

# The Swedish Method

PETER BLOWES / BRIEFING #364 / JANUARY 2009

**Want to read the Bible with someone? Go Swedish, says Peter Blowes.**

For 19 years, I worked in Argentina in a context where many university students were unaccustomed to reading. Bible studies in that country (with its strong Catholic influence and practices expressed in the current evangelical style) were often an exercise in glancing at a text and then using ‘authorities’ to prove a point. For example, a youth group would typically read a passage of Scripture, close their Bibles to discuss it, and then one student would then say, “My pastor says ‘X’”. Then another would reply, “But my pastor says ‘Y’”. The argument would then escalate as one and then the other would pull in higher authorities from around the evangelical world to justify their points of view. From rallies, television or radio programmes, they would cite evangelical ‘celebrities’ such as Yiye Avila, Carlos Annacondia, Luis Palau, and then, to clinch the argument, Billy Graham. What they were doing was a Protestant version of Catholicism: they appealed to a higher human authority to win an argument.

While I respect and support the place of Bible teachers, I wanted to break that dependence on human authority, and build confidence in *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone. But how could I do that without haranguing the students yet again on the sufficiency of Scripture, the importance of reading the Bible and the power the Bible has to fulfil all their spiritual needs? I wanted them to *discover* that God speaks his word, not be told that truth by me. Furthermore, to them, I was an insignificant person, socially and ecclesiastically, so my authority on the matter would not have counted for much!

I soon realized I was working with a postmodern generation. I found that what they needed, firstly, was motivation, rather than content: they had to be *motivated* to read the Scriptures, rather than be told that they must read them. In the sort of youth work I was engaged in, there are three classic motivators: music, food and sport. Conventional wisdom held that the way to do ministry was to gather the young people around, provide them with one of the above distractions and, at the appropriate moment, have someone address the crowd with a biblical message. I was determined to break out of that (ineffective) pattern and allow the word of God itself to motivate. My aim was to create an environment in which God's word would be heard directly in an attentive fashion.

The invitation we issued was simple: “I would like to invite you to come and read the Bible with some other students”—nothing more, nothing less. The Bible was the only motivator. Fortunately in this overtly ‘religious’ culture, the invitation was received well: there were people actually interested in reading the Bible. For these simple, student-run ‘cell’ groups, we opted to study the Bible using the Swedish Method.

## THE SWEDISH METHOD

As far as I can tell, the name ‘Swedish Method’ was first attributed to this simple Bible reading approach by Ada Lum, an IFES staff worker and Bible reading enthusiast of many decades. She named it in honour of the Swedish student group where she first saw it used.

Starting a Bible reading group using this method requires a minimum of resources and preparation, and can be highly rewarding as it leads readers to confront the Scriptures directly.

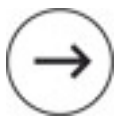
Begin by praying, asking God to speak through his word. Then read a short Bible passage aloud (10-15 verses is ideal). Instruct each person to go back over the passage on their own while being on the lookout for three things:



A light bulb: This should be something that ‘shines’ from the passage—whatever impacts most, or draws attention.



A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question the reader would like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: A personal application for the reader's life.

They should write down at least one thing next to each item. Allow people time to savour the text and explore it at their own speed. This usually takes about 10 minutes in silence.

Afterwards, get each reader to share one of their ‘light bulbs’ with the group. Spend some time discussing these, if your group is keen; it's always interesting to discover what has impacted different members.

Then, in the second round, ask them to share one of their questions raised by the passage. Often it is best to invite the person who raises the question to propose an approach to answering it, and generally encourage that person towards further investigation. Alternatively, any member of the group can respond to the question, provided the answer appears in the passage under consideration or in a previous section of the book that your group has already covered.

In the third round, ask each person in your group to share one of their applications as it applies to their own life. Then, to conclude, pray: invite people to lead in prayer as they please; no-one should feel pressured to pray. Invite a suitable person to close the time of

prayer; this avoids embarrassment for newcomers, makes it clear when the prayer time is finished, and prevents prolonged, uncomfortable silences.

If your group contains fewer than five people, ask them to share two or three 'light bulbs', questions and applications each. You can then discuss these things according to the time available.

After the meeting, you may wish to address the questions again. However, in the meeting itself, it is important to seek to avoid arguing, falling into the trap of 'sharing ignorances' and imposing an answer by appealing to human authority.

The philosophy behind this style of Bible reading is to promote good observation of the text, group participation and self-guided discovery. Each person has the opportunity to discover for themselves what God says. In principle, no-one answers the questions unless they are about something simple, like the meaning of a word. The idea is that the questions motivate investigation on the part of the person who raised them. It is also important to avoid anyone 'grabbing the microphone' and jumping on the poor new person present; instead, it is impressive to witness the capacity that even non-Christians have to understand the Bible when God speaks to them!

## **THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS:**

The Swedish Method, as I have used it, responds to a number of theological principles that I learned from D Broughton Knox, who was, among other things, principal of Moore Theological College in Sydney from 1959 to 1985. These principles include:

1. The perspicuity of the Bible: the Bible is comprehensible, and its interpretation does not depend on experts or even authoritative interpreters (such as the dogma of the Roman Catholic church).
2. The notion held by Catholicism is that the church created the Bible; in Protestantism, we hold that it is the Bible which creates the church. This latter perspective must be true if we believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture or, as Broughton Knox was wont to say, in the "divine *expiration*" of Scripture, as words are exhaled, not inhaled. (The Greek in 2 Timothy 3:16 uses the term 'exhaled'.) Scripture was true from the time of its inspiration. The councils could not make it Scripture; the only thing they could do was exclude those writings which were not inspired. This perspective is easily observable in mission history following the discovery or gift of a copy of Scripture which was then taken back to a village or community, and where, as a direct result, a church sprang up. Accordingly, the Bible needs to be read in the vernacular language by people. When the Holy Spirit applies that word to their hearts, they respond. For this reason, we must pray that people

read their Bibles and that, in their Bible reading (or hearing), God will open their minds and hearts.

3. The whole Bible is the counsel of God, so it is not so important which parts of the Bible people start with, but rather that they do so! The word of God is the supreme evangelist in this sense. The evangels (Gospels) are, of course, a great place for people to hear the gospel, or be evangelized, but it is not essential that they begin with them.
4. The Bible is addressed to its readers or hearers. In Matthew 22:31, Jesus, addressing the Sadducees, said, “[H]ave you not read what was said to you by God ...?”. There is no logical problem in the fact that God had every reader of Holy Scripture in mind at the time of its ‘exhalation’. This means that God’s word is not only inspired and universally applicable, but also that, in it, God is speaking presently to every particular reader (or hearer) of his word. This is a very exciting notion! It speaks of the immanence (closeness) of God in his word. But in the same place, one person may be oblivious to the fact that God is personally speaking to another through his word. It is a case of the wheat and the tares growing together—of the kingdom of God doing its work secretly (Matt 13:24-30).

This point helps us understand the absurdity of the view that identifies the Scriptures solely as a ‘witness’ to the truth, or as simply ‘containing’ the word of God. God is perfectly capable of revealing himself, and, as is the case in human relationships, he does this in maximum expression through words. This is even more conspicuously the case for us, being so far removed from the historical events of the Bible.

## **ADAPTATION**

The Swedish Method of Bible study is very adaptable to different contexts because

- it requires no preparation
- it requires no trained leaders
- it gives immediate results
- it avoids arguments
- it doesn't cost money
- it is re-usable and repeatable
- it can be taught to others very easily
- with a little adaptation, it can be used with non-literate people, with the Scriptures being read to them

- it works just as well with large crowds (who share with their near neighbours) as it does with small groups
- it suits postmodern readers with its instant ‘gratification’ and emphasis on personal exploration
- everyone gets to express their opinions (which people love to do!), but those opinions are always tied to the text of the Bible
- it avoids ‘Bible bashing’ as it puts Christians and non-Christians on equal footing in the group before the word of God
- it avoids appealing to higher authority to win arguments
- it allows the word of God to speak for itself
- it teaches people the most difficult and most basic task in Bible reading: observing what the text actually says!
- it motivates investigation and thinking without being threatening
- it exercises basic skills in asking questions which are crucial to developing an adequate interpretation of Scripture
- it undermines anti-intellectualism without being overly intellectual (I still smile sadly when I recall the misplaced criticism I once received—that this approach was too intellectual!)
- it applies the Scriptures directly to the life of the reader from day one
- it teaches inductive Bible study inductively.

As with all Bible study, this approach seeks to achieve what Paul describes in Colossians 1:27-28: “the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

## LIMITATIONS

However, the Swedish Method is not a fully developed inductive reading of the text. Instead, it provides immediate benefits, with people concurrently learning some of the basic skills of inductive study. Leaders are sometimes concerned that novice Bible students may miss the point of the passage, or its central message or application—which, after all, is not always an easy thing to spot, even for skilled Bible teachers. But my experience has been that practice makes perfect: after only a couple of weeks, people’s observations tend to improve dramatically as they become accustomed to the practice of letting the Bible speak for itself, rather than colouring it with their preconceptions or outside authorities.

Another limitation is that having readers find applications in the text does not always mean that these applications are actually applied. An accountability structure—such as reporting back the following week on the previous week's application point—has often proved useful in this area.

## **TAKING IT FURTHER**

As the group grows in their familiarity with and skill in reading the Bible, the Swedish Method can be expanded to include additional symbols that draw out other aspects of the passage. Do not rush this process as it depends on whether group members have refined their observational skills. The expansion is not always easy, and the introduced concepts are much more open to debate. I have experienced good results when I've added them in groups who have completed at least a year's Bible reading.

The most common 'second generation' symbols are a set of circling arrows (to show how the ideas in the passage interrelate), a heart (to show the central idea of the passage) and a circle with an arrow coming out from the centre (to show the passage's innate central application). It is helpful to practise these without making any comments on who is right or wrong during the initial studies, as skill, competence and confidence are gained through practice.

I have also recently discovered an additional step that has reportedly led to the planting of thousands of churches in northern India. At the end of the Bible study, next to a speech bubble symbol, group members write down the name of a friend or relative who would benefit from them sharing what they learned from the study. Their aim is then to talk to that person before the next meeting. The norm and practice of sharing the 'good news' promoted by this step has had dramatic effects. Why not try it where you are?

Finally, inductive Bible study can be taught as the next step, and it will make a lot more sense to readers who are accustomed to careful observation of the text and the practice of allowing God's word to speak authoritatively for itself. We do not want half-baked theoreticians of inductive Bible study; we want competent practitioners. I have had the experience of students who could teach me a course in how to do an inductive Bible study, but who were unable to do one themselves. We don't want to train people to give courses in inductive Bible study; we want them to be reading the Bible effectively!

## **THE RESULTS**

The Swedish Method has been used in cell groups, church youth groups, talk preparation, personal and family devotionals, Sunday school preparation, and even in academic study at university.

As students have taken their questions to their pastors and other teachers, this has stimulated their pastors to pursue further investigation. Some pastors even end up

preaching on the questions these students have raised! Having students motivated in the area of Bible reading has often encouraged pastors greatly as these students tend to approach the pastors with their questions arising from Bible study, rather than confronting them with the answers. It has also been far less threatening for pastors, and has led them, instead, to further investigation and growth.

During my 19 years as a missionary across north-eastern Argentina, I think the Swedish Method had, possibly, the greatest impact out of everything I did—especially given that I had no regular public preaching platform! It characterized my ministry, along with two oft-repeated phrases: “That’s a good question” and “Keep reading your Bible” (a Broughton Knox saying that I adopted—to which my Argentine students have since added “carefully!”).

We occasionally need refreshing in our Bible study to renew our attentiveness to what God is saying. The Swedish Method approach is enjoyable, and hones our observation of the text. It has been useful in leading people to Christ: God speaks to them directly through his word without the ‘noise’ bystanders so often inject.

Try it with your home group or neighbourhood Bible study group. Invite your neighbours, relatives or your children to join you. You may be delightfully refreshed and surprised—and so might they.

## A TEMPLATE YOU CAN USE FOR BIBLE STUDY

### BIBLE PASSAGE:



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