

Developing a Bible Study

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Someone asked me after a group discussion about a Bible passage, “How do you come up with these questions?” What a great question! Anyone who leads Bible studies or teaches groups should be communicating that process, explaining and modeling how a study is developed.

Leading a group of six or eight people in a Bible study, or teaching before an auditorium of hundreds, or distributing videos to thousands carries an inherent risk. The better job the leader does of studying and presenting the beauty and depth of Scripture, the more danger there is of group or audience members coming away with the sense, “That was wonderful and inspiring but can’t see those kinds of things when I open my Bible. I just stare at the page and give up after a few minutes. Then I put in the next video.” The better the teacher, the greater that risk. A person may gain great benefit from watching a video, or listening to a lecture, or even participating in a discussion. Yet there will seldom be the depth that grows out of personal engagement in Scripture. Spiritual formation happens best through the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer through the direct connection with God’s Word.

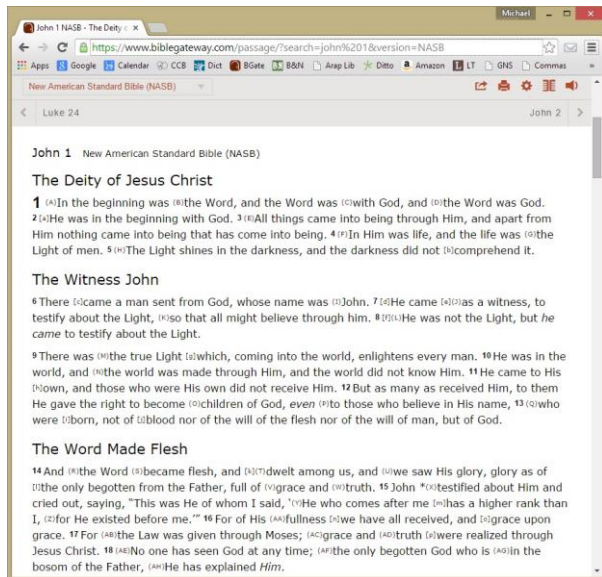
Whether you are working on a study only for your own use or preparing to lead a group, the following process may be useful. There is no

claim that this is the only or even the best way to develop a Bible study. But this approach provides a starting point.

Bible study is about the text. With the wealth of resources available on the internet it is possible to find numerous different translations to use and compare. A significant benefit of using Bible passages printed from the internet sources is to enable a fresh start every time a passage is studied. Marking and making notes in a Bible passage is one of the best ways to follow the flow of the passage, to see the writer’s thought process, to understand the logical progression of teaching or to see the connected actions in a narrative. The disadvantage of doing this in the Bible itself (the printed copy you usually use) is that as helpful as the markings are today, they will impede your study the next time you look at the same passage. Using a fresh printed copy from an internet source (or even photocopying a page from your Bible) avoids this problem.

For example, www.biblehub.com or www.biblegateway.com provide the Biblical text as well as more other resources than anyone can likely use in a lifetime of Bible study.

Using BibleGateway, you can find a passage of interest:

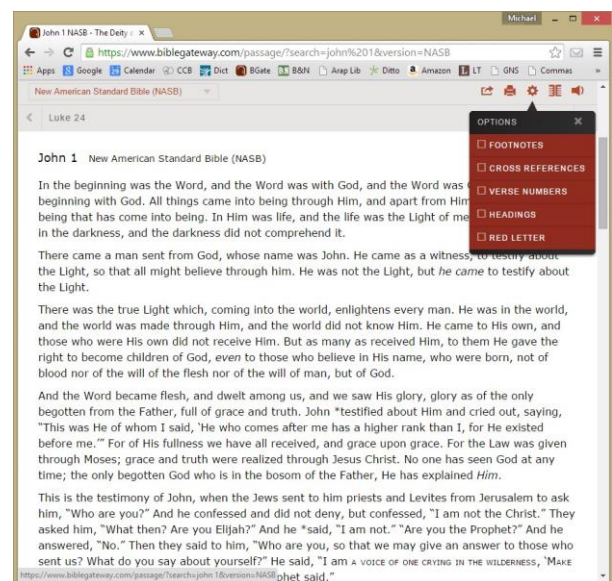


As you can see, the display of the passage looks very similar to a printed Bible you may be familiar with. The text is there along with verse numbers, paragraph divisions, section headings, cross-references, footnotes and other resources.

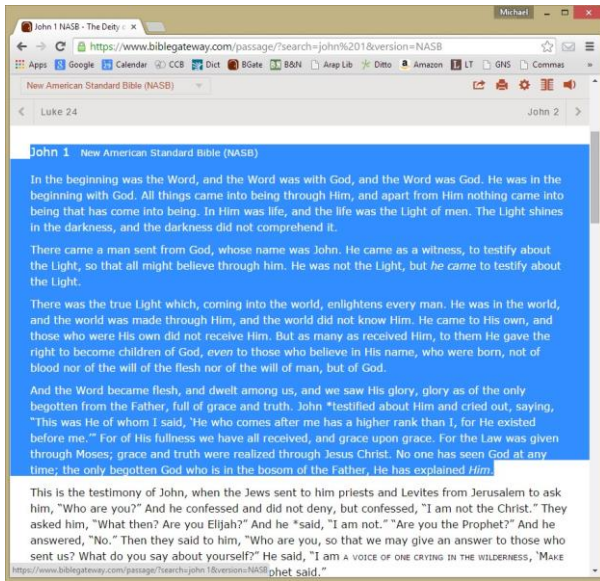
Once again, Bible study is about the text. Footnotes, and cross-references and commentaries are wonderful and helpful tools. The tools can be used for great benefit, but only after time has been spent in the text itself. The benefits easily become distractions. Turning to a footnote or commentary too soon tends to limit further thought or investigation. Once we read another's opinion we tend to narrow our exploration and thinking about the passage to what we read. Or we can jump from cross-reference to cross-reference, never seeing the depth of any particular passage. Cross-

references are best used as a way to compare and contrast related passages after each passage has been studied in detail on its own. Then the cross-references can add clarity and precision to our understanding, rather than adding breadth without depth.

For this reason, I strongly recommend taking advantage of another benefit of many Bible web sites. Use the "Preferences" or "Configuration" or "Settings" to temporarily turn off the useful but unnecessary additions. In BibleGateway, simply clear the checkboxes:

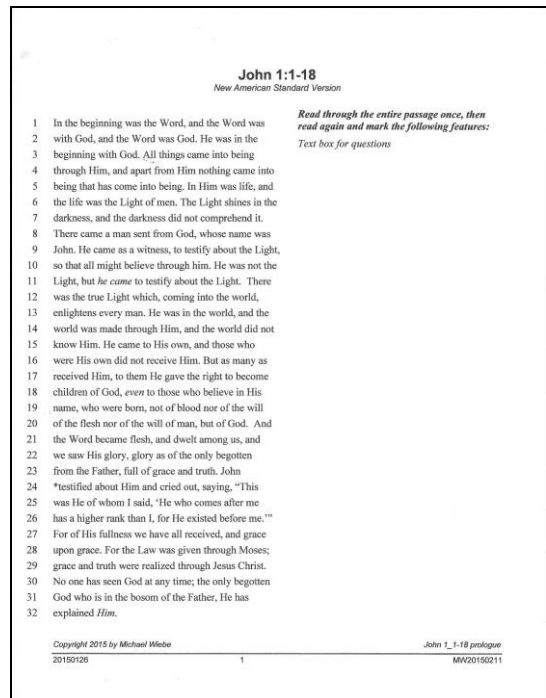


It becomes a simple task of selecting and copying the text of the passage you want to study and then pasting the text into a word processor.



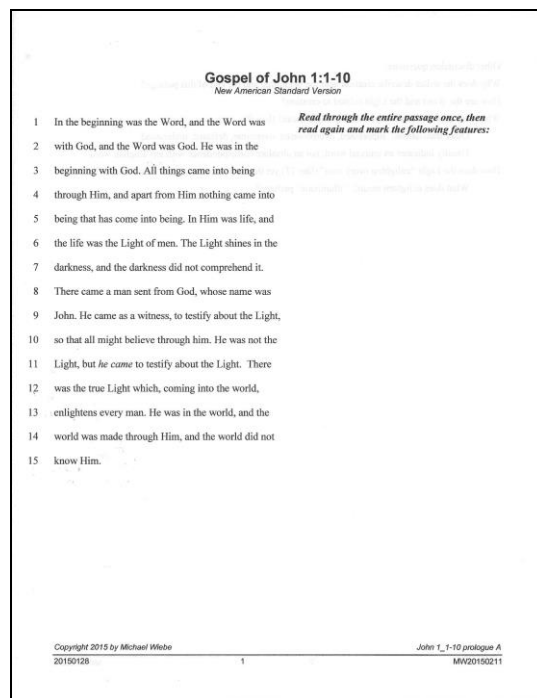
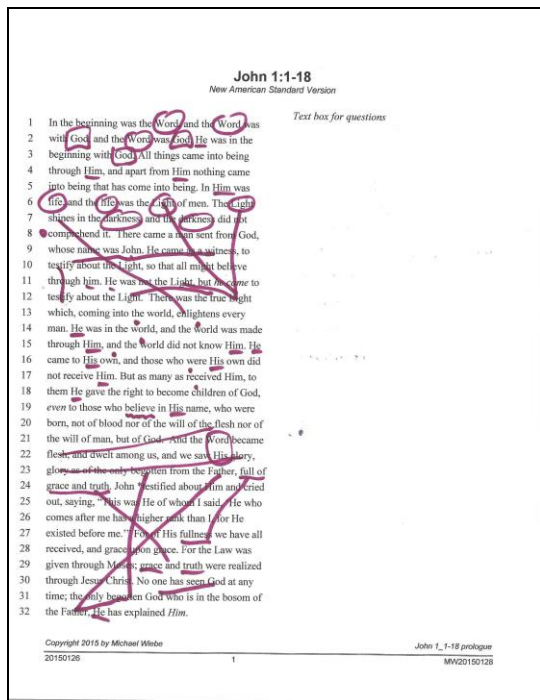
Once in your word processor you can format the text any way that helps your study.

Double-spacing and wide margins leave room for notes and other marks to help in the observation of the text. Adding line numbers is helpful if the goal is a group discussion (especially if verse numbers have been removed.)



Another benefit of using this kind of printed text is the ability to make several “fresh starts” even for the same study (personal or to lead a group). Digging into a text does not always produce great results immediately. Getting beyond superficial questions and familiar truisms often takes time and even a few false starts.

For example, a first pass at this passage (using the inductive method of observation, interpretation, and application) resulted in lots of marks but few coherent ideas of what the passage had to say:

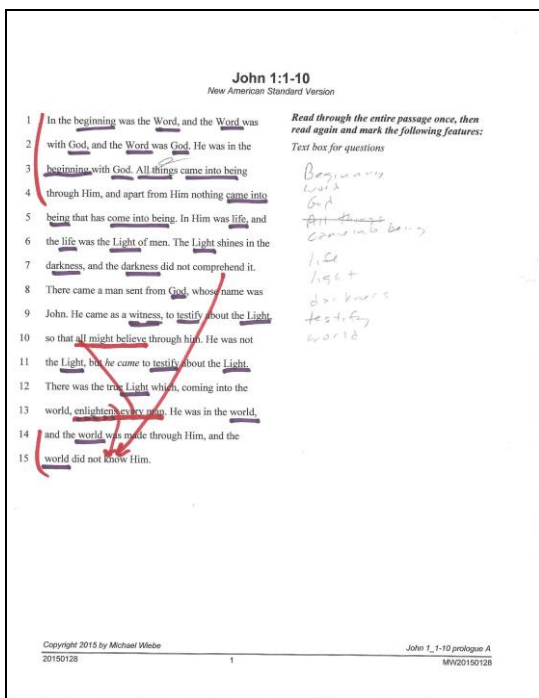


As has been said before (at least by me), inductive Bible study is a lot like detective work, gathering clues, looking for connections, finding the unexpected without ignoring the commonplace. Not all “clues” are critical, but the detective (or the Bible student) cannot know that ahead of time. The more clues that are collected, the better the likelihood of finding the key you are looking for.

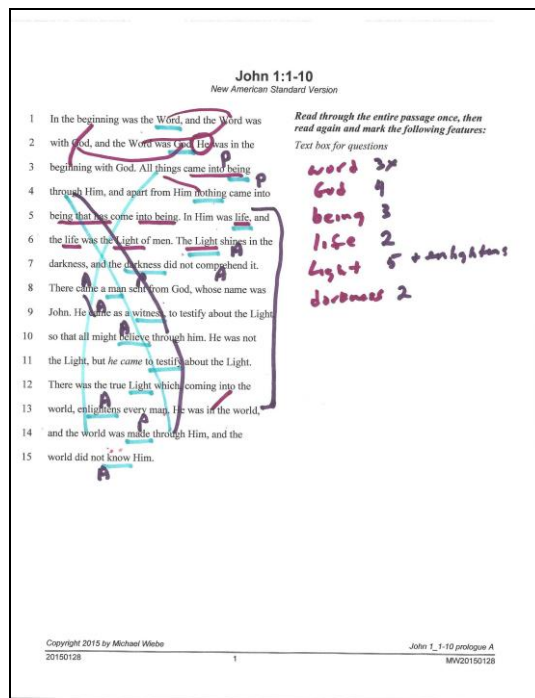
An important observation was that there was too much in this passage to cover in a one-hour discussion (the plan for the study). Without the verse numbers and paragraph divisions and section headings, you will need to give some serious thought (always a good idea) about how to divide up portions of Scripture, even passing through chapter divisions.

The second look at this passage with a reduced scope of just ten verses seemed a little more manageable:

That also means that some clues will lead to dead ends, investigations that are not particularly productive. For example, looking at the passage again with colored pens in hand produced the following:



After spending some time on that trail it did not seem to be productive, so I started with another “clean” copy of the passage and made a different set of observations:



My notes even included a count of the number of occurrences of what seemed to be some of the key words in the passage. Imagination is essential. Keep asking yourself, “How else might I see what this passage is saying? What questions have I not asked yet?” Counting the recurring words is not a formula or a trick for success. But in this case the fact that “Light” or “enlightens” is repeated so many times gave me a new place to start from that angle, looking at how light might be important in the passage.

Once again feeling the need for a fresh start resulted in what seemed to have more potential for my own learning as well as for a group discussion:

John 1:1-10
New American Standard Version

Read through the entire passage once, then read again and mark the following features:
Text box for questions

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was
2 with God, and the Word was God. He was in the
3 beginning with God. All things came into being
4 through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into
5 being that has come into being. In Him was life, and
6 the life was the light of men. The Light shines in the
7 darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.
8 There came a man sent from God whose name was
9 John. He came as a witness to testify about the Light,
10 so that all might believe through him. He was not
11 the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.
12 There was the true Light which, coming into the
13 world, enlightens every man. He was in the world,
14 and the world was made through Him, and the
15 world did not know Him.

Handwritten notes:
underline - Word
circle - man named John
Box - Light
Word → life → light
man - testimony, witness about light

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The passage began to fall into three sections – what it said about the Word, what it said about “a man named John,” and what it said about Light.

This approach grew into the plan for the group discussion:

Gospel of John 1:1-10
New American Standard Version

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was
2 with God, and the Word was God. He was in the
3 beginning with God. All things came into being
4 through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into
5 being that has come into being. In Him was life, and
6 the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the
7 darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.
8 There came a man sent from God whose name was
9 John. He came as a witness, to testify about the Light,
10 so that all might believe through him. He was not the
11 Light, but he came to testify about the Light. There
12 was the true Light which, coming into the world,
13 enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the
14 world was made through Him, and the world did not
15 know Him.

Read through the entire passage once, then read again and mark the following features:
Underline everything the passage says about "the Word."
Circle everything the passage says about the man named John.
Box everything the passage says about "the Light."

Summarize (no more than three words each) what the passage says about the Word, the man named John, and the Light:
Word: _____
John: _____
Light: _____

How does the writer relate these to each other? What is the connection between the Word and the Light? What is the connection between John and the Light?

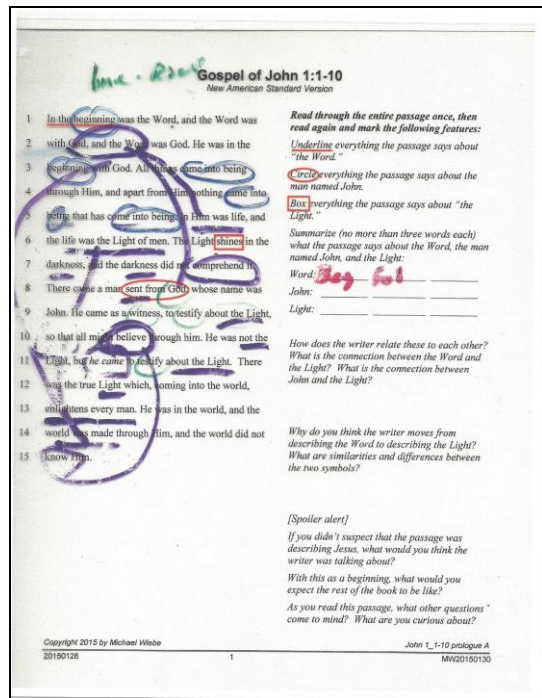
Why do you think the writer moves from describing the Word to describing the Light? What are similarities and differences between the two symbols?

[Spoiler alert]
If you didn't suspect that the passage was describing Jesus, what would you think the writer was talking about?
With this as a beginning, what would you expect the rest of the book to be like?
As you read this passage, what other questions come to mind? What are you curious about?

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The result was (in my opinion) a fruitful time looking at the passage together as a group and using the process of observation, interpretation, and application to help the members of the group to begin seeing for themselves the things I was finding in the passage as well as new discoveries for all of us made during the time of the discussion.

Marking observations and questions from the group (using a transparency on an overhead projector) was helpful in understanding the passage:



The excitement of seeing and sharing insights in the very word of God is exhilarating. It is critical to remember we are not trying to invent new ideas or produce clever interpretations or force the text into a desired doctrinal position. We are trying to find what the text says with as much clarity and accuracy and precision as the Holy Spirit provides to our finite, creature minds.

Leading a group discussion is not lecturing and telling the other members all the wonderful things the leader has discovered. Rather, questions that will help everyone in the group to dig into the passage themselves, whether the person who has never read the Bible

before, or the seminary professor. They may see what the leader saw, or something even better.

The point of describing the process and the intermediate steps of the study is for encouragement. When you begin studying a passage for your own Quiet Time or in preparation for leading a group, don't become discouraged if great theological insights do not immediately leap off the page. Dig. Mark. Underline. Circle. Connect. Then print out another page and start all over again, all the while asking the Author of the Scriptures, "Open my eyes Lord that I may see wonderful things in your Law" (Psalm 119:18). Good, life-transforming Bible study is work. I never miss an opportunity to use the quotation from John Piper: "Raking is easy, but you only get leaves. Digging is hard, but you may find diamonds." Don't be satisfied with leaves.

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