Life Reformation Studies
By William Boekestein

A Study Guide to
Getting the Message:
A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible
By Daniel M. Doriani
## Contents

Preface to the Study Guide 3

1. Introduction 4

2. Observing What is There 6

3. The Literary Context 8

4. The Historical Context 10

5. Analyzing Narratives 12

6. Analyzing Discourses 14

7. Solving Problems 16

8. Developing Themes 18

9. The Challenge of Application 20

10. The Practice of Application 22

11. Reflecting on the Point of a Text 24

12. Reflecting on the Redemptive Thrust of Scripture 26

13. Getting Started 28

Appendix: Seven Principles for Effective Group Bible Study 29
Preface to the Study Guide

Daniel Doriani’s *Getting the Message* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996) was written to address real and pressing questions that confront Christians:

“How often have you wished you could handle the Bible more confidently? Perhaps you have been confused when Bible teachers contradict each other, or when a sermon soars far beyond your simple thoughts on a text. Or you realize that the stock Sunday school material you have will not work for your class, but you have no idea how to prepare your own lesson. Why are Christians unable to evaluate sermons, or to gain much from devotional reading, or to prepare lessons on their own?

Doriani’s answer: “It is because they lack a method for studying the Bible. This book presents a straightforward method for effective Bible study. The goal of that study is not simply to understand the Bible better, but also to apply it to life (p. 3).”

This study guide is designed to assist those who want to learn this method for effective Bible study but are looking for a simple plan for using the book in a group study. The questions in this study guide are intended to be a guide to provoke conversations. Readers should not feel pressured to discuss every question at every meeting. In fact, in the case of *Getting the Message*, it might be better to allow at least half the time to share the work the group has done in the “exercises” portion of the book. Time should be given for prayer, and especially prayer that relates to the material studied.

In the first chapter the author makes the point that Scripture can only be rightly interpreted and applied by those who believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whether you are a committed believer or a “skeptic or waverer” (p.7), the study of Scripture is a powerful exercise. As you begin this study make a commitment to listen carefully to what God will say through his word; it may change your life.

For more detailed suggestions on making a small group study work well, see the appendix. A great follow-up to *Getting the Message* is Daniel Doriani’s *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001).
Chapter 1: Introduction

Getting Started
Read Chapter 1 of Getting the Message.

Reflect on Acts 8:25-35.

Discussion Questions
1. Define (using a dictionary if necessary):
   a. Exegesis—

   b. Hermeneutics—


3. What is a potential danger of studying the Bible without adequate tools? (p. 3).

4. Christians need training to study the Bible because “we live in a world far removed from the world of the Bible.” How can we bridge the gap between the two worlds? (pp. 4,5).

5. How does this training help in applying the Bible to our lives? (p. 5).
6. While Doriani insists on the need of having sound methods of interpretation, why does he say that sound method is not enough? (p. 6ff.)

7. What “advantages” do Believers have as they approach Scripture (p. 7).

8. List and explain the three necessary elements of proper biblical interpretation. (p. 8).

9. Briefly summarize and explain the significance of the “Three Forms of Heart Failure.” (p. 8-10).
   a.
   b.
   c.

10. Fill in and briefly explain the CAPTOR acronym: (p. 11).
    C
    A
    P
    T
    O
    R

Wrap Up
Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) for God’s help regarding the three forms of “heart failure.”
Chapter 2: Observing What Is There

Getting Started
Read Chapter 2 of *Getting the Message.*

Attempt the exercises on page 27.

Discussion Questions
1. Identify and explain the fundamental skill for biblical interpretation (p. 14).

2. Restate and explain the significance of Principle 1 of observation (p. 15).

3. Restate and explain the significance of Principle 2 of observation (p. 16).

4. Restate and explain the significance of Principle 3 of observation (p. 17).

5. Restate Principle 4 of observation (p. 18).
6. Are all details of equal significance? Explain, including examples (p. 23).

7. In what ways does culture limit our ability to observe a text (p. 24)?

8. In what ways do traditions limit our ability to observe a text (p. 25)?

9. How does Doriani support the following statement: “Traditions can serve us well or poorly” (p. 25).
   a. Positive use—
   b. Negative use—

10. How can the skill of observation help to overcome the “blind spots” inherent in our traditions (p. 26).

**Wrap Up**
Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) that God would make us careful observers of his word.
Chapter 3: The Literary Context

Getting Started
Read Chapter 3 of Getting the Message

Attempt some of the exercises on pages 41 and 42

Discussion Questions
1. How does literary context effect a statement or phrase (pg. 30).

2. How does understanding historical context aid your understanding of a sentence or phrase.

3. How is the importance of historical and literal context sometimes exaggerated? (pg. 31).

4. What is the first thing you need to do in studying context? (pg. 31).

5. Restate and explain the significance of principle 1 related to context.
6. Restate and explain the significance of principle 2 related to context.

7. Restate and explain the significance of principle 3 related to context.

8. Restate and explain the significance of principle 4 related to context.

9. Restate and explain the significance of principle 5 related to context.

10. Restate and explain the significance of principle 6 related to context.

Wrap Up
Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray, (specifically) for greater insight into the setting of God’s word.
Chapter 4: The Historical Context

Getting Started
Read Chapter 4 of *Getting the Message*

Attempt some of the exercises on pages 41 and 42

Discussion Questions
1. What are the three goals of studying historical context? (p. 44).

2. What different things must we think about and research if we are to fully understand the World of the Bible? (p. 45).

3. What are four things you can do to further your study of biblical times? (p.48)

4. Name and define Doriani’s three broad types of relationships of readers to authors of the Bible. (p. 49-50)
5. What is Doriani’s second principal and give an example? (p. 50).

6. What is Doriani’s third principal and give an example? (p. 51).

7. What two ways can we discover the traits of the actors in biblical stories? (p. 52)

8. Compare and contrast the writers of James and Galatians as they write on faith and works. Do they have the same message? (p. 53-58).

**Wrap Up**

Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) that God would root us more deeply in the Bible’s history.
Chapter 5: Analyzing Narratives

Getting Started
Read chapter 5 of *Getting the Message*.

Attempt the exercises on page 75.

Discussion Question
1. What is a narrative? (p. 61)

2. Restate and explain the significance of the three principles we use to study narratives.
   a.

   b.

   c.

3. In this chapter Doriani uses the words *story* and *drama*, in what way are we to perceive these words? (p. 64)

4. Reflect on the six chief elements found in biblical dramas.
   a.
b.

c.

d.

e.

f.

5. What insights did you gain from Doriani’s illustration from Luke 5:17-26?

6. What are the two questions we can ask that help us apply biblical narratives to our current situations?
   a.

   b.

Wrap Up
Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) to know God’s ways and live the life he blesses.
Chapter 6: Analyzing Discourse

Getting Started
Read chapter 6 of *Getting the Message*.

Attempt the exercises on page 92.

Discussion Questions
1. What is a biblical discourse? (define and give examples).

2. What is discourse analysis and why is it important? (p. 78).

3. How can the main topic and theme be found in a discourse? (p. 79)

4. Is it easier for you to analyze individual sentences or a text as a whole? Explain, showing significance of your answer (p. 82).

5. What are ‘implicit and understated connections?’ (p. 81).
6. What is parallelism and where is it found? (p. 87).

7. What is meant by ‘addition and subtraction?’ (p. 89).

8. What is meant by ‘cause and effect?’ (p. 90).

9. What is meant by ‘clarification and explanation?’ (p. 91).

10. From your perspective, what was the most important point in the chapter?

Wrap up

Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) for patience and sensitivity in interpreting Scripture.
Chapter 7: Solving Problems

Getting Started

Read chapter 7 of Getting the Message.

Attempt the exercises on page 105.

Discussion Questions

1. According to Doriani, how must we read the Bible if we are to better understand the problems that we don’t understand?

2. What are the three main kinds of problems readers encounter in the text?
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 

3. What does Doriani name as the fundamental problem that most Christians face when reading the Bible?
4. How can we overcome that fundamental problem?

5. What common themes related to problems did you observe as you read through Doriani’s three sample passages?

6. Restate and explain the significance of principle 1 related to problems.

7. Restate and explain the significance of principle 2 related to problems

Wrap up

Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) for wisdom to engage problems we encounter in Scripture.
Chapter 8: Developing Themes

Getting Started
Read Chapter 8 of Getting the Message.

Attempt the exercises on page 120.

Discussion Questions
1. Suggest some occasions in which topical or thematic studies might be useful.

2. Often the hardest part of developing a topic study is knowing where to begin. How does Doriani’s first principle address this difficulty?

3. Why, in the words of principle two, is it “…Vital to distinguish between the concept and the biblical term or terms that describe it”?

4. In the development of a theme, what is the difference between “the survey of the data and the synthesis of the data”?
5. What is a concordance and how should it be used in preparing a thematic study (see principle four)?

6. What is the fifth principle and why is it important for thematic studies?

7. What does the author mean when he says, “Themes often begin with a problem”? (p. 118).

8. Toward the end of the chapter, Doriani suggests that some of the themes that need developing most are those least likely to receive attention. Can you think of other themes that should be developed but seldom are? Consider encouraging your pastor to develop some of these themes. Better yet, offer him some of the thoughts that this chapter of *Getting the Message* has helped you develop on this topic.

**Wrap up**

Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) for opportunities to present topical studies of Scripture.
Chapter 9: The Challenge of Application

Getting Started
Read chapter 9 of Getting the Message.

Attempt the exercises on page 134.

Discussion Questions
1. What are three things Christians disagree on regarding the application of Scripture? (p. 123).

2. Explain and critique the first view of application (p. 124-5).

3. Explain and critique the second view of application (p. 125-127).

4. Explain the third view of application.

5. What are five important factors in doing application well?
6. What insights did you gain from Doriani’s first illustration of application (Case 1: A Simple Text)?

7. What insights did you gain from Doriani’s second illustration of application (Case 2: An Obscure Question)?

**Wrap up**

Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) that God would give us a proper view of application.
Chapter 10: The Practice of Application

Getting Started
Read chapter 10 of Getting the Message.

Attempt the exercises on pages 152-153.

Discussion Questions
1. Applying the Scriptures is a difficult task that requires a proper method. The author suggests several difficulties that prove this fact. Summarize and explain the three difficulties that you found most compelling (pp. 139,40)?
   a.
   b.
   c.

2. What is the primary obstacle that we face in applying the Bible (p. 140)?

3. Principle 1 of practicing application is: “In applying the Bible, we must expect to find applications in all kinds of Scriptures, not just in commandments.” Name and briefly comment on the seven “kinds of Scriptures” in which we may find applications (141,42).
   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.
   e.
4. Principles 2 and 3 speak of two different types of texts. In what way are these type of texts the same? Different? (pp. 142,43. Compare with 148, second new paragraph.)

5. Explain the importance for application of both “supports” in Doriani’s bridge illustration (143,44)

6. How does “daring to be boring” (suggest a different term?) fit in to application? (149, cf. 131).

7. Evaluate, from several angles the following quote: “the value of proclamation rests on the truth of the message, not in the virtue of the messenger” (150).

Wrap Up
Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) for help in applying Scripture to yourself and others.
Chapter 11: Reflecting on the Point of a Text

Getting Started
Read chapter 11 of Getting the Message.

Attempt the exercises on pages 167-168

Discussion Questions
1. From which two “sources” must every main point of the message/sermon flow? (p. 155).

2. Why is it necessary for a message to have one main point? (pp. 154,55).

3. Walk through the steps of determining the main point of the text/message.

4. Why must a scriptural message (sermon, lecture, etc.) have a specific theme? (158)

5. In a few words each, summarize the resources you should use to discover the theme of a passage (Principle 2, p. 159-162)
   a.
b. How should this question be answered?¹

b. How does Doriani expand upon this principle that Scripture has a single main point? (164-67)
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 

Wrap Up

Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) for precision in understanding the Bible’s meaning.

¹ “It is of the greatest importance to understand at the outset that Scripture has but a single sense, and is therefore susceptible to a scientific and logical investigation. This fundamental principle must be placed emphatically in the foreground, in opposition to the tendency…to accept a manifold sense,—a tendency that makes any science of Hermeneutics impossible, and opens wide the door for all kinds of arbitrary interpretations. …It must be maintained that Scripture…has but one proper sense. (Berkhof, Louis. *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 57.) Berkhof defends this fact on the following three proofs: 1) God, who is absolute truth, communicates his truths clearly and “has not given us a revelation that is intended to mislead. 2) Since God is clearly revealed in nature, he must be even more clearly revealed in Scripture. 3) God used real language, the character of which is to be understood, to reveal himself in the Scripture. Scriptures must have a single sense. (pp. 58,59).
Chapter 12: Reflecting on the Redemptive Thrust of Scripture

Getting Started
Read chapter 12 of Getting the Message.

Attempt the exercises on page 185.

Discussion Questions
1. Reflect on Doriani’s statement that a sermon is, “...Sub-Christian if it fails to present Jesus to this fallen world” (p. 170).

2. What is a “fallen-condition focus” (or FCF)? How does it help to “get to Jesus” in every text that we study?

3. What is a “redemptive-historical focus” (or RHF)?

4. How does the Law (Genesis to Deuteronomy) point to Christ?

5. How do the historical books (Joshua to Esther) point to Christ?
6. How do the prophetic books (especially Isaiah to Malachi) point to Christ?

7. How does the wisdom literature (Job to the Song of Solomon) point to Christ?

8. How do the Gospels and Acts center on Christ?

9. How do the Epistles and Revelation center on Christ?

Wrap Up

Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) for a Christo-centric approach to Scripture.
Chapter 13: Getting Started

Getting Started
Read chapter 13 of *Getting the Message*.

Meditate on 2 Timothy 2:15-26 (esp. v. 15).

Discussion Questions
1. What are three ways to improve private devotions? (p. 188).

2. What four skills make a good group study leader? (p. 189)

3. What four character traits should a leader show, do you need to have all of these? (p. 189).

4. What goal must a study group constantly keep before it? (p. 190)

Wrap Up
Do you have any questions or comments that haven’t yet been addressed?

Pray (specifically) for your group’s private devotions and group leader(s).
Appendix: Seven Suggestions for Effective Group Studies

Effective Bible studies rarely just happen. Instead, they are the Spirit-blessed product of persistent application of foundational principles. The following seven principles are offered as helps toward fruitful group study.

The Principle of Careful Preparation
One of the main reasons why group studies are as poorly attended and unedifying as they sometimes are is a lack of careful preparation. Too often, group “studies” are an exchange of disconnected comments about a text (or topic) that many of the participants barely considered ahead of time. That’s a problem since, for most of us, profitable speech flows from premeditated thought. “The heart of the righteous studies how to answer…” (Prov. 15:28).

To aid in preparation, small groups should consider using study questions which members can carefully and prayerfully complete with a view toward sharing their answers with the group. This can be especially helpful for those who are less comfortable being put on the spot. In a sense, those who have carefully prepared for the study have earned the right to use valuable group time by talking. The principle of careful preparation does not mean, however, that the goal of group study is the presentation of perfect answers. It does mean that participants should put work into the lesson, and develop thoughts to share with others.

The Principle of Biblical Prioritization
I am convinced that Scripture studies are almost always aided by a well-written guide. Some of the best guides I have used are commentaries; especially those that began as a sermon series by trained Bible scholars. Homiletical commentaries combine the best of careful exegesis and pastoral application. One of the dangers, though, of using a study guide is that the Bible can become eclipsed by a lesser book. It is easy to subconsciously begin to treat the Bible as the “raw materials” and the study guide as the “finished product,” giving preference to the latter.

Probably the best way to avoid misusing commentaries or study guides is to make then the last part of your preparation for the group study. Attempt to first work through the passage in focus. Ask questions about the text. Note observations and applications. Use the study questions to stimulate thought before turning to the “answers” in the commentary. In this way the commentary becomes a sounding board for your ideas and conclusions rather than a source book. Such an approach is consistent with that of the Bereans who, “…Received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).

A related principle is that group discussions should be guided by Scripture not by personal opinion (whether yours or those of a professional commentator). This does not mean that a question or comment is out of line just because it is an opinion. It does mean that conclusions that are reached and counsel that is given should be biblically based.

The Principle of Creedal Dedication
As important as it is to maintain Scripture as the purest subject of our study, a study is not necessarily Christian simply because the Bible is used. Many cults study the Bible too. Christianity is a Faith, that is, a body of teaching, that can be summarized with concrete propositions. So, for example, a Christian study will hold as basic beliefs, the twelve articles of the Apostles’ Creed. In the interest of “free thinking,” a small group might have the goal of being open at all points. As noble as this approach sounds, it is neither biblical
nor helpful. The principle of creedal dedication may rub the wrong way those who prefer to have “no creed but Christ.” But, as has often been pointed out, as soon as you say what you believe about Christ you are articulating an “informal creed.” Groups which have not clarified their basic biblical assumptions may find themselves debating core, settled Biblical issues, and possibly confusing its members.

The Principle of Written Reproduction
When was the last time you lost a really profound thought because you failed to write it down? Such a frustrating experience illustrates the importance of note-taking. In fact, the written Word, itself, is a strong apologetic for written reproduction. It has been well said that, “Thoughts disentangle themselves as they pass from the mind, through the lips and over the fingertips. Writing down your thoughts and drawing them together is one of the key differences between Bible reading and Bible Study. A rich reservoir of scriptural knowledge can be stored for future use when written reproduction is employed.” For this reason study questions should usually be answered in writing (not just by making mental notes). It is also a good idea to bring a pencil to the study since we trust God gives insights to others as well, which we should record for further reflection.

The Principle of Group Cooperation
The principle of group cooperation simply makes the point that there are reasons that believers meet together rather than simply studying as individuals. To actually reap the benefits of group study we need to know what we are trying to achieve by meeting together.

• **Growing in love.** Our chief aim should be to love our neighbor. Paul teaches that “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:10). In group studies our goal should be to understand not only the Bible, but each other, so that we will know better how to love each other.

• **Sharing of experience.** It is my conviction that in most cases, Bible study leaders should view themselves more as discussion facilitators than information providers. In other words, there should be a difference between a sermon and a bible Study. Small group studies, unlike traditional sermons, offer occasion for everyone to ask questions and offer personal insights.

• **Entering into a holy communion.** If only for a few hours, group Scripture studies can do more to fit us for heaven than most other things we will do in the week. Reaping this benefit requires the members to commit to attend and actively participate in the group.

If there are advantages to group study, there are also dangers.

• **Formality.** What began as a fresh, informal, relaxed and happily flexible spiritual meeting easily degenerates into legalistic formalism. There is nothing less attractive to regular attendees or outsiders than to see someone grudgingly doing something which he obviously dislikes. Small groups should discipline themselves to remain spontaneous. This may mean making changes. It will mean being open to spontaneous prayer. Members should also remember the impact their attitude has on others.

• **Inconsistency.** There is a danger of becoming “in-study” someone that you are not the rest of the week. Beware of hypocrisy and aim for continuity both during the study and afterwards.

• **Vulnerability.** Ideally, small group involvement assumes a level of transparency that creates the possibility of broken trust. When sensitive topics are discussed confidentiality must be strictly maintained.

• **Superficiality.** Being aware of the possibility of getting hurt, group members will be tempted to hold back. We acknowledge that the more
“real” we are with each other and with God, the more we will benefit from our meetings. Superficiality should be avoided. Sin should be discussed with sobriety.

- **Animosity.** Many of the topics studied in small groups are held very dearly. In this context, hurt feelings are only a short step away from disagreements. We need to be respectful of each other, recognizing that we are all at different points in spiritual growth and that none of us has fully attained perfection ourselves.

- **Prolixity.** The art of unduly prolonged or drawn out talk has unfortunately become a trademark of many small group studies. Avoiding prolixity means resisting the urge to create a verbal monopoly or chase down “rabbit trails.” Use your comments judiciously. Even group leaders should know when to refrain from speaking (Eccl. 3:7).

**The Principle of Consistent and Logical Progression**

There should be ordered movement in your study. People benefit from knowing where they are, as well as where they can anticipate ending up (not to mention why and how they will get there). Bible study, whether personal or group, should not be haphazard. There is something methodologically deficient with the practice of randomly choosing texts to study. This isn’t the way the Bible was written, it isn’t the way that humans learn, so it isn’t the way the Bible should be studied. That’s why most Bible study books you see today are organized either topically or textually. Consistent and logical progression aids our learning because data build upon each other as a course of bricks are laid upon the last. It also makes completion of a study something of a monument. Without being too rigid, sticking to a nightly schedule and a weekly time-line can maximize the impact of your study.

**The Principle of Personal Application**

Too many faithful Bible study attendees silently wonder, as they pack up their materials and prepare to leave another study, “What am I supposed to do with this information?”

As with preaching, Bible study calls for a response. When Peter’s Pentecost audience heard his exposition of Scripture, “…They were cut to the heart, and said… ‘What shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). This same sort of question is asked at the end of every effective group Bible study. The answer will have something to do with our heads, hearts and hands. Studying the Bible is inherently “dangerous” because the Bible is God’s sword (Heb 4:12). It changes our minds as it chops up our flawed human logic and selfish patterns of thought. It pricks our hearts and emotions by slicing through the veil that covers our deep idols. It energizes our slack hands by cutting away the weights and sins that ensnare us (Heb. 12:1). Swords are dangerous. But if used rightly, and blessed by God, the end result is complete conformity to the image of Christ. There’s a goal that should breathe life into any group Bible study!

The next time you start getting ready for your group study, reflect on what you can do to improve it. If you’re bold enough, you might even consider modifying these principles into a group covenant so that everyone knows what they might expect from the study.

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1. The published Scripture expositions by R.C. Sproul, for example, make great study guides because he presents the teaching of the text, clearly, simply and practically.
2. Many churches more specifically summarize their understanding of Scripture through historic confessions (such as the Belgic Confession of Faith, 1561 or the London Baptist Confession of Faith, 1689) or congregational statements of faith.
3. The Bible itself contains several creeds, or short, non-negotiable summaries of the Christian faith (E.g. 1 Timothy 3:16).
4. From Walter Henrichsen and Gayle Jackson’s *Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 14.