

BIBLE STUDY METHODS

The Word-cluster Method¹

The goal of the Word-cluster method is for the truth and power of God's Word to change our lives. In addition to a formal study of the Scriptures, we need to do some old-fashioned soul searching along the way.

The word-cluster method, when used in addition to a word or topical study, can accomplish three tasks. First, it will help you generate a personal, expanded definition of the word or topic. Second, it represents your personal and historical relationship with the word. Third, it can help you identify any "unofficial" definitions of the word you may have. These definitions often go unchallenged, in spirit of the fact that they color your perception of Scripture and of life.

A word-cluster opens up your heart, like study opens up the Scriptures. Here is how it works.

Select a word.

Select a word before you begin your in-depth Bible study. This way you get a better understanding of what your thinking really is without being biased by the "right answer." You will need to be vulnerable and honest as you do this exercise. If you are doing a word study, you already have your starter word. A variation is to select a word that seems the opposite of the word you intend to study. If you are doing a topical study, there are key words that permeate the topic. Select one or two of these as starter words.

Now cluster.

- 1. Write the starter word in the center of your page and put a box around it.** Turn off your internal censors, editors, and judgments. (This is hard for those of us who need to be proper in the way we do things.) What ends up on paper should be equal to what is going on in your thinking.
- 2. Looking at your starter word, what is the first word or phrase that comes to mind?** Write it down close to the starter word and circle it. Draw a line connecting it to your starter word. What does this second word cause you to think of? Write it down, circle it, and connect it to the word before. This is called a thought-line. It may follow a straight-line or it may look like a tree branching out all over the page. The form is not important. Continue this way until you can go no further. I chose the word *authority* for a real exercise. Sample #1 below shows how my word-cluster began to take shape.
- 3. Go back to your starter word and begin this process again.** Add a new thought-line of words that occur spontaneously. You can go back to previous thought-lines or individual words at any time and add on. Your page will begin to look like a web of thought-lines.

¹ Slightly modified. The Word-cluster Method by Tim Sanford, Discipleship Journal, 91, 1996. (p. 20-21)

Feel free to put thoughts wherever they seem to fit. Don't over-analyze, just jot them down. There will be time to check for accuracy later.

Take your time. Do not force words or thoughts but allow enough time for thoughts to develop. You will know you are finished when you fill the page, or you run out of ideas. I usually go a minimum of 15 minutes before I consider myself finished. Look at the word-cluster now (sample #2). Notice how it developed in several different (and unexpected) directions.

Survey your cluster.

1. Once you have completed your word-cluster, take time to sit back and survey your handiwork. Ask yourself questions such as:
 - Do any patterns emerge?
 - Do any comments surprise me/
 - Are there comments or words that seem to be missing from my paper (e.g., emotion words)? Why?
 - What observations can I make from this exercise?
 - What life experiences play a part in the thoughts represented on my paper?
2. Based on what is in front of you, write a personalized definition of the word. Pull it directly from your word-cluster (not from a dictionary). Write it down. After you have asked all the question, and have written down your own definition, put your paper away. You will come back to it later.

Complete your in-depth study.

Now proceed with your word or topical study as you normally would ...

Open your heart.

After you have completed your Bible study of the word or topic, pull out your word-cluster paper and set it beside your study notes. Ask God to speak to you about this subject. Compare the study notes with your word-cluster paper. Make some observations. Are there some marked differences? Are there some blind spots? Are there thoughts that match up? Is what you say you believe actually the same as what your word-cluster reveals? How can your personal definition of the word better match the scriptural meaning?

By using traditional Bible study methods and the word-cluster method, you not only gain an understanding of the scriptural meaning of the word, you also get a concrete way of looking at what you actually believe. You see how your beliefs match up with Scripture, and you expose areas where they may not. This method moves you from studying to soul searching. It will help you align your thinking with Scripture.