My lightbulb moment

When my lovely Bible study leader told me about ‘The Swedish Method’, I thought it was a terrible idea. I could hardly believe Catherine wanted to use it for our group.

I had seen this sort of thing before. I thought it was good for 1-to-1 or for private Bible reading.

And to be brutally honest, I’ve never even liked recommending this stuff for private Bible reading. The whole idea of finding what God is ‘saying to me today’ irks me. I’ve seen people grab a verse out of context and conclude that God says to build a house in the mountains or something. I want to teach people to read the Bible in context, not to jump to hasty mystical conclusions.

I didn’t say how appalled I was by the idea. Instead I said, ‘Um … maybe.’

Our women’s Bible study was starting a DynaMites Music group, which meant that every week unbelievers would be invited to join us. We would have a shorter time, since we planned to fit a music session, morning tea and Bible group all into the one morning. I suggested we do a short study with questions relevant to both Christians and non-Christians. We would be fine – so long as Catherine had done lots of prep and knew the passage well.

When she told me that ‘The Swedish Method’ took less prep, and that was one reason why she wanted to do it, then I was really worried. But I trusted her, and she was the leader, so I resolved to be supportive.

And I figured I ought to read up about it, too. I thought it must be okay if Matthias Media recommended it. But then the article was all about what works in Argentina where there is a strong Catholic influence and people tend to rely on human authority instead of looking closely at the Bible for themselves. It was encouraging leaders to not teach the Bible and not answer people’s questions. I don’t think we have the problem of relying on human authority here in Australia. We have contempt for authority.

After reading the article I had A Really REALLY Bad Feeling about it.

When our first morning of DynaMites arrived, we had two new women join our Bible group. Catherine prayed before we began, then we read Luke 1: 1-25, about the birth of John the Baptist foretold. We took 5 minutes to silently read through the passage and write our thoughts next to these symbols:

 Something which stood out to us as we read the passage. Actually, I liked that we were simply writing something which has caught our attention, rather than a ‘Scripture which God has given us’. That sat much better with my personality.

 Any questions the passage raised for us. Easy enough.

Then we went around the circle and read out what we’d written beside our lightbulbs. It was quite encouraging to hear what stood out for others, especially since most of us wrote different things. We went around again and read out our questions.

 Then we took a few more minutes to silently write down what we were going to take away.

On this first week, we went around the circle to read them and it was totally hit–and-miss. One of the visitors said that she was going to pay more attention to signs from God. That was what she was taking away! Disaster!

Fortunately, Catherine thought it hadn’t gone well. Phew! I waited for her to say she would do something else next week. But no, she said she would give it another go.

The second week was much better - we discussed the questions amongst ourselves as each one was asked, looking at the Bible passage for answers. But our discussion didn’t get to Jesus, who was central to the passage.

Cetherine talked to me about how she and I could steer the conversation towards the main point. We decided instead to add another symbol.

 She found a target, so that after our initial discussion we would all write down what we thought the main point (s) of the passage was, before writing what we would take away.

Finally, we had a good Bible discussion.

After a few weeks, our group got used to this new method. I got used to it. In fact, I now love it.

One thing which has taken me by surprise is how natural our conversations about the Bible have become. Until now, preparing and leading a Bible study has (for me) been all about trying to manufacture a conversation to feel natural and to end up at a certain point. With this method, none of that is necessary. People in the group say what strikes them as they read through the passage and these are thoughtful comments straight from the heart. The leader helps keep the conversation focussed on the Bible passage (we are chatty women, after all) but she doesn’t need to manipulate the conversation. We have a simple structure, but the discussion flows easily.

We are encouraged by other people’s observations and how they find the passage personally comforting or challenging. We apply it to our lives as we go.

It’s very different to discuss *genuine* questions for group members, rather than artificial questions written on a piece of paper. We’re talking to each other, rather than merely answering the leader. We all have the opportunity to raise our questions from the passage.

Another surprise has been how easy it is for visitors to fit in. Regardless of what spiritual stage a visitor is at, it’s comfortable for them to simply listen or to choose to join in and ask questions. Most visitors ask questions and we aren’t left wondering what they thought of it all.

I have found so many advantages with this method – everything Peter Blowes had claimed in that Matthias Media article that I had read/skimmed over. It’s adaptable, requires no preparation, costs nothing and teaches people how to read the Bible for themselves. It’s wonderful to see how one of those original visiting women has stayed and is now able to identify the main points of the Bible passage for herself. This method (I want to call it ‘The Lightbulb Method’) is perfect for our group, with our short amount of time. If we had more time we could try out the other symbols and variations which are out there.

All of these advantages have been wonderful, but I’ve had an even bigger surprise. Using this method has transformed my own personal Bible reading. I have found that I’m instinctively looking for what strikes me as I read the passage. I take more notice of the questions that I have. I still use Bible reading notes, but now my own thoughts and responses to what I’m reading come first, before I read the questions and comments which someone else has prepared. I find the Bible is having a deeper impact on me when I read it on my own.

I still don’t love the name ‘The Swedish Method’ (it sounds like it will involve massage) but I have realised that prepared questions can often hinder and narrow the conversation. We don’t need them. What a lightbulb moment!