

Introduction to Sunday Morning Study (revised Feb 8, 2022)

SMS (Sunday Morning Study) is a Bible study/fellowship group that started in the 1980's at First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley. It is now (year 2022) the longest-lasting fellowship/study group at First Presbyterian Church

The core of Sunday Morning Study (SMS) is our belief that the Bible is the revealed Word of God.

An SMS member once characterized SMS as First Presbyterian's "industrial strength" Bible study. SMS indeed has "industrial strength" - not because the membership is so wise or learned, but because we help each other face the truths of the Bible directly, text to heart, and fulfill our desire to know for ourselves what God wants to tell us. It's the Bible that's "industrial strength."



SMS logo by Craig Oakley

Bible study at SMS is like a cooperative treasure hunt. We use an "inductive study" approach – described below in more detail – actively investigating as we progress through a Bible book, finding and sharing evidence and perspectives to deepen our understanding. A rotating "facilitator" (the rotation de-emphasizes the leader and emphasizes the Bible) leads the discussion by posing questions to the group. There is no separate "study guide," though facilitators share historical and background information gleaned from standard reference books. Our goal is to provide a safe environment for people to comfortably share their thoughts, but also to just sit back and listen.

I joined SMS in 1994. At that time we had about 55 members and met in the senior pastor's office while the pastor was away participating in one of the Sunday church services. At that time, our mission statement read as follows:

- Sunday Morning Study (SMS) is an ongoing, weekly, inductive Bible Study. We share a common love for God and a desire to understand Scripture in its historical-cultural context. We are disciples of Jesus Christ who strive to allow Scripture to speak to us directly and change us as we follow Him in our complex world.
- We enjoy spirited discussions led by members of the class who facilitate the interaction.
- We represent a cross-section of the church, including all ages, both unmarried and married people.
- We strive to be prayerful and practical in our support of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley through direct involvement in various roles throughout the church.

- We welcome newcomers into the group and encourage them to be deeply rooted into the fellowship of SMS. We value our friendships with each other and enjoy frequent events and outings together.

The sections below expand upon this mission statement and add detail:

We enjoy spirited discussions led by members of the class who facilitate the interaction.

The discussions take the form of an inductive study run by “facilitators,” not “teachers.” I wrote the following notes to help facilitators. Not every facilitator followed them, nor was it required that they do. Variety is the spice of discussions.

Induction means to draw conclusions from evidence. Inductive Bible study proceeds through questions, not statements. The questions encourage participants to draw their own conclusions from evidence in the scriptures and from the culture (history, customs, etc.) of the scriptures’ original audience. As a teacher who has studied learning theory for decades, I can say that induction brings more meaningful lessons to the participants than simply explaining things, even if the explanations are interesting and lead to “break out” groups for discussion on the facts.

During an inductive discussion, which uses facts as fodder for each individual to draw their own conclusions, scripture is assumed to speak to each person individually, so every participant does not necessarily reach the exact same conclusions. Note that this is different from the strategy of making one’s prescriptive talk really long so there might be something in it for everyone. With induction, it’s a matter of assembling the conceptual pieces with different emphases. One caveat: though conclusions may differ, whether slightly or greatly, from one person to the next, they should all be justifiable by evidence found in the same text. So some conclusions might be challenged on that basis. And of course, many times, participants do reach the same conclusions.

The Facilitator

The “facilitator” structures and times the discussion on Sunday mornings, but not as an authority or leader. The instructor is the Holy Spirit, who teaches directly from scripture. That’s why inductive study should always begin with a prayer.

In general, the facilitator should prepare more than will actually be used in class, and not feel that it’s a wasted effort when the class does not get around to every detail that was prepared. This is not like preparing for a lecture. The facilitator might prepare like this:

- Read the passage in question, and maybe those before and after.
- Read it as if you’d never seen it before. Don’t try to make it mean what you’ve always thought it meant. Let scripture speak for itself.

- Look for the obvious – facts about people, places, events.
- Note the “function words” that structure the text, words like “*before*” or “*therefore*,” “*so*” or “*since*,” and so on. These relate one sentence to others.
- Take notes or write responses as you read.
- Look up names, places and maybe some word meanings in a reference book (or online), in order to know and be able to share relevant points of the cultural/historical/geographical context for understanding the passage.

The facilitator mainly leads through asking questions, but *some* new information, shared from reference books, may be useful, especially contextual information. But watch the pacing – supplying *all* of this contextual information might drag the lesson:

- Who wrote it, and when and where?
- Who exactly are the people that are mentioned in the text?
- Where are the locations mentioned in the text, and what are they like?
- When did the events mentioned in the text happen, and where do they fit into the general histories of Israel / Assyria / Babylonia / Rome, etc.?
- Who was the original intended audience for the text, and why do people think so?
- What are the cultural meanings of events in the text at the time the text was written?
- What are the English meanings of key Greek/Hebrew words?
- What objects mentioned in the text were familiar back then, but not today? What were they like?
- Which other Bible passages (perhaps found through cross-references) are relevant?

These fact-type questions are helpful to prepare the facilitator, but they are not good discussion questions for the group because their answers are simply right or wrong. These should simply be shared with the group. Such factual questions may start with *Which, where, who, when, define, list, name, how many, summarize, identify, tell what happened, etc.*

Discussion Questions

The Facilitator needs to plan some discussion questions. The best discussion questions have multiple correct answers, each answer supported from evidence in the Bible or from the culture of the time. They might start with *why, how, describe, explain, predict, arrange, speculate, compare/contrast, categorize, group, characterize, rate, give pro/cons, conclude, give an example, show why and what does this mean?*

So, for example, a facilitator could ask discussion questions like these:

- What is the meaning of the message?

- What are these people like?
- What is the author's purpose in saying this?
- Why would God want me to know this?
- Why did the author say so much (or so little) about this?
- Why did they take the actions that they did?
- How did it happen?

Here are some more specific questions that can serve as models:

- How is the priesthood of Jesus like that of Melchizedek?
- Why did Nebuchadnezzar fail to follow Daniel's advice?
- What was the people's reason for worshiping the golden calf?
- Was Gedaliah a true-hearted leader of Judah, or a puppet installed by Babylon?

Questions such as these provoke discussion, since participants may disagree about which of the multiple answers are the most significant. That's okay. It's also okay for facilitators follow up on these answers to ask what in the text led a discussion participant to come to a particular conclusion.

Other questions may examine the context and how it relates to the text:

- What can we tell from the text about the original audience?
- What would the original audience for the passage have understood by it?
- Is this statement meant to be understood universally, or only for those hearing it then?
- How does this passage fit with the rest of the chapter?
- Is it meant to be understood literally or figuratively?

Sometimes a facilitator thinks of a discussion question but doesn't know how to answer it. **Those are often the best questions to ask during the class discussion.** Remember, **the facilitator is not the authority.** The Bible is the authority. And all group members are active investigators, with knowledge and a valid point of view, which can be brought out with questions like these:

- What else in the Bible does this remind you of?
- What other passages address the same concerns?
Or even just:
 - What did you notice in this passage?"
 - What do you think of that?"

Encourage participants to re-live the story in the text, entering it emotionally as well as analytically, and identifying with the characters." Such discussion questions could include:

- What difference should this passage make in our lives?

- What decisions would you make which are in harmony with this text?
- How would you feel if.....
- When have you experienced anything like that?
- How does reading this passage make you feel?

And as always, follow up with **“What in this passage (or elsewhere in the Bible, or the historical conditions) brought you to that conclusion?”**

Leading Questions

Avoid “leading questions,” which lead the participants to some single predetermined conclusion. Leading questions can stifle discussions. A facilitator who thinks his conclusion is so important should just state it openly and let participants comment on that.

Compare and Contrast

Similarly, one can **compare and contrast** related passages. These can be located by using the cross references found in many Bibles. Sometimes such related passages may seem to contradict each other. The facilitator can invite the participants to resolve the contradiction. Of course, the Bible leaves some contradictions unresolved, such as free will vs. predestination.

I prefer to read complete passages and not just one or two verses at a time, because context is important. I think that when New Testament authors quoted or referred to a single verse from the Old Testament, they meant that verse to stand for an entire well-known passage. Like if we say, “The whale swallowed Jonah,” the entire story of Jonah is brought to mind.

On the other hand, to read lots of complete passages does take a lot of time. Maybe the facilitator could just summarize the related passages so there’s more time for discussion.

Using Reference Books to Help Plan a Discussion

Facilitators sometimes use reference books to help them prepare. More recently they may use online resources the same way. For example, I’ve used the Ray Stedman library of sermons, available at <https://www.raystedman.org/> There are many, many, many, many more. However, like with all things in the online world, one must carefully discern which are trustworthy. I trust the Stedman site both from reading what he has to say, and also from his reputation, as he was pastor of the well-known Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto.

References are mainly useful in the following areas:

- providing **context** to the text under discussion, which includes leads to related Bible passages.

- providing **answers to the fact-type questions** mentioned above, so we don't have to waste time wondering about them.
- **inspiring the facilitator to ask even more questions about the text**, questions he or she might not have thought of, without the challenge of an author's new perspectives.
- **organizing** a passage into themes or sections.
- Interlinear translations and concordances can be useful for **understanding the original Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic** meanings of various words in a passage

It is important, though, not to elevate the commentaries' importance above that of direct interaction with the Biblical text.

Various Styles of Presentation

Different facilitators should present lessons in different ways, since variety helps everyone. Most of these variations, by themselves, do not make a Bible study inductive or not.

For example, some facilitators read long chunks of Bible text, while others read more and shorter chunks. Some follow up with lots of cross-references, while others don't. Some present lots of background information, while others present it only when it's needed to clear up points as they come up.

Some facilitators are quite creative, presenting musical selections, works of art, or essays by well-known writers to compare with the passage under study. One of our facilitators often writes "pseudo-paraphrases," paraphrases of the passage under study that are derived from modern culture. Then we can compare / contrast the pseudo-paraphrase with the actual Biblical passages.

Sometimes facilitators have had the group split up into smaller discussion groups and report back.

How does a facilitator moderate the discussion?

During the discussion, the facilitator provides background and other context, assigns reading, displays chart, maps, and illustrations, and asks questions.

Remember, what's important is not that the facilitator talk, but that others feel invited to talk, and have space to do so. Ideally, except for when presenting background information, the facilitator should talk no more than anybody else.

Don't forget the applications to present-day life. Some participants might find them obvious, but others not so clear. In any case, no single person will come up with as many applications as the whole group.

Finally, **facilitators must keep an eye on the clock.** They are probably not going

to get to everything, particularly if they heed the admonishment to over-prepare. To end on time shows respect towards the other group members.

Also, there's only so much that participants will actually remember from a lesson, so extending it longer is mostly a waste of time. Remember, no matter how long or short the Biblical passage is, one could present it in 30 minutes, 60 minutes, 90 minutes, or 120 minutes, or longer, just with differing levels of detail.

In general, the facilitator can control the time simply by ending discussion periods or letting them run further. And if a facilitator has an important discussion to hold about the final verses of a passage, they should basically skip discussing other verses in order to get to it early enough to discuss it.

Further model discussion questions

Since questions are the essence of an inductive study, here are a few more sample questions which have more than one correct answer:

- What are these people like?
- What is the meaning of the message?
- What's the author's purpose in writing that?
- What points about God are we meant to understand here?
- Why did the author give so much detail / say so little about this?
- What literary or theological themes do you see? How are these themes used to make points?
- What are the logical implications of that statement?
- What does the person in the story seem to believe about the situation?
- Was that person's decision expedient or wise?
- How do the various translations of verse 5 affect the meaning?
- If that person had not been there, how would the situation have been different?
- Why might God have chosen this person at this time?
- What other stories in the Bible are like this one?
- What other stories in the Bible seem to contradict the message of this one?
- What can we tell **from the text** about the original audience?
- How does this passage fit with the rest of the text?
- Can you paraphrase the main points in the text?
- How would you summarize the main points in the text?
- How does this passage relate to the sermon we heard this morning (or the speaker's message at the retreat last month?)

Besides questions that focus exclusively on the text, here are some sample questions of application and speculation, which only partially connect to the

text, but which may still be relevant to personal applications and people's own lives.

- If the author states a "sacrifice of praise," then how is praise a sacrifice?
- If Paul advises sacrificing one's freedom for the sake of weaker Christians, how much freedom should be sacrificed?
- What sort of modern situation is like this one?
- Why might God speak to people in dreams / visions rather than burning bushes?
- What exactly is the spiritual meaning of Babylon?
- Is this statement meant to be understood universally, or is it specific for the original audience?
- Is this statement meant to be understood literally or figuratively?
- How do we seek the Lord in such cases?
- What decisions would you make which are in harmony with this text?
- Was the person in the text justified in the actions they took?
- How would you feel if that happened to you?
- What experiences have you had like that one?
- How does reading this passage make you feel?
- What example does this text provide for our lives?

Such questions are important, in that they may have direct applications to people's lives, but at the same time, it's important not to let the discussion devolve into simple opinions based on non-Biblical sources, or to stray too far from the topic at hand. It's up to the facilitator to make sure that they don't.

Scheduling

SMS normally studies one book at a time, reading through it from start to finish. We generally alternate between an Old Testament book and a New Testament book. Here is the schedule for the latest book that we have studied, Genesis. It demonstrates about how long a passage we might study each day.

| | | |
|-------------|--------------------|--|
| 30 May 2021 | Chris Corwin | Introduction to Genesis |
| 06 Jun 2021 | Craig 1:1-2:3 | In the Beginning |
| 13 Jun 2021 | Susan 2:4-2:25 | Man and Woman |
| 20 Jun 2021 | Paul 3 | The first sin and its punishment: expulsion from Eden |
| 27 Jun 2021 | Tim 4:1-5:27 | The descendants of Adam and Eve up to Noah |
| 04 Jul 2021 | Chris O. 5:28-7:24 | The Nephilim; Noah and the Flood |
| 11 Jul 2021 | Linda 8-10 | The flood subsides; Noah makes a covenant with God |
| 18 Jul 2021 | Craig 11-12 | Tower of Babel; Abram is called and goes to Egypt. |
| 25 Jul 2021 | Tim | Special Topic: Christianity and the environment |
| 01 Aug 2021 | Stella 13-14 | Abram and Lot; Melchizedek blesses Abram |
| 08 Aug 2021 | Joe 15-16 | Abram's covenant with God; Hagar and Ishmael |
| 15 Aug 2021 | Joe 17:1-18:15 | The sign of the covenant; Abraham and Sarah |

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|-------------|-----------|-------------|---|
| 22 Aug 2021 | Craig | 18:16-19:38 | Sodom and Gomorrah; Lot and his daughters |
| 29 Aug 2021 | Linda | 20-21 | Abimelech; Isaac born; Hagar and Ishmael exiled |
| 05 Sep 2021 | Susan | 22-23 | Isaac "sacrificed"; Death and Burial of Sarah |
| 12 Sep 2021 | Linda | 24 | Isaac and Rebekah marry |
| 19 Sep 2021 | Paul | 25 | Abraham remarries; His death; Jacob and Esau |
| 26 Sep 2021 | Joe | | Special Topic: Mental Health |
| 03 Oct 2021 | Tim | 26 | Isaac and Abimelech; Esau marries a Hittite woman |
| 10 Oct 2021 | Stella | 46 | Esau is betrayed by Rebekah and Jacob; Jacob flees |
| 17 Oct 2021 | Susan | 28-29 | Jacob goes to Laban and marries Leah and Rachel |
| 24 Oct 2021 | Joe | 30 | Jacob prospers and has many sons including Joseph |
| 31 Oct 2021 | Craig | 31:1-32:2 | Jacob flees Laban, but makes a covenant with him |
| 07 Nov 2021 | Linda | 32:3-33:20 | Jacob meets Esau and wrestles with God |
| 14 Nov 2021 | Paul | 34 | Jacob's daughter Dinah raped; her brothers' revenge |
| 21 Nov 2021 | Stella | 35 | Jacob wrestles God and is welcomed home by Esau |
| 28 Nov 2021 | Tim | | Special Topic: Patriarchs behaving badly |
| 05 Dec 2021 | Susan | 36-37 | Esau's clan; Joseph betrayed and sold to Egypt |
| 12 Dec 2021 | Linda | 38-39 | Judah and Tamar; Joseph and Potiphar's wife |
| 19 Dec 2021 | Don Louie | | Special Topic: Difficult Bible passages |
| 26 Dec 2021 | Christmas | | – no meeting |
| 02 Jan 2022 | Linda | 40:1-41:45 | Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream and gets powerful |
| 09 Jan 2022 | Chris O. | 41:46-42:38 | Joseph saves Egypt and reconnects with his family |
| 16 Jan 2022 | Tim | 43:1-45:15 | Joseph and his brothers are reconciled |
| 23 Jan 2022 | Paul | 45:16-47:12 | Jacob/Israel brings his whole family to Egypt |
| 30 Jan 2022 | Mike | 47:13-48:22 | Famine in Egypt; Last days of Jacob. |
| 06 Feb 2022 | Joe | 49-50 | Jacob dies and is buried in Canaan; Joseph dies |
| 13 Feb 2022 | Everyone: | | Reflections on Genesis |

Note that most Sundays we study one or two chapters. On rare occasions, we have presented a Bible book's passages in a different order than just start to end. For example, the last time we studied Psalms, we presented groups of Psalms by theme.

Also note that we occasionally have "special topics" that may or may not be directly related to the book that we're studying. They are presented by members who have an interest in / knowledge of that topic. Recently I have presented special topics on Christianity in China, the Taizé Community in France, and what "culture" is in the first place. In the past, we've even had pastoral staff present a special topic.

The purpose of the special topics is to stir things up a bit so we don't get stuck in a rut. But also, they're interesting in their own right.

Note, too, that we meet every week of the year, with only a couple exceptions for Christmas and Easter. It's nice to have a fellowship group that one can depend upon to consistently meet.

We represent a cross-section of the church, including all ages, both unmarried and married people.

This statement was much more true when I first joined SMS in 1994 and we had 55 members. At that time, in addition to the diversity of married and unmarried people, we also had age diversity, from college aged to grey hairs, weighted towards early middle-aged people. Many members, both married and unmarried, had families. Ethnically, we included members whose family background was Euro-American, Asian-American, African-American, Jewish and even one member from India. For a significant time, we also had members who were homosexual and members who were deaf (one of our members interpreted sign for them). We even had a Muslim member for a few weeks.

This diversity obviously will deepen any inductive study, but more than that, it means that whatever station one is in life, there's more likely to be somebody already in the group that they can identify with. Indeed, SMS seems to have always had a revolving door of members joining and leaving, to the point that a large proportion of the lay leadership in the church was SMS members or former members.

As time passed, SMS has shrunk. Partly this occurred through people moving away from the Bay Area, and some may have occurred when a homeless, but mentally challenged, man joined the group, but much of it occurred as parents were increasingly required to help out in the Sunday morning child care, which kept them from also attending SMS. There were also some difficult situations with a few members (that I don't want to detail here) that affected the leadership of the group, who then left SMS. Also, some members left in order to forge or maintain relationships with members of other groups.

In any case, the group shrank, particularly losing the middle-aged members. Eventually our last college student left just a few years ago, and now the members are growing rather elderly.

Watching this shrinkage, I was sure that the group would shrink to nothing about fifteen years ago when there were only about a dozen members left. But interestingly, the shrinkage seemed to have been stemmed, and it has remained around a dozen (not necessarily the same dozen) for quite a while. Up to that point I had been worried about the group's future, but this development reminded me that it's not my group, but God's, and if he wants it to continue, even with a smaller population, than that's what's going to happen. So I don't worry about it so much anymore. And who knows, perhaps it will grow again to fifty someday. That's not impossible, either.

In the old days, we elected officers annually, with the stipulation that nobody could

be an officer for two years in a row.

Here are the officer positions from 2005:

- Chairperson/Host
- Prayer Coordinator
- Snack Coordinator (we had snacks for each lesson)
- Room Set-up
- Teaching Coordinator
- Publicity
- Missions and Fellowship
- Treasurer

As the group shrank, the need for so many officers also diminished, and it became impractical to limit their terms to just one year. (sigh).

We strive to be prayerful and practical in our support of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley through direct involvement in various roles throughout the church.

When SMS was larger and more middle-aged, we were involved in a quite a variety of church functions. It's important to do that, not only for their own sake, but also so SMS does not become its own separate and self-contained group.

So, for example, members have been deacons. They have sung in the church choir. Every month or so a contingent of SMS members handled the "homeless meal," and in fact one of our members was involved in coordinating that meal and presenting a Bible study after the meal to those who wished to attend. Some of us served as ushers and helped distribute communion. We coordinated with other fellowship groups to participate in Habitat for Humanity. We always presented a charity at the annual Christmastime "Gift World." One of our members started a charity called "Love, Inc." which aimed to help poor and homeless people in the area, which many of us participated in.

One of our members coordinated a weekly "culture class" at First Pres. for foreign students. Most of these students were from China. The class leadership always needed help coming up with presentations or helping out on weekend field trips.

For many years we had a "prayer chain," where members could request prayer, and the request was efficiently spread by telephone to other people in the chain.

I myself participated in almost all of the activities mentioned above, which means there might have been many others which I just didn't know about. Also, I played keyboards most weeks at the afternoon "5:45" service.

We welcome newcomers into the group and encourage them to be deeply rooted into the fellowship of SMS. We value our friendships with each other and enjoy frequent events and outings together.

I often thought that SMS was an almost ideal gateway to First Presbyterian Church, particularly back when the group was larger, not only because of the diversity within the group, but also because we had so many social activities back then.

One rather unique activity was called “Supper for Six.” Three or four members would volunteer to host a pot luck dinner at their respective homes for five other members, all on a particular date. Sign-up sheets were passed around during class. Six members around a table seemed the ideal size for even shy people to get to know others and get to be known to them.

Other common social activities included:

- Superbowl parties (mainly to watch the commercials)
- Movie Nights
- Go out to a concert (three of our members were professional musicians)
- Easter Brunch
- Meet at *The Coffee Source* or *The Musical Offering* for snacks and conversation after SMS (this was before First Pres started serving lunches.)
- “Spontaneous” lunches after SMS
- Graduation Parties for SMS members who had recently graduated.
- Potluck after class to honor newlyweds
- Dinner after the Tenebrae Service
- Hikes at Tilden Park and San Bruno Mountain and other places
- Annual Fourth of July Party
- Annual Christmas Party
- Foray to the Chinese New Year’s Parade

And of course, we also participated in all the concerts and social activities organized by First Pres.

Finally, early every autumn (or thereabouts), we held a day-long retreat. Sometimes it would take place at a members house, and occasionally at a community center of some sort. It would be a time a reflection, and also planning. Usually at least one member of First Pres’s pastoral staff would attend and speak.

I still have the schedule for the 2004 meeting, which took place in July, 2004:

SMS (Sunday Morning Study) Retreat
At Jenny Henke’s Home

Saturday, July 17, 2004, 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Schedule

9:00 a.m. Coffee, juice, pastries, fruit

Ice- Breaker: Name tags of Bible characters on each person's back, they must get clues from others to guess who they are.

9:30 a.m. Get acquainted: Game of "Switch," led by Kat

10:00 a.m. Meet Josh McPaul

10:10 a.m. SMS re-evaluation, priorities, moderated by Josh McPaul

- what is working, what isn't working
- identify priorities of focus (Mission Statement)
- identify priorities for supporting SMS
- identify leadership positions needed and the respective responsibilities
- identify individuals for those positions

12:00 p.m. Lunch: assemble your own sandwich, salad, fruit, drinks, cookies (Costco)

12:45 p.m. "Prodigal Son Improvisation," Jenny Henke

1:15 p.m. Discussion on how to prepare to lead a Bible study, Paul MacFarlane leads

2:15 p.m. Break

2:30 p.m. Prayer

3:00 p.m. Clean up

I also have video of retreats from a couple other years which supply many more details of what we typically did for a retreat back then. And of course, the retreat specifics as well as the length of the day varied rather widely from one year to the next.

To conclude

I hope this letter is a clear introduction to what Sunday Morning Study is, and what it can be. SMS has been by far the most meaningful Bible study that I have encountered on my Christian walk. It is my hope that someday more people will be able to experience what Inductive Bible Study and Fellowship can do for theirs.