisticated as possible about bringing the gospel to people, so I want to have as many tools as possible, know how to use each of these tools, and know when to use which tool.
- Use of scripture: "Dorm BSs study the gospels in the fall, study the words of Jesus, especially parables, SoM, elliptical studies in John etc." Ming suggested, "Perhaps the parables especially and the gospel in general are too confusing. Perhaps people aren't ready for the gospels. Perhaps we should start with topical studies: 'Relationships', etc." My visceral reaction: "It seems too simple." Charlie: do the stories of Jesus before you do the teachings of Jesus. Jesus' interaction with people before the confusing parables.
- Some association questions are better than others. If you ask assoc. questions where people have to draw a conclusion, then if you draw the wrong conclusion (easy to do early in the study) then the discussion is going to go off in an unhelpful way. Hence, "re-interpretation" since people may have already interpreted the text once. Are we forcing premature, supposed clarity?
- Another question, if we allow people to make incomplete, even heretical conclusions early on, do we lose the church people because they listen to the progress of the study and just shut down, assuming that they cannot learn from these semi-pagans who are spouting off non-Biblical opinions? When you are trying to get people to see the text in a new way, almost anything goes except the standard Sunday School answer.
- Fundamentally, we are looking for two things. 1) "There's more here than you thought." We need to get people's attention. We want people to see that scripture bears in-depth study. And 2) We want to draw people into submission to the text. Not mastery of data, stories, memory verses, but submission. Not critical analysis, sitting in judgment of scripture. But submission to it. Not writing down my words (Rich's words) but taking into their lives Jesus' words. (My words will indeed pass away, but Jesus words will never pass away.)