

How to Create and Lead Participatory Bible Studies

1. Preparing to Lead a Bible Study

The purpose of participatory Bible study is to encourage a group to engage together with a passage of scripture, to hear from God and take action. The following guidelines can be used to help prepare a study from any Bible passage within a small group setting. There are three basic areas to consider when preparing and leading a Bible study:

- ❖ **Observation** - Looking closely at what you see in the passage
- ❖ **Interpretation** - Interpreting what the passage means
- ❖ **Application** - Applying the passage to your life so that you can respond

Before leading the group to engage with the passage together it is important to spend some time in preparation. The main purpose of the preparation time is to familiarise yourself with the passage and to think of some study questions for the group to use together.

A. Read and Observe the Passage

- Choose a passage that you would like the group to discuss. If there is a specific topic that you need the Bible study to cover then think carefully about which passages would be suitable. If you need help finding a suitable passage you may like to use a concordance or online Bible search tool.
- Be open to being challenged about any preconceived ideas you have about what the passage says. Spend some time carefully reading and reflecting on it. Try to examine the main focus of the passage before looking at the detail.
- The first stage is to try to see what is there. Re-read the passage several times. *What questions arise when reading the passage? What do you not understand? What stands out for you?* Make note of observations of what you see and of any questions you have.
- Try not to look at any secondary material before you have spent time carefully examining the passage itself. If there are any words that you do not understand use a Bible dictionary.
- Think of some questions that can help the group to observe what the passage is saying.

B. Interpret the Passage

- After observing and understanding the facts in the passage, the need is to interpret them so that we know the original meaning the author was seeking to convey.
- To interpret a passage it is helpful to understand some background in which it was written. *Who wrote it? When and to whom was it written to? What is it saying? Why do you think the writer said this? What did it mean to the people then?* etc.
- Try to understand the context of the passage within the book itself and in relation to the rest of the Bible. Interpret scripture with scripture. Look for other similar passages to help you to understand what this passage is saying. To do this use an online Bible search facility, cross-reference Bible or a concordance
- If you need help in interpreting the passage consult some Bible commentaries to see what other commentators have said.
- Note some questions that will help people to understand and interpret the passage.

C. Apply the Passage

- After coming to an understanding of what the passage means we need to know what it is saying to us personally
- It is important to look at our own lives and see if we are doing what the Bible teaches. The following questions may be asked: *How does what this text says apply to me? How can I respond to it now? In what ways do I need to change?*
- Think of some specific questions that will invite others to discuss how the passage applies to their own lives.

In summary, before leading the Bible study try to do the following:

- ✓ *Spend time carefully reflecting on the passage and look to interpret it in its proper literary and historical context*
- ✓ *Try to have some understanding of what the passage says and what it is saying to us now*
- ✓ *Think about how the passage applies to your life and allow it to challenge you*
- ✓ *Prepare a series of questions for the group that will invite them to observe, interpret and apply the passage for themselves*
- ✓ *Make a note of observations and questions to jot your memory as you lead the study*

Helpful Tools for Preparing to Lead a Bible Study

Search Tools

- *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* and *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: 21st Century* are both exhaustive concordances that alphabetically list every occurrence of each word that appears in the Bible.
- www.biblegateway.com is an excellent site that allows you to look up bible passages in a variety of different translations. The site also allows you to search the Bible by 'keyword' and by topic.

Bible Dictionaries

- There are a number of excellent one volume Bible dictionaries available. Notable ones include the *IVP New Bible Dictionary* (ed. by Howard Marshall et al.) published by Inter Varsity Press, and *Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. David Freedman) published by Eerdmans
- If you are looking for more in-depth background information then you may like to look at the individual volumes within the *IVP Bible Dictionary Series*, published by Inter Varsity Press. Articles cover a wide range of biblical themes, significant historical or cultural background, and each Old and New Testament book as a whole.

Bible Commentaries

- There are a variety of different Bible commentaries series available. A helpful website to look at is www.bestcommentaries.com which provides recommendations on different types of commentaries, and also provides updates on new commentaries being released.
- To help select the most suitable commentary you may also like to look at *Old Testament Commentary Survey* by Tremper Longman and *New Testament Commentary Survey* by D. A. Carson, both published by

Baker Press. These books provide helpful recommendations on the best individual Bible commentaries available.

Pre-Written Bible Studies

- Tearfund has collectively republished a number of individual Bible studies from its Footsteps publication in *Guide Our Steps*. Bible studies from all of Tearfund's publications are available online at: <http://tilz.tearfund.org/en/resources/>
- The *Knowing the Bible* series (ed. J. I. Packer) published by Crossway is a collection of group Bible studies going through every book of the Bible.
- *Good Book Guides* (ed. Tim Chester), published by the Good Book Company, are an expanding range of Bible studies. They seek not only to uncover the meaning of the passage but also to lead people to apply what they have learnt.

2. Leading the Bible Study

A. Start with an introduction

- Introduce the main topic within the passage. Be clear about the main aim of the study.
- You may like to share some background about the passage that you will be looking at.

B. Read the passage

- Read through the passage slowly so that people are given time to absorb what it is saying
- You may like to ask someone else to read the passage

C. Encourage group to share and discuss

- Invite others in the group to respond to the passage
- Ask specific questions about the passage that will encourage others to discuss how to *understand*, *interpret* and *apply* it themselves
- Share some of the things that you have learned from the time you have spent looking at the passage.

D. Conclusion

- Summarise some of the main points of discussion
- Encourage participants to reflect more on the meaning of the text and to put what they have learnt into action

Helpful Tips for Facilitating Bible Study Groups

- *Try to keep the group size between 4 and 12. If groups are bigger than this there is less opportunity for everyone to join in the discussion.*
- *It is important that the facilitator spends time examining the passage beforehand so that they are able to help the group to understand it better. This does not mean they should use the group as an opportunity to share everything they have learnt. If they do, people may feel that what they have to say is not as valuable because they do not know as much as the facilitator.*

- *Encourage people to pray and ask for God's help before they begin the study. Finish by thanking God for what has been learnt and ask for help in applying the learning in everyday life.*
- *Try to ask open questions about the passage of scripture that will encourage people to engage together with what it is saying. Always try to keep the conversation going.*
- *The purpose of the Bible study is to engage with the passage in order to seek what God is saying in it, and to let those truths affect our lives as a result. Try to make sure there is a good balance in the discussion between understanding what the passage is saying and applying the passage.*
- *The facilitator should make sure that no-one dominates the discussion. Encourage those who are quiet to share their views, but recognize that some people may prefer to listen and think about what is being said rather than speak.*
- *Be encouraging and create a safe place for discussion. It is important that everyone feels comfortable to be able to share their thoughts on the passage. People need to know that they are valued and that what they say will be heard. This does not mean that each person's comments will be equally true and helpful. If the discussion moves too far away from engaging with the biblical passage then the facilitator needs to steer it back.*