InterVarsity
SCRIPTURE ENGAGEMENT

# THE "ROSS LETTER"

## *Paul Byer's Account of How Manuscript Bible Study Developed and Its Significance*

**Ross wrote from Australia:**

I knew that Manuscript Discovery originated in the U.S. but I did not have any contacts there. I would be grateful if you could take time to write to tell me of the style of Manuscript Discovery (Manu. Disc.) that has developed since the movement first began. The matters of interest are:

1. The how and when to the different Manu. Disc. programs that are different in the U.S.
2. Is it mainly a West Coast phenomenon? If not, how widespread is it?
3. To what extent are people committed to Manu. Disc. as a future direction for understanding scripture?
4. To what extent has Manu. Disc. percolated into congregations?
5. Are there any of the Bible publications aware of Manu. Disc.? What are the prospects of a loose leaf A4 Manuscript Bible being produced?
6. What is the range of Manu. Disc. materials presently available from IVCF in Pasadena?
7. What arrangement has been made in regard to copyright?
8. Any other material of interest.

I hope you will be able to write to help in spreading the concept as far as possible.

Kind regards,
Ross P.

**Paul Byer's response, October 1986 (revised February 1987):**

Dear Ross,

This is not a very speedy reply to your letter of August 11th regarding Manuscript Bible Study. I was in Southeast and South Asia for five months, March 15 to August 17th; since getting back it has been hard to get caught up.

My trip took me 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 Manuscript Bible Studies (MBS), at their invitation. Sometimes it was just an all day affair, or a series of evenings, but more often it was in one of their training conferences where I would have 2 hours or up to 4 hours each day for five or six days. But that was still not what I like best, which is to have the students for 6 days, and have sessions morning, afternoon, and evening. In this time we cover the first half of Mark and do the second half in a later week. On a local campus, or with a church, we do what is called a "Bible Dig-in", which is 2 1⁄2 to 3 hours Friday night, and perhaps 7 hours on Saturday. Some of the books and

passages which fit this time period, and which have good content, are Habakkuk, Amos, Jonah, Exodus 32-34, Mark 1-3, Philippians, etc.

We had the first manuscript study back in 1953, or 1954, and we did Colossians at The Firs, a conference center in Bellingham, Washington. I had studied Architecture at the university, and then came on InterVarsity staff. In my personal Bible study I used a pencil to mark up the text, and 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 in 2 Corinthians) and then I could put each page face up and work right through the whole text. So I did this, and discovered that this opened up meaning, as the internal structure and relationships within the text became apparent, and thus Paul's whole letter took on new meaning.

I shared this with my co-worker, and she said, "Let's do this with students." We decided on the "manuscript format" rather than cutting out pages, and mimeographed Colossians, and studied in the mornings and afternoons for five days. It proved to be a significant time for those of us involved and we continued this format once or twice a year with other 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 now do, but took 1 1⁄2 hours for the daily small group Bible study. This was helpful, and the students seemed to get more from the text in this manuscript format, but in hindsight, we now know we had not yet discovered the full potential of the tool we were 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, working directly with students, but with a specialty in Bible study. So that summer 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 beyond the first half of the book, but that study of the manuscript of Mark opened up my understanding 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 just had 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. The pages are only printed on one side. When placed out on a table side by side the whole section of the text we are working with becomes visible. Thus we could not pick or choose, isolating our "key passage" and treating it special. Each part of the text was now expected to have significance, and so the meaning of each part, or paragraph, had to make sense, contributing something to the whole theme that was being developed. This is the way we write, and it was reasonable to believe it was 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 as we have it is a unified whole, and an even stronger sense that we were in touch with what the author wanted it 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 using our common basic knowledge of how we understand what we hear and read. 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 data 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 data from the text, and show that there is a better meaning than the one you proposed. This happened to me more than once.

What is the sequence, the procedure that develops such a study?

First each person spends a block of time in personal study of the manuscript formatted text. This is primarily the time for careful reading, for making observations of what the text is saying and how it is saying it. Look for special words, repeated words, how the sentences fit together, and especially note any surprises in the flow of words and ideas. Allow questions that come out of the text to surface, noting them in the margins. As you encounter words, or personal and proper nouns that you are not familiar with, use special tools, like English and Bible dictionaries, to determine their meaning. When you encounter a word, or phrase, that makes you wonder if the writer might be bringing it into his text from an earlier biblical usage, use an analytical concordance to see if you can uncover its earlier usage, and how it impacts the passage under study.

Because the text format is like a work book/study manual, it can be freely marked up, with pen or pencil, but usually with colored markers as well. Why is this encouraged? Well, at the beginning level, just because it is fun! But the colors in themselves are not so significant, but their use does draw the student into the text, to look at it more carefully, and in the process of marking it up, to discover how it is put together. This active use of pen and marker helps in becoming an active reader and so creates an active interest in uncovering the meaning of the text. This encourages the student to participate with others in digging into the text to find its meaning. It also seems to put a deeper imprint of the text upon the mind, so that in future study and discussion recall is more easily made to support or challenge a proposed meaning.

Second 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 of 3 to 5 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. This small group discussion makes them an active participant in the group process. Even though they may not participate in the

large group discussion that follows, they have thus already declared their interest in the text and so follow the discussion, prepared to respond as new meaning is determined.

Third is a discussion where the leader, usually starting at the beginning of the passage under study and moving through it, gathers comments and questions about the text from anyone in the study, and in dialogue develops the probable meaning that is being uncovered. 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 data in the text as meaning is determined. There have to be limits on time but usually all comments and questions need to be accepted and dealt with on the basis of the data in the text. Such fairness and openness takes time but it shows that we have confidence that the text can be understood, and it does make sense as it stands if we allow it to speak. In the end the main points that the text is making should be reviewed. Of course it is easier if the leader has been through the text before, and has an idea of what is there. Bu this is not always possible, and was not the case the first time through Mark. But the fact that we were all in the study together, and working together, produced an unusual dynamic as we encountered sections we just did not understand. The time would come when we would leave them and go on, but this was done with the expectation that new insights would come. And they did.

I am emphasizing the use of tools and technique. Every craftsman has good tools, values them, and knows how to use them, but tools alone do not get the work done. It is the person, his integrity, his desire, his effort; and in Bible study, it is the leader's faith, prayer, love and obedience to the Lord and His Word that cannot be separated from the methods of study.

Teaching is a spiritual gift, and as a spiritual ministry there is accountability first to the Lord who has given the gift, then to the fellowship where it is used, and then to those who want to learn. Most anyone involved in a manuscript study, who develops some skill in the process, may begin to lead a study with others. Their ability can be developed with use, effort, evaluation and prayer. But actually a teacher should be compared with an artist, or as above, with a craftsman, or as suggested by some, as a mountaineer (See separate paper). But how are master teachers developed? First, a sense of call from the Lord to step out and begin. Second, a confirmation by others that there is some gift, some ability to fulfill the calling. Third, the motivation to put in the effort in preparation, to work through the risk and experience of failure, to put in the time of repeated experience, until the necessary skills become second nature. But finally what gives such motivation? It must be the deep joy of seeing the aliveness, of hearing the "Wow"s, of seeing the changed lives that come to people who have a new or fresh encounter with the Living Lord in His Word.

All of this leads to consider how the study impacts the students.

First is that in the study we are teaching students how to study, how to think, how to question and form conclusions from the biblical text. This is as foundational for a life with God as a biblical Christian as the truth is that comes from the text. In fact, it is the safeguard that what is taken from the text is true.

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 among their friends.

Fourth, usually there is one or more special places where the truth of the text breaks in upon them, and they are now aware that a particular change in actions, values, or relationships are called for. These calls to new obedience often surface and are shared and prayed about in the closing time with the small group, both daily, and at the final session of the study.

Of course we didn't learn all that I have discussed above in that 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 when used in times of concentrated study of blocks of Scripture. And as teachers we learned that as we would teach through a passage several times with different groups, it would keep opening up to us, but the students in the earlier group never felt cheated, for what they had learned was not just the content, but the attitude that there was always more to be learned. So they would often ask us what we were learning since they had studies with us. We repeated these studies in the first half of Mark, and as word about the studies spread, the numbers grew. But then requests for a study that would go on into 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 teaching sections, and more 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 come together like the first half.

But we learned two basic things in these Mark 2 studies. First, not to give up, for with repeated observation, and questions, and discussion with new people over a period of time, we did make breakthroughs like we had in the first half. Second, do not attempt to teach meaning, or understanding of the text, that you can not support by the data you see in the text. Don't teach the notes you put on your manuscript when someone else taught it, and don't teach the summary from a commentary, unless the data that supports it is clear to you. In other words, don't fake it. The validity of the method must be supported by the integrity of the leader. If to say, "I know what the text is really saying here", is the only truthful statement you can make, then make it. The study will only go forward on truth, not pretense, and you as the leader must be the first one to believe this and live it out.

At first the staff involved in these early beginning were from the West Coast, but in the 70's staff joined us from elsewhere in 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 made the point that anyone who had been through a study should be able to turn around and lead a small group through the same text. Personally I knew that not everyone would, or perhaps could do this, but if many would try, we would find teachers. This is the way it has worked.

Beyond this I have not set up certain 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 the use of the procedures outlined above, 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 methodology and content. The method must first work for those who teach it.

The main emphasis of MBS has been on the West Coast, but it is also used in many places across the country where I have not been, and taught by leaders that I do not know. It is my conviction that if a tool is to really be effective and helpful in a movement like InterVarsity, 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. It may not be needed or helpful. I work on an invitation basis. As staff change, the cycle of the use of MBS may rise or fall. That may be of no consequence. But one thing is sure. The use of Scripture in any work of God is foundational, and not optional. And for some MBS is a tool which does prove useful.

About twelve years ago I was asked by students to teach a course at Fuller Seminary, and it was subsequently approved by the curriculum committee. It is called “Campus Bible Study” and has simply been a MBS of Mark, with the same methodology I use with students. (The content is not being changed). The class is usually a mixed group, some entering students, some just ready to graduate. I teach the class first, to test the credibility of the methodology. If it proves to be a useful tool for them, it should also have value in the university community which is my primary audience. I teach, secondly, because many of these seminary students will be asked to lead studies with students and young adults in the near future, and some do not have a tested method to start with. If I can give them a method and a model which they can use it may help prepare some students for ministry on the campus. And MBS has been helpful in many churches where these students have used it.

Our manuscripts, as listed on the order form, are all from the RSV text. Its copyright is held by the National Council of Churches (USA). We have secured permission to print the text in our format, and report to them the number of copies of each biblical book or passage produced. I do not know if any other agency in the country is producing the text in a similar format, but I have not come across one. Our sales total around $12,000 (US) per year. So far we have kept the duplication and distribution local, to keep overhead down, and thus the price as low as possible.

From time to time questions come up about the best translation to use in MBS. If people want to prepare their own text and get permission they can use whichever one they wish. We started with RSV because at that time we believed it to be the best, and it was then widely used among students. Since then many other translations have appeared. Some have suggested we switch to the NIV. We have tried the NIV, and other versions, but so far, I and most of the other staff who teach, come back to the RSV. For one thing its consistency of translating a Greek word with the same English word is more than some other translations. This is especially helpful as we look for textual clues to uncover the author’s primary topic. Of course, the RSV is not perfect, and there are places where the leader may need to make

comments on the text itself, and encourage students to do their own checking as they are able to use various tools. But we want those in the studies to know that we put our essential trust in a commonly used English text, and that we do not rely upon a special class of scholars, apart from translators, to tell us the meaning of that text.

At the same time we do not want to devalue good scholarship and its contributions to textual understanding. Commentaries can and should be used, especially by leaders, and also by students, but in both cases, after, and not before personal work has been done on the text, and preferably after the text has been discussed with a group.

Thus the three checks against interpretive error are, first, the study of the biblical text within its context, which is usually the study of a book, or a major section of it, to best determine the author's intended meaning. Second, to review personal study of the biblical text in a hermeneutical community of peers, which does not stifle the individual from developing her/his own reasoned interpretation, but at the same time, is prepared to challenge each one if the interpretation does not fit the data of the text. And third, a final check with informed scholarship, which is simply enlarging the hermeneutical community. But care must still be taken to determine, if possible, the presuppositions others work from, and the immediate data that supports their conclusions within the text.

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***Photo of Paul Byer:***