

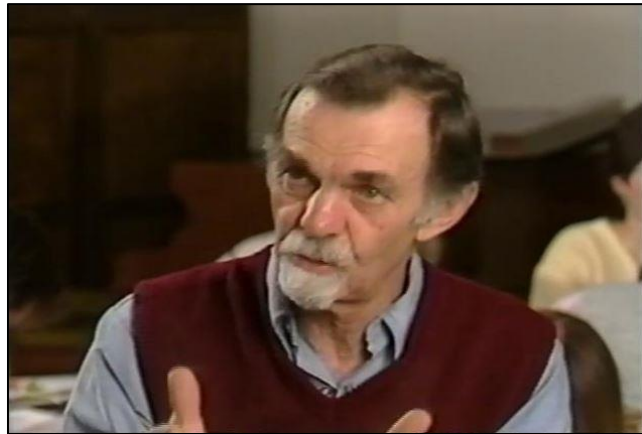
The History of Manuscript Bible Study

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There is some conjecture as to when and where Manuscript Discovery began or was developed. We have a letter from a staff member of the IVCF (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship) in USA, written in 1986 to Ross Pfennigwerth who is involved in MD in Australia. The letter from Paul Byer gave details of Manuscript Bible Study (as he called it) as beginning in 1953 within the student Christian movement in Washington. The letter is presented here almost completely, excluding opening and closing remarks:

From Paul Byer, October 27 1986:

'We had the first manuscript study back in 1953, or 1954, and we did Colossians at the Firs, a camp ground in Bellingham, Washington. I had studied Architecture at the university, and came on the IV staff. In my personal Bible study I used a pencil to mark up the text, then got started using some colors to designate themes, and key words,

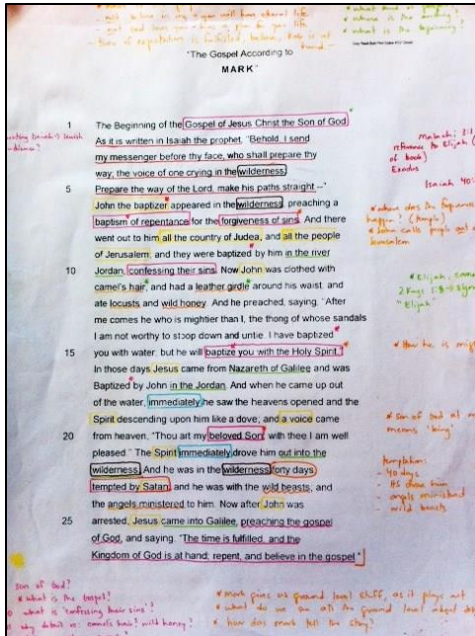


etc. But something bothered me, although I wouldn't have been able to verbalize this at first. It was just that every time I flipped a page the material I had worked on disappeared from sight and there was no way to relate it visually to the new pages. One morning it hit me; I had to buy two New Testaments and cut the pages out of both (I was working on 2 Corinthians) and then I could put each page face up and work right down the line through the whole text. So I did this and discovered that this opened up the meaning, as the internal structure and relationships within the text became apparent, and Paul's whole letter took on new meaning.

I shared this with my co-worker and she said, "let's do this with the students". We decided on the 'manuscript format', and mimeographed Colossians and had a go at it for four or five days with study in the mornings and afternoons and a speaker in the evenings. It was a significant time, for the 15 of us involved in Colossians and we continued to repeat this format once or twice a year with the students.

In the late 1950's we began to use manuscripts in the group Bible studies at the IVCF West Coast summer training camp. We did not use the longer block of time as we do

now, but took one and half hours for the daily small group Bible study. This was helpful, and the students seemed to get more with the text in the manuscript format, but now in hindsight, we know we had not yet discovered the full potential of the tool we were still learning to use.



The next step came in 1969. I had been West Coast Regional Director of IVCF, but that year shifted out of supervision and direction of the summer training program, to become a campus staff worker amongst the students, with a specialty in Bible study. So that summer at camp was the first time I could take a group of about eighteen students and concentrate for a full week on the text of Mark. We did not get past the first half of the book, but that study of the manuscript of Mark opened up my reading of that gospel in a new way. I had been leading Bible studies from Mark for years, and had helped to write a Bible study book on Mark, but this study unlocked things that I had just not seen before.

How do I account for this?

First, the manuscript forced us to look seriously at all of the text in its sequential order. We could not pick or choose, isolating a 'key passage' and treating it as special. Each part of the text had significance and the meaning of each part, or paragraph, had to make sense by contributing to the whole theme that was being developed. That is the way we write, and it was reasonable to believe it the way Mark was written. So we worked together, questioning, contributing and modifying our concepts until we believed we had some insight as to why the text was put together as we find it. This did two things: it gave us a growing sense that the text was a unified whole and an even stronger sense that we were in touch with what the author wanted to say to us.

Second, we all knew that we could not have achieved the same result on our own, no matter how hard and long we might have worked at it. The very diversity of the group gave a result greater than the sum of its parts. Yet it was not that the group was without leadership; I was in charge. But at the same time, I was not the authority to determine what the text was saying. The authority was in the text itself, and we all worked together to determine its meaning. Each person could, and did contribute to what they thought the text was, or was not saying, but their comment had to be supported by the

information in the text. As a leader you know the group has learned this principle when someone challenges your contribution or conclusion with their understanding of the text and shows that there is a better meaning than the one you proposed. This happened to me more than once.

But finally, what is the value of such a study? Sure, it is fun to make discoveries, but is that the purpose of a study? What about 'Application'? Let us define application. We must see the whole sequence that develops in such a study.

First, each person spends a block of time in personal study of the text. This is primarily the time for making observations and allowing questions that come out of the text to surface. Special tools, like English and Bible dictionaries, and analytical concordances can be and are often consulted. The text is marked up, usually with colored markers, not because the colors are in themselves so significant, but because their use draws the student into the text, to look at it more carefully, and to discover how it is put together. This active use of pen and marker puts a deeper imprint upon the mind, so that in the discussion and future study, recall is more easily made to support or challenge a proposed meaning.

The second step is a small group discussion among peers where they share their observations and raise their questions. It works best if a strong leader does not dominate this discussion. Each person needs the freedom to speak, and to be challenged but not put down, except by the data in the text. This small



discussion group (of 3 to 5 people) is very important. It is the seed bed for the questions and comments that each person probably has, and that the study of the text brings to the surface. It makes them active participants in the group process and even though they may not participate in the large group discussion that follows, they have already declared their interest in the text and so follow the discussion and are prepared to respond as the meaning in the text is determined.

As indicated, the third step is a discussion where the leader gathers responses from the entire group, and takes the initiative in building the probable meaning from the data in the text. Again, how this is done is very important, for this is when the participants in

the study are seeing a model of how to think clearly in working with the text, so as to determine the meaning. In the end, the main point that the text is making must be



made clear. Of course it is easier for the leader if he/she has been through the text before and has an idea of what is there, but this may not always be possible and was not the case the first time through Mark. But the fact that we were all in the study working together produced an unusual dynamic in that group. This is often the case.

So the first point of application is that in the very process of the study we are teaching students how to study, how to think, how to question and form conclusions. This is foundational for a life with God as a biblical Christian. Second! the integrity of the biblical text is made evident and for many students it is the first time they have personally experienced this. Usually this makes a lasting imprint upon them, which may change their whole attitude and use of Scripture in the future. Third, especially with Mark, there is a new or renewed commitment to the Lord Jesus, to live for his sake and for the sake of His gospel. This may take the practical form of a commitment to start, or help start a Mark study. Fourth, usually there is one or more special places where the text breaks in upon them, and they are now aware that a particular change or action is called for in their values, relationships and/or lifestyle. These calls to new obedience often surface and are shared and prayed about in the closing time with the small groups, both daily and at the final session.

Of course, we didn't learn all this in the first Mark study, but as we look back the points were all there; we just didn't realize it. But we did learn that the manuscript as a tool is important, and that its effectiveness is increased as it is used along with other tools. We repeated these studies of the first half of Mark and as word spread the numbers grew. Requests for a study of the second half of Mark also grew so we set one up. But here we discovered that the text was very intense with lots of Old Testament references, either explicit or implicit. So progress was slow, and for some time we just had to admit that we couldn't see it all coming together like the first half.

In the 70's, staff joined us from around the country. I never set up any special training for staff, but simply said that MBS was better 'caught than taught', so if they wanted to teach they should attend a study. Publicly, I said that anyone who had been through a study should be able to lead a small group through the same text. Personally, I knew that not everyone would or even could lead, but if many would try we would find those for whom this tool was a natural fit, and they would become the new teachers. This is the way it has worked.

I have not set up particular criteria for teachers, or attempted to control what is taught in the studies. Accordingly, there are variations in teaching styles and in the points that various leaders emphasize. My position is that if we keep working with the text in the manuscript format, stressing good observation by all, and expecting the students to study and question among themselves, and then to question the leaders, this in itself, in time, will be the best corrective of both method and content. The method must first work for those who teach it.

It is my conviction that if a tool is to really be effective and helpful in a movement like InterVarity, and in the church, it must be able to be picked up, used and passed on at the grass roots level. I personally never try to push the use of MBS into some place. I work on an invitation basis. As staff change, the cycle of the use of MBS may rise or fall. The use of Scripture in any work of God is foundational, and not optional. And for some, the MBS is a tool which proves useful.

I have taught MBS at Fuller Seminary to a range of students. Many students go on to lead studies with other students, young people in other communities and churches. This offers them a method to start with. I have recently returned from a trip to the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Burma, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Singapore. My time in each country was primarily spent in getting students and staff into MBS at their invitation. Sometimes it was just an all-day affair, or a series of evenings, but mostly a few hours each day of a 5 or 6 day training conference. But I still prefer spending 6 days with sessions morning, afternoon and night and we cover the first half of Mark. At a local campus or church, over a weekend we would do up to 3 hours on a Friday night and 7 hours on the Saturday and Sunday. Some books and passages that fit this time period, and which have good content, are Habakkuk, Amos, Jonah, Exodus 32-34, Mark 1-3 and Philippians.

