

# Preparing Small Group Bible Study

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Small groups are all about the merging of life stories. There is your story; my story; the person sitting next to you; and the story of the person just entering our group. There is an individual logic to revealing our stories. Sometimes we tell our stories chronologically, and sometimes we tell our stories radiating from central events, and sometimes as themes, struggles, victories, and so on.

If you have ever tried to get to know someone (and of course, if you are in a small group, that is exactly what you are trying to do), then you already understand that certain things are helpful. It is helpful, for example, to know something of the other person's background; the culture and conditions in which they were brought up. And it is helpful to know something of the other person's relationships, past and present; and something about their psychological makeup; and something about their hidden agendas, biases, and aspirations. All these help you connect, empathize, and eventually merge your story with their story in deepening levels of friendship.

Since we are *Christian* small groups, we believe that God is a participant, and God is sharing God's story in, through, above, beneath, and beyond our stories. God shares the story of redemption in much the same way as we share our stories with each other. Sometimes it is chronological; sometimes radiating from significant events; sometimes as themes; and sometimes in creative ways that we only understand in retrospect. Just as we are constantly revising our appreciation of each other, we are constantly revising our appreciation of God. Our sensitivity grows in fits and starts, dull stretches and interesting surprises, as our companionship deepens.

The Bible is a primary (but not the only) way in which God reveals God's story. People are complicated, but although they have many stories to tell, there is a thread of "life story" that runs through all their living. So also God's story is complicated, and although there are many stories to tell, there is a thread of "salvation history" that runs through all of it. The most important thing in any relationship is to penetrate to the depth of that abiding thread. Get to know the "one true you". Get to know the "one true God". This is the basic attitude with which small group leaders approach scripture and prepare Bible studies. Indeed, the word "study" is not the best description of what the small group is doing. The small group does not "study the book". The small group is getting to know God in their midst.

Here are the basic things to consider if you are a small group leader and preparing to guide conversation about the Bible. This is not a *procedure*, and the steps are not necessarily in order, and the proportionate amount of time given to each perspective is not constant. It's the same with any relationship you are building with one another. Getting to know God in the small group follows its own conversation logic.

## History

If you want to get to know someone well (like God or the person sitting next to you), then it is helpful to know some facts. It may be important to the thread of the "one true story" of God to know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That has significance. Similarly, it may be important to know that the person sitting next to you was born in 1950 during the worst snow storm in the history of Cleveland; that the birth was extra hard and doubly dangerous; and that this fact shaped how family perceived and valued the child ever after.

On the other hand, some facts may not be important, or at least seem unimportant at this stage of your relationship. We really don't need to know that the favorite food of the person across the table is popcorn, or that the locusts and honey eaten by John the Baptist were cooked or eaten raw; a steady diet or occasional rations. Bible study is not a game of "trivial pursuit". I discourage "fill-in-the-blanks" exercises in small group Bible study as a means to remember facts. After all, it would be demeaning to you if we distributed a survey after your time of sharing with statements like: *Tom said that he liked \_\_\_\_\_ peanut butter for lunch on Saturdays* (correct answer is "*crunchy*"). I suspect God is frustrated when we have to resort to such pedantic exercises to remember what God said or did. Perhaps we weren't paying attention?

## Perspective

It is helpful to understand the peculiar perspective of the author (or supposed author) of the Bible passage we are reading. Imagine a small group with a very introverted husband and a very extroverted wife. They love each other very much, but one does most of the talking. No matter how faithfully she reports the thoughts and emotions of her husband, it is

still helpful to know her own unique assumptions and biases that give the report a special spin.

When God is in the room, there is a sense in which literally thousands of faithful spokespersons are in the room. Remember the cell phone commercial in which a huge host of technical support people silently follow the man or woman around as they talk on the cell phone? I always imagine that host accompanying God into the small group meeting, and God saying “Can you hear me now?” The Bible has a host of faithful people speaking for God, but it is important to know that they are *not* God. And it is important to know what nuance they might give to God's words.

The point is that everyone has a perspective ... even the author who wrote the original Bible passage we are studying. The more you learn about his or her perspective, the better you understand how they are reflecting God's message to others. Many Bibles use marginal notes to refer readers to other parallel passages using similar words, or on the same theme, or about the same events. These comparisons often reveal the unique perspective of a prophet, Gospel writer, historian or evangelist.

### **Past and Present Context**

Small group conversation is a dialogue that evolves over time. If you could read a transcript of the dialogue from one or two years ago, you would naturally want to know more about the context of the dialogue to interpret what any one person said. What was going on in family crises or international affairs? Why did this small point seem to be so important at the time; and why did this question that seems so enormous today receive so little attention back then?

The same is true for our conversations with God through the Bible. We need to know the context. What issues were crucial to Isaiah at the time? Why did Paul have such a problem with women wearing short hair? Our desire to be faithful remains constant, but the reality is that issues and problems, tactics and solutions, change in different circumstances. What was really relevant in the 4<sup>th</sup> century before Christ may be different today. The same words may be powerful now in ways that were barely known then.

The more we understand the past, the more alive the Bible becomes today. Sometimes we discover that Biblical issues and choices are remarkably similar to those today. Take, for example, the dilemmas of war and peace, or justice and forgiveness. On the other hand, sometimes connections that we take for granted are suddenly perceived quite differently once we know more of the past. Paul's metaphor of the church as a *Roman* family is very different than our assumptions about the church as a *modern American* family.

### **What People Say**

In order to understand what is significant about history, perspective, and context with regard to any Bible passage, most leaders (and even scholars) listen to what other people have to say. Unfortunately, whatever anybody says about Biblical history, perspective, or context is loaded with their own interpretation. Even if they don't overtly express a doctrinal opinion, it is still there in their manner of expression, how they order ideas, and that little adjective or adverb added to the sentence.

Again, this is just the same with any relationship in our small group. Sooner or later, if we really want to get to know someone, we begin to listen to what others say about them. Indeed, I can learn a lot about myself (for good or ill) if I listen to what others say about me.

The real question, then, is not *if* I should consult Bible commentaries, sermons, and other books about the Bible. The question is: *which ones*? We want the best, most learned, and most faithful opinions. And we want to avoid mere gossip, uninformed ranting, academic gibberish, trendy entertainment, and any resource that seems to take us away from the *main point* in a relationship, which in this case is “getting to know the one and true God”.

Most small group leaders eventually build their own small library of “reliable sources”. There is a wealth of material out there, and the choice is admittedly subjective. The best way to build your library is to ask someone of integrity that you trust to show you their library. But in the end, for any given Bible passage, and in preparation for any specific conversation, you limit yourself to just one or two resources. Yes, tell people what sources you use. Allow people to check out their own sources. But whenever you use too many resources, the discussion is no longer about God, but about your sources. While you debate Bible translations and concordances, God may grow impatient or lonely and leave the room.

## And Who Do You Say That I Am?

The most exciting and daunting part of preparing a discussion about the Bible is to focus your own point of view. What exactly do you think God is saying through this particular scripture? How does this scripture deepen your own personal relationship with God? How will you take it to heart, apply it to your lifestyle, and build it into your strategic plan for faithfulness?

Here again you may want to read favorite sources, or explore a wide variety of viewpoints. Avoid blind obedience to any one source; and avoid dogmatic insistence that your insight is always the best one. But do not avoid responsibility. Take the risk of sharing what you really think and feel about a Bible passage. The people in a small group want to know. You may be afraid that your insight may be shallow or controversial, but if you want to lead discussion about the Bible you must take the risk and say what is on your heart and mind. If you take the risk of openness, they will too. If you have built a solid foundation of trust around shared values and core convictions, the group will value your insights and use them as a springboard for more conversation.

Too often small group leaders borrow a curriculum, read aloud from a chapter, follow and exercise to fill in the blanks, and congratulate themselves that they have “studied the Bible”. Since Bible study is really about getting to know God, there is no real study unless you put your heart into it.

## Prayer

Prayer is a particularly important part of your preparation to lead Bible conversation. There are three parts to the prayer of every Bible discussion leader:

- 1) **Ponder:** Take time to reflect on all that you have read. Start with the Bible passage itself. Read each phrase aloud and brood upon it. Ask yourself: *Why would this passage be important to me? Under what conditions might it be important for others?*
- 2) **Listen:** Turn your mind off, and just open your heart. Acknowledge the array of emotions that are elicited within you by the Bible passage. Pay attention to your body and discern the degree of stress or serenity that you may be experiencing. Vocalize in a few words the core of what God is saying to you through scripture right now.
- 3) **Surrender:** Ask God to use you as an instrument for the spiritual growth of others. Imagine yourself taking God's hand, and folding it around the hand of each person in your group. Ask God to use your foolishness as an opportunity for grace, and to overcome your stupidity with revelation.

Prayer allows you to restore or renew your own relationship with God. This helps you introduce God to others in the same way that you introduce a beloved companion to a new friend. The Bible is not a book, but a handshake or an embrace.

Whenever you prepare to lead a Bible discussion, you should clarify in your own mind what will count as success. How can you evaluate if you don't anticipate? The goal of Bible discussion is not to study a book about God, but to deepen a relationship with God. Therefore, success is not measured by how many historical facts people learn, or by how many doctrines have been explained. It is not even measured by the degree of agreement small group participants have achieved by the end of the conversation. Here are the three ways to measure success:

- ✓ *Do participants feel closer to God? Is their companionship with God deeper? Do they feel stronger, more confident, and more sensitive to walk with God every day?*
- ✓ *Do participants sense that they are more clearly aligned with God's purpose of redemption? Have they learned how to adjust their lifestyles to fit God's expectations? Are they discerning their place in God's plan of salvation?*
- ✓ *Are participants eager for more? Are they ready to turn again and again to scripture as easily as they would phone a friend? Are they looking forward to the next opportunity to use scripture as a path to deeper meaning in life?*

If you can say yes to each of these questions, then you have done a good job as a Bible study leader. Since God is a constant mystery, Biblical reflection is a lifelong process. Once you are done, let it go and let the Holy Spirit take over.