

## How to Teach the Bible in a Small Group<sup>i</sup>

- **Begin with good Bible study.**

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” 2 Tim.2: 15.

Teaching the Bible begins with careful study and proper interpretation. According to Paul, we must aim at “correctly handling” God’s Word, which implies that it is possible to handle it incorrectly. If we are not careful in our study and preparation, what we teach will be incorrect, unhelpful and perhaps even harmful.

- **Careful study of God’s Word is basically a two-part process:**

**Exegesis** is the process of determining what the text we are studying originally meant. We want to answer these questions: What was the author originally trying to communicate? How would the original hearers have understood it?

**Hermeneutics** is the process of determining what the text means for us today. Answer this question: How should we apply the truth from the passage to our particular life situations?

- **A few rules for good Bible study:**

- 1. Always consider the context.**

*All meaning is context driven*, so when studying the Bible, always consider the context. Context means the portions of scripture immediately surrounding the section you are studying. So for example, if we look at John 9:3 (“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus…) we might conclude that these three people were sinless, which would be false. In order to appreciate the true meaning of the verse, we must read it in its context or “setting.”

- **This is why in our small groups, we prefer bible studies where the group looks at one passage, rather than topical studies that link together many unrelated scripture verses.**

- 2. Make sure you understand the meaning of words.**

The meanings of words change over time. Some words have several different meanings. And different words can have the same or similar meanings. These are all reason to make sure you understand what words mean. This may require the use of an English dictionary as well as a Bible dictionary or reference book. For example, the word “world” in the Bible has several different meanings, and understanding the right meaning is key to understanding a text. Sometimes the word simply refers to planet earth—God’s creation. Sometimes it refers to the people who live on the earth (John 3:16). Sometimes, though, it refers to the “world system” that is opposed to God (1 John 2:15).

### **3. Interpret according to the grammar of the sentence.**

Always consider basic rules of grammar when studying the Bible, because these things are important to proper interpretation—things like verb tenses, subjects and predicates, adjectives and adverbs, etc. A simple rule to remember is “when there is a therefore, always look to see what it’s there for!” Certain words and clauses link one section of scripture to another. Understanding the flow of the argument is often key to arriving at the right interpretation.

### **4. Try to grasp the author’s intention.**

All writers have a purpose and plan to their writing—there is something they are trying to communicate. Our job in Bible study is to discover the purpose and plan of the author’s writing. For example, in John 20:31, John tells us why he wrote his gospel: “*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*” Sometimes the stated purpose is not so obvious, like with one of Paul’s epistles. But once you read through an entire letter, the reason for Paul’s writing may come into focus. Things that help us grasp the author’s intention are the historical setting, the time and culture of the writing, and the occasion for the writing. Investing in a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia, or a background commentary is always helpful. One thing is always the case: a text cannot mean now what it never meant then!

### **5. Take into account the background of a passage.**

The more you understand about the passage you are studying, the better your interpretation will be. It’s important to consider the historical setting (e.g. the Israelites are in exile), the geographical elements (Jesus had to pass through Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee) and the cultural elements (in Jesus’ day, the burial of a father was the responsibility of the eldest son). To us, the phrase “taking up our cross” in Lk.9: 23, sounds like it means putting up with difficulties, but in Jesus’ day, a cross was clearly a place of execution. This small cultural difference greatly alters the meaning of the text.

### **6. Take into account the genre of a particular passage.**

Genre is the literary style or form of a particular passage. In the Bible, there are many genres—there is history, poetry, prophecy, doctrine, allegory, parables, etc. It’s important that when studying one of Jesus’ parables, for example, that we don’t treat it like it was history. A parable is understood differently from a historical passage, and vice versa.

### **7. Always interpret scripture by scripture.**

The Bible should be considered as a whole. So, despite the fact that it was written over a broad span of time and by many authors, the message of the Bible is quite unified and has a very consistent view of

God. A good rule of thumb is to always compare parallel passages (passages that deal with the same subject matter) and to always interpret vague or confusing scripture with clear, straightforward scripture. (E.g., when Jesus talks about “hating” mother and father in Mt.11, we must understand that in light of His clear commandment to love in Jn.15:12. What Jesus means is that we should not love anything more than Him and His kingdom.)

**In Vineyard, we prefer inductive Bible study. It prevents people from reading into the Bible their preconceived notions and allows the Bible to speak for itself. Inductive Bible study is the surest way to make the Bible our true standard for belief and practice.**

## **Leading an Inductive Bible Study Discussion**

### **What is it?**

Inductive Bible Study is a discussion oriented Bible study session in which the leader encourages participation of everybody in the group through their involvement in discussing a series of key questions that are aimed at exposing and discovering the truth from God's word

## Why is it Important?

As a tool, Inductive Bible Study helps the group to discover *what God has said* in the passage. Inductive Bible Study helps to reduce or eliminate a common human tendency in which a leader imposes on the text his or her feelings, beliefs or what he or she think is the interpretation of the passage. Instead, Inductive Bible Study encourages people to think for themselves and examine their hearts. In the process, each member of the group is allowed to process, personalize and retain the truth of the scripture that is specific to his or her life.

It should be noted that there are a variety of valid methods of studying the Scriptures. Vineyard Columbus prefers to use Inductive Bible study method because we believe it is consistent with our mission to develop a community of passionate, mature, reproducing disciple of Christ.

## How is it done?

The key to a successful Inductive Bible Study session is the ability of a leader to formulate and ask questions that will encourage everyone in the group to **Observe** the facts and significant characteristics of the passage, **Interpret** the intended meaning for the original audience, and **Apply** the truth of scriptures to each of their lives.

### 1. Preparation

- a. The primary aim of a Bible study session is to invite the Lord to talk to his people (us) through his scriptures. As you prepare for an Inductive Bible Study, ask for God's wisdom (James 1:5) and direction regarding what you or your group needs to be fed in order to grow and mature into Christ's likeness (Col. 1:28).
- b. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, select a book of the Bible, chapter, character, topic, etc. and study the text on your own first. Pray for understanding from the one whose words you're studying. Read through the passage several times and try to get a sense of it in its entirety; that is, in its context.  
*Note:* Study guides, commentaries and Bible study tools are very helpful with overviews, historical details and original intent. However, your decision to not read them first will help you avoid the unduly influence of the author's findings and insights.
- c. **OBSERVE** the facts and significant characteristics of the passage by seeking answers to the "W" questions, i.e. who, what, where and when. Example:
  - *What* form of Biblical literature is this? (Narrative, history, gospel, parable, law, prophecy, poem/song, collection of wise sayings, or apocalyptic literature? Is there more than one of these?) The answer to this question will help us understand the purpose of the passage for its readers.
  - *Who* is mentioned in this passage? What was his or her position in his or her community?
  - *What* is happening (what is taking place, what is commanded, or what is talked about)?
  - *Where* is the action taking place – what is the scenery? What sounds, smell, weather, or character can be noticed? What natural or supernatural forces are referred to?
  - *When* (past, present, future) or what time of the day, year, etc.?
  - *What* words, ideas or phrases are repeated? Are there words you don't know? LOOK them up! Refer to a Bible dictionary or commentary for help with unfamiliar ideas, places, customs, etc. If it is an English word, is the biblical meaning in contrast with modern understanding?

- ❑ *What* grammatical clues are present? (Figure of speech / symbols / simile, allegory, hyperbole, irony etc.), cause and effect, summary, explanation or purpose statement etc.
- ❑ *What* things are compared or contrasted?

\_If the passage is not divided, **divide** the passage into paragraphs. Try to give each paragraph a brief title that helps reflect the content.

\_Write down some of your *observation* **questions** to use in your group.

- d. **INTERPRET** the passage. Ask:
- ❑ “Why?”, “Why not?”, and “How” of the scripture.
  - ❑ Is there a common idea running through the passage?
  - ❑ What is important in this passage for the original audience to understand?
  - ❑ What significance that message has for you?

\_Write a one-sentence **theme** for the entire passage that captures the main idea the Holy Spirit has shown you.

\_Write down some of your *interpretation* **questions** to use in your group

- e. **APPLY** the biblical truth to you and your small group.
- ❑ What truth does God want us to believe?
  - ❑ What lies does God want to expose in our beliefs?
  - ❑ What action do we need to take? (Praise, repent, pray, thank, wait, serve, give, reach out, etc.)

\_Write down the outcome God desires for you and/or your group.

\_Write down some of your application questions to use in your group.

- f. **Prepare a brief introduction** to your study. Include background information to help set the scene. In general, create interest in the main topic or theme of the passage you are using.

## **Doing the Inductive Bible Study with your group.**

You can plan a list of primary questions ahead of your group meeting, but secondary questions have to come in response to whatever the group does. That is at the time when the Bible study is taking place. Your success in doing this (coming up with secondary questions) does depend to a large extent on your ability to *relax and genuinely listen to what other people in the group are saying*. In fact there may be no more valuable skill to an Inductive Bible Study leader than to listen.

Nervousness and concerns about our performance as leaders is often the primary cause of our failure to listen. It is easy to focus all of our attention on questions we would like to ask when we get nervous and anxious. Remember – It is all about Jesus! Jesus was never worried about his performance, never concerned about the follow up question. He listened carefully to answers someone gave and his secondary questions occurred naturally. As a leader, it is important to learn and practice listening to other people's opinions - concentrating on their answers and relaxing. With relaxation and genuine attention to what others are saying, follow up questions will come naturally.

**Tip:** You may find it helpful to practice a pause between someone's answer and your follow up question. Often this technique will allow you to concentrate on listening when someone is talking and for you to think of your follow up question only after he or she is done talking. Often our success in leading a discussion session will spill over to boost our leadership ability, and help shift our focus from how we look and how we perform, to what our group needs.

### ***Things to avoid:***

- ❑ Do NOT give a test: As a leader you are more likely to have spent more time on the passage than the others in your group. It will be more of a blessing if you set up your questions to seek people's thought rather than testing their knowledge.
- ❑ Avoid leading questions.
- ❑ Ask one question at a time.
- ❑ Make your questions accessible to everyone.
- ❑ Avoid vagueness. Ask what you really mean to ask.
- ❑ Give more options than "Yes" and "No".

### **3. Resources that may be helpful:**

1. A modern translation of the Bible.
2. Inductive Bible Study guides, especially those published by Vineyard.
3. A dictionary & concordance.
4. Commentaries (see *How to Read The Bible...* for a good list).
5. Books on Bible study and interpretation (e.g., *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart).
6. Magazines on small groups (e.g., *Discipleship Journal* which has small group ideas, Bible study techniques, and Bible studies in every issue).

## **Some additional tips for preparing a small group bible study discussion**

1. *Set up an apparent contradiction, and ask the group how it might be resolved.*  
*Examples: Read Galatians 3:5-11, Romans 4:1-5, James 2:21-23. "James*

*seems to be in direct contradiction to Galatians and Romans. How do we resolve that?"*

2. Ask them how a particular truth might apply either to life in general, or to specific situations you imagine. Example: You are giving a teaching on serving and then ask your people how they would handle a younger brother who complains that he is no longer receiving the attention he once had. How would you respond?
3. "What would it look like..." (get them to use their imaginations and apply the truth to different situations). Example: Have them describe what a church would look like that was 100% into knowledge; describe a church that was 100% into love; and describe what the balance of those two churches would look like?
4. Give them a statement from a third party (either imaginary or an authority) and then ask them to react to it. Examples: (a) You are giving a teaching on the nature of human sexuality out of Genesis. Give the example, "a homosexual friend approaches you and says, 'What is your opinion of my lifestyle?'" (b) Ask them to respond to this statement from a liberal theologian: "If we believe that the life of Christ was meant for the salvation of man from his sins, then we are really selling him short. He was a man who lived and died for his cause."
5. Ask how someone from x, y, or z perspective would answer a particular question. Example: When doing a teaching on the gift of hospitality: "How would a homeless person feel if they were to attend one of our meetings?" "How would an international person feel if they entered our group?"
6. Set up a real life situation (where principles often don't apply neatly) and ask how the principle might apply in that situation. Ask for exceptions. Example: You have just given a teaching on how to love one another unconditionally. Then you ask about the scenario of a friend who is constantly stabbing you in the back. Should you continue to love that person unconditionally? What about a woman who was sexually abused by a relative? Is it her responsibility to reconcile with that person?
7. Ask what the difference is between a passage of scripture you just read, and something else with which they are already familiar. Example: In 1 Cor. 9 Paul says, "to the Jews I am as a Jew, and to the Greeks I am as a Greek". Doesn't this preach that Christianity is not exclusive and that there are redeeming parts to all world religions?
8. "Devil's Advocate": Challenge a position they all seem to accept. Example: Ask them what their position is on the rapture. Then ask them to justify their position based on scripture.
9. Discovery: what do you think this passage is really saying? Example: Who wants to share an experience where this truth has really made a difference?

## Some practical suggestions for leading a small group discussion

Leading a group discussion is truly more of an art than a technique. It is best learned by practice and experience than from a book. So much depends on the personality of the leader and the make-up of the group that specific methods are usually unhelpful. There are a few guidelines though that can help a group discussion work better:

1. **Be the leader!** Many people don't like group discussions because no one seems to be in charge and the discussions wander aimlessly and pointlessly till the meeting is over. When that happens, it is because the leader is not leading. You need to keep an eye on where the discussion is going and when it gets too far off course, you need to interject comments and direct people back to the topic. People won't be interested if they feel it is a waste of time, so as the leader make sure the discussions are on track and heading somewhere. At first, you may have to take a more dominant role, and get people "stirred up" until they get use to participating. But as people get more comfortable with the format, they should enter in to the discussion quite readily and begin responding to each other and not just to you.
2. **Be a good listener.** People will want to share when they feel they'll be heard. Make sure you use common courtesy and listen to what is being said! Give eye contact and lots of affirmation for sharing. Respond to what was said so people know you really are listening (and are not just thinking about what you are going to say next). When appropriate, refer back to what someone said earlier so people know what they say is important enough to remember. All of these things will encourage good discussion.
3. **Be sensitive.** For many people, talking in a group is a big risk! They will watch how you as the leader respond to them and to others when they contribute to the discussion. They want to know it is "safe." They don't want to be judged or ignored or to be told they are wrong in front of others. Be gentle and affirming. Make it clear to your group that it is safe to share thoughts and ideas; that no one will be reprimanded for a "wrong" answer, and that everyone is learning together.
4. **Be on time.** People will quickly tire of group discussions if they take over the entire group, leaving no time for anything else. And this is so easy to happen! So watch the clock and be sure to limit discussion, no matter how good it is getting. Better to have them go away hungry because then they'll come back for more!
5. **Be aware of potential problems.** Many people dislike group discussions because of all the problems that are possible. It is helpful to be aware of the pitfalls ahead of time and have some idea how to handle them when they pop up.
  - a. **The problem of the rabbit trails.** There is a delicate balance between keeping the discussion on track and allowing people the freedom to share. It's up to you to determine where that balance is and to gently but firmly bring the discussion back to the topic at hand. Some rabbit trails are worth exploring and people will

appreciate the consideration you give them by addressing some of these trails from time to time. But an entire meeting of them can feel like a waste of time. So be alert!

- b. The problem of the filibuster.** Invariably, each group has one: someone who just plain talks too much! (By the way, make sure that it isn't you!) It will help if once you know who they are, to sit *next* to them in the room rather than *across* from them. This will cut down on eye contact and discourage a lot of talking. Also, without being rude, you need to pass the discussion on to another group member with some deliberation. "Why don't we hear from someone else now? What do you think about what we've been discussing, Sue?" Remember, that when one person is too dominating in the group, other members will lose interest.
- c. The problem of the shrinking violet.** There is usually more than one of these in a group, but these are the folks who are very shy and very afraid of speaking in front of others. They need lots of encouragement and much affirmation. If you have a lot of these in your group, cut down on any joking around, as shrinking violets may fear being teased in front of others. (However, some joking can have the effect of lightening the tension in the room, so here again, discernment is key.) Whatever you do, you want your group to feel extremely safe. Talk with these folks before the meeting. Ask them to read passages out loud. Without being intimidating or putting them on the spot, ask them a question directly. Make it your goal to get your shrinking violets fully participating in-group discussions.
- d. The problem of the difference of opinion.** Not everyone is going to agree about everything all the time in your group. Disagreements are inevitable but in a group, little disagreements can become full-blown arguments without the people involved intending for that to happen. And arguments "in public" are embarrassing and sometimes hard to recover from. On this issue, men and women relate very differently. Men will not usually avoid a disagreement and often they enjoy a good, lively debate. In fact, some men may wish to debate just for the sheer enjoyment of it. Women, on the other hand, value harmony and for the sake of harmony will avoid a disagreement at all cost. What is often sacrificed in the process of all this is the truth. Here is where it is important for you to be both well prepared and extremely tactful. Try to understand what the issues in the passages are ahead of time and anticipate potential disagreements. Gently but firmly maintain what you believe to be truth while at the same time make allowances for gray areas where there is legitimate room for disagreement. And when you're not really sure, admit it and agree to find out some answers for the next meeting.
- e. The problem of too personal/impersonal sharing.** Here again is an area where people differ on what they prefer. Some people will feel that group discussion is not successful unless sharing gets to an intensely intimate level and people are sharing personal secrets and everyone is crying. Others will feel very uncomfortable with

sharing at this level and instead prefer the discussion to remain at a very theoretical and impersonal level. In general, women prefer personal sharing and men prefer impersonal. Both extremes will be unhelpful for your group. There are things that really are too personal for group discussion and bringing them up is just plain inappropriate. When this happens, show compassion, but indicate that you would like to talk with the person some more about it after the meeting alone. (Of course, if your group has been together a long time and knows each other intimately already, then this doesn't apply!) The other extreme is not good either, because small groups are where we care for each other. There's got to be some measure of personal disclosure for care to happen and relationships to grow. There are personal type questions in each study in order to give people the permission to share personally in the group. Be patient with those who are resistant to personal disclosure but set an example yourself. Often the tone for sharing in a group is set out by the leader. If the leader can be personal, the rest of the group can be personal as well.

Finally, *have fun!* Group discussions can be a lot more fun for the leader because all the pressure is off to "perform" and make it happen. You can actually enjoy yourself and you might learn something in the process! God's word is so rich that you will no doubt learn something new each week from what someone else shares. So have a good time!

#### **Acknowledgement**

To large extent this excerpt is taken from "Inductive Bible Study Discussions"©1996, by Beth Crawford; and from "How to ask great questions" □ 1998 by Karen Lee-Thorp.

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