

Navigator's Small Group Helps

12 STEPS TO LEADING BETTER BIBLE STUDIES

1. CAN YOU LEAD A SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY?

Leading a small group in Bible study is not as hard as you may think. The focus of attention is not on you as the leader, but the Bible. *Your* role is simply to guide the discussion, encourage personal interaction with Scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to make application according to each group member's needs. Many committed Christians are witnessing the dynamic impact of small Bible discussion groups. Sparked by the growing hunger for personal knowledge of God's Word and close fellowship, these bands of eager learners are springing up everywhere. The intense fellowship, the personal interaction over God's Word and the mutual commitment to application experienced in these groups can cause great spiritual development. One person, such as you, with a genuine desire and hunger for the Lord is enough to spark a group. That group can ignite a neighborhood, church, business office, dormitory or barracks. The resulting disciples could saturate a community with God's Truth. And you could be the person to start this process.

Goal of the Discussion Group

The type of discussion group presented in this booklet involves prior personal preparation by each participant. Otherwise, the discussions become a substitute for personal study and the time is spent with everyone "sharing their ignorance." Those who have prepared will not learn anything new from those who haven't prepared and will soon lose their motivation for personal study. Therefore, the goal of a discussion group is to amplify the results of each person's individual Bible study through your interaction together.

A successful group:

- * Provides an incentive for each member on a regular basis.
- * Enables all of you to go beyond the limits of your own personal findings by exposing you to the ideas of others and by stimulating further thoughts.
- * Creates an atmosphere of love and acceptance which stimulates honest talk of personal discoveries, questions, problems or needs.
- * This acceptance builds the confidence of group members and allows them the freedom to speak about the Bible without fear of embarrassment or criticism.
- * Fosters positive Christian fellowship where group members can develop close personal relationships in an informal setting. You learn how to pray together, and how to bear the burdens of others.
- * Equips growing Christians with a method for helping others grow spiritually. Small Bible study groups are one of the most effective tools to help Christians fulfill Christ's Great Commission to make disciples in every nation.

The Nature of the Discussion Group

Group discussions are not lectures in which an infallible expert displays his knowledge to a captive audience. The lecture is unnecessary in a group discussion because the members have prepared their studies in advance and should be able to share what they have learned. Nor are group discussion conversations in which overly opinionated people carry on a dialogue. In this situation the quieter members of the group will soon lose interest and may stop coming altogether if they are not given opportunities to share. The spontaneous interaction of a good discussion provides a setting for sharing, learning and making new discoveries. God's Word achieves its

life changing effect on people through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The effective group leader will act as a chairman and guide, not as an authority and teacher, because he realizes the authority is the Bible and the teacher is the Holy Spirit. And *you* can be such a leader as you rely on the Holy Spirit in applying a handful of principles to turn the Bible discussion group into a dynamic center of fruitful ministry. This booklet covers the fundamentals of leading a discussion group. If you are planning to start a group for the first time, it will provide a step-by-step explanation of how to lead a discussion. If you are looking for some new tips to improve a study you are already leading, this material will provide a resource of ideas and practical suggestions as well as a thorough review of basic principles.

2. HOW TO ORGANIZE A GROUP BIBLE STUDY

Every successful endeavor begins with prayer. Before you start inviting people to a group Bible study, begin praying daily that God will attract the group members He wants, that He will unify them and will enable you to lead and encourage the group. The kind of Bible study you want depends, of course, on the type of people you invite to be in the group. Are they couples, single adults, housewives, businessmen, senior citizens, church members? Are they non-Christians, new Christians, Christians with a few years of maturing, seasoned veterans or a combination of all four? Your Christian bookstore carries many good studies on individual topics, concerns and books of the Bible for varying age groups and Christian maturity levels. Just be sure the study you choose fits the needs of the group, contains lessons that are not too hard or long and is applicable to group members' situations. If you are choosing the study *as a group*, narrow your selections to three and let the group members decide by vote which to use. Some bookstores will allow you to take home some studies to help you decide. If you want to start a study with fellow church members, extend an invitation in your church bulletin or newsletter. Or you might want to help follow up new Christians in your church or witness to recent contacts in the community. Specific Bible studies could be the right vehicles for meeting their needs. Always *personally* invite potential group members and then give them a telephone call later in the week. This shows you really are concerned about them as persons and not just numbers. Be specific about the details of the study when you're inviting people. Tell them *what* you are planning to do, *when* you plan to meet and *how many weeks* the course of study will require. Probably, the first study series shouldn't last longer than six weeks. Then you can make plans with the group for further study.

Informational Coffee Hour

One way to start a group Bible study in your neighborhood is to invite several people to your home for coffee and dessert, tell them of your interest in starting a group and then ask them to join you. When you invite them be sure you tell them what you will be talking about so they don't come under false pretenses. Your informational coffee hour shouldn't be "religious." Don't open with a prayer or use Christian jargon such as "I've been led to start a Bible study." You may be familiar with these words but they will only scare prospective participants. After serving refreshments and simply explaining the format of the study group, suggest they call within two weeks *if they are interested*. Therefore, those who are not interested will not have to call and offer an excuse. Don't feel hurt if everyone isn't as excited about the Bible study as you are. Not all will want to join. Just be loving, gracious and kind to everyone so they will have the freedom to make their own decisions without feeling guilty. Try to keep the group small; you don't have to start a big program. A big group can stifle discussion because fewer people can participate. *Grow* into business, rather than go into business. Start with a few interested and eager people, a good group size is six, and as they become trained they can lead other groups. The natural progress of a healthy Bible study is growth. But don't be disappointed if you only have one or two people in the group. God is intensely interested in the individual. "For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18:20). People often accept an invitation to a Bible study and then fail to attend. It's easy for them to forget something that is not yet part of their routine. The devil desires to keep people from God's Word and will set obstacles and distractions in the way. Remind them of the study a day or two in advance. After the first couple of weeks this shouldn't be necessary. By then they will have discovered the profit

of their Bible discussion group.

Practical Details

Many practical details affect the success of a Bible discussion group. An uncomfortably warm or cold room, noisy children or pets, or studies that run too long can distract the group members. Here are some things which you, as the group leader, can plan in advance.

- * *Meet in a comfortable atmosphere.* The warmth of a living room, the unity of a kitchen table, or the informality of a dorm room or barracks all lend themselves to a teaching atmosphere. Your attitude and approach can make the time together friendly, natural and conducive to honest searching.
- * *Make appropriate physical arrangements.* Meet in a circle so all can see and discuss with each other. Make sure your chair's height allows you to have good eye contact.
- * *Maintain good lighting.* Good lighting will not only illuminate the room, it also creates a warm feeling. Also, no one should have to look into the sun or toward a bright window.
- * *Provide proper ventilation.* Make sure the air temperature is comfortable.
- * *Guard against distractions.* Pets, television and radios take away attention from the discussion. If needed, make arrangements with babysitters.

You will discover other practical details as you lead your group. But remember the key to a successful group Bible study is God working in hearts. So again, the best preparation is your prayers.

3. YOUR FIRST MEETING

The first meeting of the group Bible study is the most important session. The impressions the group members receive during this meeting may greatly influence their participation during the rest of the study. If you are leading a study within your church, the members of the group will probably have differing levels of Christian maturity. Some may never have been in a group Bible study and may be apprehensive. If they are uncomfortable and don't feel accepted during the first meeting, they may not come to the second. Though it may be difficult, the leader in this situation should try to stimulate discussion with questions of varying difficulty so that all will be helped. Remember this is a *group* discussion. You are the leader, not the director. You will set the members at ease if you don't assume an air of superiority but show the quiet confidence which comes from having a plan and knowing how to execute it.

Objectives

As a good leader, you should always begin with a clear objective for each session. You shouldn't fall into the trap of "flying by the seat of your pants" and hope everything will work out fine. The objective will summarize what the group should understand and apply by the end of the discussion period. It can be stated in one or two short sentences. A clear objective will help you:

- * know where you want to proceed with the discussion and give you direction for your questions.
- * evaluate progress at any point during the discussion. After this evaluation, you can make needed adjustments.
- * make decisions during the session as to what to discuss. If a tangent or unrelated issue arises, you can direct the group back to the main goal.

Plans for the First Meeting

Your major objective for this first meeting is to have the participants start studying the Scriptures. Here are three major steps to accomplish this:

* *Become acquainted with one another so honest discussion and interaction can take place.* As a person arrives, introduce him to the others. When the group is gathered, ask each member general questions about their hometowns, occupations, hobbies, etc. You should share first to establish what could be mentioned and how long each person could talk. Even church members may discover many new things about each other.

To further "break the ice" you could distribute cards on which are written such unusual question as:

Who was your fourth grade teacher? Tell something about her.

What qualities do you like in a cookie?

What do you like to do on a rainy day?

If the group is comprised of Christians, you can ask them to give their testimonies.

* *Explain how the Bible is going to be studied and how it will be discussed in the group.* Before you begin your explanation, pause for prayer and ask God to guide the discussion and to teach the group members from His Word. Explain that all Christians need spiritual food, fellowship and training and a small Bible study group is an excellent way of providing all of these. Through the study, the members should not only be fed but also learn how to *feed themselves*, a basic requirement for maturing. Tell them you will ask four basic questions about the Scriptures: *What does it say?; What does it mean?; and How can it be applied?* Be sure they understand you will ask these three types of questions in different ways during the study sessions to stimulate thinking and not to test or belittle anyone. Tell them that through their active participation in the study, they will *discover* the facts of the Bible, begin to *understand* those facts and their relationships to each other, and then *apply* those facts in their lives. Stress the purpose of Bible study is to become good friends with a Person, not principles. Everyone should adhere to a set of standards to help unify the group. You, as the leader, should *suggest* these standards so you will not assume a dictatorial attitude in telling everyone what is expected. Everyone should agree that *attendance* at the discussions and *preparation* of the Bible study is important. Then agree on the length of each session. Tell them you will be diligent to end the sessions on time. Now introduce the Bible study plan and give them their materials or have the group decide from a list of three or four, the study they want to use. If you are using printed materials, have each person read aloud a paragraph of the introduction and instructions. Stop and discuss whenever a question arises.

* *Complete part of the first lesson.* Enthusiasm and an expectancy can be developed as the members actually complete part of the study. Ask them to quietly start working on the first part of the first lesson for five or ten minutes.

Then ask the group to share what they have discovered from this short glimpse into God's Word. Work at creating curiosity and anticipation for the rest of the study series. For example, you might ask, *I wonder if we will discover a relationship between these things as we complete our study?* Or say, *That is an excellent observation. I have a hunch we will see more about that as we complete the study.* Be sure to encourage the group members as they respond, especially as they tell of what they learned from the study time. Work at giving sincere compliments. They will be heartened and motivated by your praise. End on time so as to start a pattern for each session. Each of the three steps for this first session should take about one-third of your time. As you adjourn, remind everyone of the time, date and place of the next session and of their assignment. Before writing an objective for your second session, in which you will thoroughly study the first chapter or lesson, you should write an outline for that chapter.

Outlines

The outline is the basic framework which underlies a particular biblical passage or topical study. It consists of a few sub-points which logically break down the chapter into smaller sections. As a contractor views a building

blueprint, so you can look at an outline to see the basic framework of the lesson chapter. When you are leading a discussion group, an outline will:

- *provide a general direction for the study.
- *help you prepare discussion questions.
- *help you evaluate the progress of the discussion.
- *serve as a teaching aid by helping the group members remember the content of the discussion if you share the outline with them.

In many studies the lesson chapter subtopics already form a brief outline. An example is in the chapter, "God Cares for You" (book one, chapter one) of NavPress' *Design for Discipleship* (DFD):

1. God Created You
2. God Knows You
3. God Loves You
4. God Made You Part of His Family

Writing an Objective

The outline provides stepping stones for determining the objective of the session. A possible objective for the chapter "God Cares For You" of the DFD could be: *At the conclusion of the session, the group members should express thankfulness of God's love.* How can you evaluate whether this objective has been accomplished? Valid indicators might be a brief testimony concerning salvation, new excitement over a verse or a prayer of thankfulness for God's love. Don't be disappointed if you don't always seem to reach the objective of the session. Remember, you may be the leader but the Holy Spirit is the director and He has plans for the study of which you couldn't dream. If you relax in your role and allow the Spirit His, you and the members of the study are going to enjoy many fruitful hours of teaching and warm fellowship.

4. HOW TO STIMULATE VALUABLE DISCUSSION

The Bible discussion leader asks questions which help group members discover biblical truths for themselves. Therefore, the leader should cultivate the ability to develop and ask the right questions to elicit discussion. Questions in a group are valuable because they:

- *help evaluate the group members' understanding, knowledge and progress in learning.
- *cause the group members to think.
- *reflect a personal approach which evokes a personal response.
- *prevent the group leader from becoming the authority figure.
- *allow the group members to discover truth for themselves.

If your questions are well written they will help the group members *discover* the truths of the Bible, *understand* or interpret their meaning and relevance and *apply* the Bible to their daily lives.

Discovery questions

Discovery questions should be carefully selected because they initiate meaningful discussion on a topic. This type of "launching" question determines both the topic you discuss and the response you receive. Since you are trying to stimulate discussion, ask general questions which have several possible answers. You can use such phrases as, *What did you learn?; What did you observe?; What did you discover?; What impressed you?* For a specific example, *What did you learn from this section about prayer?* Discovery questions must be simple and

short. Avoid using "and" or "but" for these usually introduce a second question. Be sure your question can be answered by the facts contained in the study. To evaluate discovery questions, review the following criteria:

Clarity... Does it ask for observations and facts rather than opinions and feelings?

Can it be easily remembered and understood? Does it avoid complicated wording?

Relevance... Can it be answered from two or three truths from the particular section of the Bible study?

What is the underlying purpose for the question? Does it focus attention on the main point?

Response... Will it stimulate good participation and discussion?

Does it give more than one person an opportunity to respond? Does it draw from their personal preparation?

Understanding type questions

Understanding questions open up, deepen, illustrate or clarify the discussion started by the discovery questions. This type of question encourages group members to go beyond their initial observations. Understanding questions guide the discussion, while drawing out the members' personal thoughts. Your goal here is to help the group understand more fully the *meaning* of the discovered truths. Ask yourself what words and phrases may not be clearly understood and then develop clarifying questions. Often during the discussion someone will ask *what does it mean?* This may replace your prepared understanding question. Answering that question is to your advantage because you are discussing their concerns. However, if the discussion wanders too much from the topic you could say, *what we've been discussing is interesting, but we've left our topic. Perhaps we could discuss this more at a different time.* Then you could present a thought-provoking question that draws the group back to the biblical issues you were discussing. To evaluate an understanding question, review these criteria:

Clarity... Does the question ask, *What does it mean?*

Does it help clarify the meaning?

Relevance... Does the question relate to truth already discovered?

Are the questions in order of importance? Will the answers reveal what the Author of Scripture meant?

Response... Does the question lead to personal involvement by the group members?

Do they have the personal knowledge to answer it? Is the question aimed at their personal understanding?

Application questions

Application is the ultimate goal in Bible study. God wants to change us, not just inform our minds. Correct applications depend upon accurate discovery and understanding. Application questions stimulate the members to act upon the discovered truths. They also serve to summarize the discussion. Use discretion when you ask an individual a question. Only ask a person directly about his personal application when it would benefit the group. One way to encourage sharing is to have everyone write an application one week during the study and then the next week they can tell the *results* of their written application. This encourages them to write short-range applications and to expect God to help them apply what He brought to their personal attention. Application questions are hard to formulate, but they are the link between Bible study and daily living. You need to live with the

passage, asking God to help you see where it applies.

Here are some examples:

What can you do to better glorify God as part of his creation?

How can you benefit from God's complete knowledge of you?

How do you receive love from God?

What assurance do you have that you are part of God's Family?

To evaluate an application question, review these criteria:

*Clarity...*Does it ask *What should I do about the truth of the passage?*

Is it clear what kind of response is expected? Does it give freedom to choose what to do?

*Purpose...*Does it call for a possible and practical response?

Does it relate to truths already discovered? Is it built on a clear understanding of the passage?

*Response...*Does it personally involve the group members?

Is it embarrassing to any of them? Does it encourage not discourage the members? Does it refer to a realistic application?

A method of asking questions

When you ask a question, look around the group until someone answers. Then you can ask *What did others of you find?* Or *What did someone else discover?* Again, look around the whole group, watching for anyone who wants to speak, instead of pointing out a specific individual. At the start, the group members will probably look directly at you as they give their replies. But if you patiently persist with good guiding questions, the members will begin responding to the group instead of to the leader. Thus true discussion will begin.

5. QUALITIES OF A GOOD LEADER

Because leaders often neglect to take inventory of their experiences, they miss opportunities for improvement. Now that you may have led a few sessions of the group Bible study, evaluate your ability to lead and the progress of the group members with the following questions (You may use this evaluation throughout the study series):

Planning and preparation

*Do you adequately prepare? If not, what is needed?

*Do you closely follow your plan? Why or why not? (Veering from your plan is not always detrimental.)

*What have you learned that you could include in future planning?

Your leading techniques

- *Do you lead or are you led?
- *Do you listen or are you always talking?
- *Are you sensitive to group members' needs?
- *Have there been any tangents? If so, how did they occur? How could they have been best handled or possibly avoided?

Biblical context

- *Do you ask enough quality questions so group members can discover, understand and apply biblical truth?
- *Do you keep to the subject of the session?

Participation of the group

- *Did everyone who was expected, come to the sessions? If not, why not?
- *Through your leadership, is everybody stimulated to contribute his best? If not, what could you do to accomplish this?
- *Do group members question and talk with each other rather than just to you?

Personal relationships within the group

- *How well do the members know each other?
- *How well do the members listen to each other?

Three 'traps'

In the process of developing skill in leading a Bible study, you may find yourself falling into one or more of three traps:

1. *Comparing yourself with others.* God's Word tells us not to do this. "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12). Comparison is a denial of God's special place for you. Each individual is unique. The Lord has given every person distinctive abilities that need to be developed.
2. *Discouragement.* When the discussion doesn't meet your expectations, you may focus on what went wrong and become discouraged. However, obstacles and mistakes will alert you to new ways of improving your ability to lead the discussion. This is part of the learning process. Don't allow Satan to discourage you. God is honored when His Word goes forth. He is the Encourager.
3. *Giving up.* Don't throw in the towel. Stay with the goal of the study until completion. "The end of a matter is better than its beginning and patience is better than pride" (Ecclesiastes 7:8). If it's God's Will for the study to continue, then in time it will prosper if you persevere.

Concentrate on the positive

Sometimes you may only be aware of the negative evaluation—the mistakes, problems and omissions. But remember it's more important to concentrate on the positive: What went *right*? What was *good* in the discussion? Emphasizing and maintaining the strong points of your leadership is just as important as improving the weak areas. The most exciting outcome of your discussion group is *not* the development of your leadership abilities. More importantly, God's Word is being studied, discussed and applied. He us using each discussion you lead to proclaim His Word.

6. INTRODUCING CONVERSATIONAL PRAYER

Does conversational prayer make you nervous? If your answer is "yes," you're not alone. Most Christians have seldom or never prayed aloud in a church group. They're afraid of sounding stupid, or not knowing what to pray, and, worst of all, making "mistakes." Of course, their fears can be allayed with a little experience in the real thing. Your job, as a leader, is to let them see that praying as a group can be a uniquely worshipful time, not something to dread at the end of a study. Actually, praying together is vital for an effective discussion group. After the members have discussed their biblical discoveries and applications, a time of praise, petition and thanksgiving will be the next most natural step. In this time of prayer, you should remind the group that it is a team and should learn to pray as a unit. To do this, they will have to forget the ritualistic King James phraseology and concentrate on things they really mean. Learning how to say exactly what is thought or felt requires perfect honesty and openness with the Lord and with one another. The person praying doesn't have to be concerned with the form of the prayer, with the specific words he prays or how he sounds to other group members. All he has to do is simply communicate with God from the heart. Remind the members they aren't being pressured to pray with the group. Allow them to work on this at their own speed. Most of them probably want to pray aloud but they need to feel the encouragement of the group to do so. God will bring all this about in His own timing. Here are several guidelines for conversational prayer:

1. *As the leader, pray first.* Unless led otherwise, pray first and in the first person singular (I, me, my, instead of we, us, they).

After you pray, another person may be led by the Holy Spirit to pray on the same subject. He is simply "continuing" your prayer with hardly a break in thought.

2. *Don't send too much time sharing prayer requests.* Much of your valuable prayer time can be spent in sharing requests rather than praying. Usually the person with the burden for someone or something will be the one to initiate prayer about that person or thing.

3. *Pray about one topic at a time.* It is important to pray topically as much as possible. One person may pray about a sick friend and a second person may stay on that topic by asking for strength for the Family. Then possibly another could pray the Family's financial needs will be met.

You don't want a disjointed time, where you skip from topic to topic, but a time in which you can join in meaningful prayer about the requests at hand. All of you will want to pray in your hearts with the person praying, rather than just listen to him.

4. *Pray briefly.* When each person prays about only one aspect of the topic, he can pray again sooner. This helps everybody keep alert, awake and involved in what is being prayed.

5. *Pray spontaneously, not in sequence.* Don't pray around the circle, but let each person pray for that which interests him. For example, if six subjects are prayed about in the conversational prayer time, you may have a vital interest in only three of them. Members shouldn't have to pray for something about which they are uninformed or not motivated.

Praying spontaneously doesn't mean praying thoughtlessly. While another is praying on the subject at hand, the Holy Spirit may confirm in your heart what you would like to pray.

To summarize:

*As the leader, pray first.

- *Don't just share; pray.
- *One topic at a time.
- *Be brief.
- *Be spontaneous.

As you start praying as a group, often there will be a few moments of silence while the members quiet their hearts and focus their attention on praying effectively. Normally the focus of prayer should start with *praising and thanking God* and then on to specific requests. Some may start praising Him for His greatness, another for His power and another for His faithfulness. One may thank Him for a neighbor who recently trusted Christ. Another may thank Him for the abundant life he has in Christ. Then you may pray for *needs within the group*. The members will find their relationships in the group will grow more personal as they pray for each other. They will also acquire an added burden to pray for other members of the group. Next you might pray for *needs outside the group*. Obviously, the number of needs is limitless, but it's more important to do a thorough job of praying for a few items than to scatter the prayers over too wide a range. By praying conversationally, you will experience a new excitement about praying in a group. You will also find it leads to more praying-both in the group and when you are alone. "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:19-20).

7. ROLES PEOPLE PLAY

Dr. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Theological Seminary, says, "Each member of the group is faced with the right and the responsibility of being a mature participant. To accomplish this he must apply himself to the task of being an effective group member, constantly evaluating himself and his relationships." In the following amusing and informative material, Dr. Hendricks describes roles people play in a group situation. You will find it helpful in evaluating the members of your group.

Characteristics of immaturity

Onlooker Content to be a silent spectator. Nods, smiles and frowns. He is a passenger instead of a crew member.

Monopolizer Brother Chatty. Rambles roughshod over the rest of the conversation with his verbal dexterity. Tenaciously clings to his right to say what he thinks-sometimes without thinking.

Belittler This is Mr. Gloom. He takes the dim view. Minimizes the contributions of others. Usually has three good reasons why "it will never work."

Wisecracker Feels called to a ministry of humor. Mr. Cheerio spends his time and talent as the group playboy. In-different to the subject at hand, he is always ready with the clever remark.

Manipulator Brother ulterior knows the correct approach to the problem, obviously. He manipulates the proceedings so his plan will be adopted.

Hitchhiker Never had an original in his life. Unwilling to commit himself. Sits on the sidelines until the decision has jelled, then jumps on the bandwagon.

Pleader Chronically afflicted with obsessions. Always pleading for some cause or certain actions. Feels led to share this burden frequently. One-track mind.

Sulker Born in the objective case and lives in the kickative mood. The group won't accept his worthy contribu-

tion so he sulks.

Characteristics of maturity

Proposer initiates ideas and action. Keeps things moving.

Encourager Brings others into the discussion. Encourages others to contribute. Emphasizes the value of their suggestions and comments. Stimulates others to greater activity by approval and recognition.

Clarifier The one who has the facility to step in when confusion, chaos and conflict dominate. He defines the problem concisely. He points out the issues clearly.

Analyzer Examines the issues closely. Weighs the suggestions carefully. Never accepts anything without first "thinking it through."

Explorer Always moving into new and different areas. Probing relentlessly. Never satisfied with the obvious or traditional.

Mediator Facilitates agreement or harmony between members; especially those who are "making phrases at each other." Seeks to find mediating solutions acceptable to all.

Synthesizer Is able to put the pieces together. Brings the different parts of the solution or plan together and synthesizes them.

Programmer The one who is ready with the ways and means to put the proposal into effect. Adept at organization. Moves in the realm of action.

You may want to read this section to your discussion group and then have them react and respond to the various roles. They can privately evaluate their role in the group and then, at the next meeting, publicly discuss it. This type of evaluation helps them see themselves for what they really are and gives them an appreciation for the other members in the group.

8. HANDLING CONFLICT IN YOUR GROUP

In most discussions, controversy, tension and excitement of any kind is avoided like the plague! Many leaders associate conflicts with dissension and strife and therefore they try to steer any trace of disagreement down a deserted alley and off a steep cliff. It's true that some unnecessary disagreement is caused by misguided opinions, petty issues and false doctrines. But not all disagreements are bad, wrong or un-Christlike. The group that sails along, with its members always giving the "right" answers may be the group that isn't thinking. It can be worth the time to discuss a controversial conflict. Some very profitable discussions have taken place after an issue or question introduced tension, disagreement and a difference of opinion. When this happens, the group leader can point the members to the *Word of God* as the final authority, instead of tradition or illogical reasoning.

Three stages

This type of good group tension is best used to point to the truth when it is produced and resolved in three stages: *personalization*, *confrontation* and *clarification*.

1. Before controversial subjects are introduced, it is best to begin with a relaxed atmosphere, the *personalization*

stage. This is best accomplished by refreshments, singing, games and other openers. Be careful not to allow this stage to run too long!

2. The *confrontation* stage begins when you introduce the possibility of tension. You do this by asking questions that lead the group members down the "streets of the unknown response" to the eventual goal of agreement around the Word.

There are many ways to create a difference of opinion and get to the honest answers. Having each member respond in turn to a specific question, staging a debate or intentionally having someone take the opposite view on an issue can create the kind of disagreement that forces the group into the Word. Following are examples of questions that often generate confrontation:

*Questions that require a decision-*Which is better: to do what is right when you don't feel like it, or wait to get the right motive, feeling or desire?*

*Questions that imply a truth that is not true-*Why might we say Muhammad was the greatest man who ever lived?*

*Controversial questions-*Why does God allow suffering? Is there a biblical basis for women's liberation? Should a Christian go to war?*

3. In the *clarification* stage the leader takes control and directs the group back to where the answers wait. The goal is to get the group into the Word to uncover for themselves the answer that will relieve the tension caused by the variety of views. Sometimes resolution occurs when the group realizes the Word *doesn't* give a specific answer but allows room for several opinions.

You should be ready with some summary questions and a summary statement to put into one sentence the conclusions of the Scriptures. From there the group can apply the principle with many possible applications.

Be cautious

Of course, you have to be cautious with confrontation questions that cause tension. Animosity, division and strife also can be caused by group tension: "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels" (2 Timothy 2:23). "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5). Aim toward love! But don't avoid healthy group tension.

9. TURNING PROBLEMS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

By now you have probably run head on into problems in the discussion group. These problems, which may seem like obstacles, can be turned into opportunities with proper handling. Here are some ideas:

How to control the talkative

Calling for contributions from others often helps-*What do the rest of you think?* In very difficult situations you may have to take control of the discussion and call for a show of hands before anyone responds. Then you can call on the group members in turn. Sometimes it may be necessary to talk privately with the "talker", explaining how group participation is imperative. You may enlist him to draw in others. This may not only solve the problem of his dominating the discussion, it will also help him become more sensitive to other people.

How to get back on track

A verbal recognition of the problem usually helps—*This is interesting. However, we have left our topic. Perhaps we could discuss this further after we finish our topic.* Or you can present a thought-provoking question to draw the discussion back to the initial thought. At times, you can suggest tabling the question or idea until after the discussion when those who want to, can discuss it further. Your *attitude* toward the tangent is most important.

How to handle wrong answers

Never tell a person he is wrong. You may want to ask the group the question you asked him. For example, *Okay, what do others think? Or Does someone else have something to say about this?* You may want to restate the question or ask another question which would help clarify or stimulate further thought. Always keep others from losing face or becoming embarrassed because of a wrong answer.

How to handle silence

You don't have to feel uncomfortable during long pauses in the study. If you give the members time to think, they will ask good questions as the discussion progresses. By being patient, you may be surprised with the number of excellent thoughts they will give.

How to handle difficult questions

Don't be afraid of saying, *I don't know.* You can always find the answer later, have someone else research it or a member of the group may have a good answer. There is no merit in being known as a "know-it-all." If you always have the answer, your discussion group will turn into a lecture.

How to cover the passage or chapter

Make a determined effort to cover the entire portion allotted for the discussion. Continually getting bogged down in details and falling behind can have a very demoralizing effect on the group. Moving ahead gives a feeling of accomplishment and success. If you have trouble getting through the material, you may have tried to cover too much and may need to cut back.

How to speak to a lethargic group

Generally the group will respond to the attitude of the leader. Pray for enthusiasm for yourself and the group. If you want them to be a little enthusiastic, you may have to be overly enthusiastic. The source of enthusiasm is a desire for the Lord Himself and for His Word.. The leader, by example, will have to demonstrate these convictions. You cannot expect excitement from the group if you are not excited yourself.

How to handle controversial subjects

To smother honest questions and convictions is detrimental to the growth of the members and the study. A Bible discussion marked only by the smile, the pious utterance or the literary, well-verbalized prayer is unproductive. Even when a group is seriously looking for truth, you may have the temptation to skirt the difficult issues of life and rely on superficial answers. The best way to handle controversial topics is to see what the Scriptures have to say and rest the verdict on the principles or commands of the Bible that apply to the situation. God's Word is the utmost authority.

How to elicit good applications

Pray that God will speak through His Word so the members will realize it applies to them. The Holy Spirit will use passages to cause them to think about their lives. Be direct in your approach where the Word is direct. You can help people see the relevance of the Scriptures for themselves by asking them application questions such as *What does this mean to you? Or Is there anything you can do about this today?* Learn how to share your own applications with honesty and humility. If you are open, they will be open also.

How to give reinforcement

It's important for you to give approval or reinforcement to the members as they respond. You can do this by acknowledging an answer with comments like *good, that's right*, or giving a positive nod of the head, a smile or other subtle behavior. You can also reinforce by supporting an anticipated response. For example: *Take a moment to think. I know you can answer this.* Even when a wrong answer is given you can reinforce participation: *That is a thoughtful answer.* Too often leaders are pleased with answers but fail to show any outward sign of their pleasure. Overuse of a particular word, inappropriate exhortation or seemingly insincere enthusiasm will probably not reinforce at all.

How to increase listening ability

Listening is not only being able to hear what people really say but also what they can't and won't say. This ability requires sensitivity, concentration and attention to the other members of the group. Some members tend to think more about what they want to say rather than about what the others are saying. They often become preoccupied with their own thoughts. One way to end this lapse in listening is to have each person in turn summarize what had been said by the previous person. Doing this requires the members to concentrate on every contribution to the discussion.

10. IMPROVING YOUR LEADERSHIP

No amount of planning, preparation, new methods and ideas can guarantee a successful small group Bible study unless the leader truly loves God and people. Then, and only then, can he lay the study in God's hands so the Holy Spirit can do his work. The following points can only be used to improve your leadership if you have settled in your heart to serve the group members. You cannot expect for these procedures to work unless you've committed to help carry out Jesus' love in their lives.

Know the passage to be studied

There is no substitute for diligent preparation and prayer. Take extra time to dig a little deeper into the passages. Don't be sidetracked from this priority. When you stop studying, you'll lose your incentive and excitement. And you will have little to give to the members.

Be excited about the discoveries of group members

Often a discussion leader will be excited only about what he himself has discovered from the text of Scripture. He acknowledges what others find with a nod of the head, an appreciating remark or a further question but he fails to get excited about the new truths group members are discovering. Just because you already know a truth that someone is now discovering, don't quench his quest for new truth by your superior attitude! Get excited about what others discover-and show it!

Utilize your sense of humor

Humor that is appropriate to the audience and to the context of what is being studied, will help create a warm, spontaneous environment. You have your own unique sense of humor, so relax and let God bring it out.

Be enthusiastic

A leader is not necessarily the one who comes up with the best discoveries, understandings and applications. Neither is he the one who uncovers the most revealing background material, character sketches or trivial facts. However, those things can be replaced by a God-given enthusiasm for not only the study, but for living. And then He will use your attitude to change other members of the group.

Use memorable and relevant illustrations

Eye-and ear-catchers captivate human interest. Simple illustrations communicate more readily than the complex. A picture, a drawing, a story, personal illustrations can help the group members identify with you. Also, encourage the participants to share their illustrations and visual aids. Visual aids accentuate and strengthen learning by:

- *contributing to the depth and variety in learning. They offer an alternative to writing, talking and listening.
- *clarifying words and concepts. They visualize the verbal and translate the members' discoveries and understandings to communication.
- *stimulating thought and imagination. They sensitize and personalize objective facts into subjective feelings.
- *aiding logic and reasoning. They allow a viewing of the process, sequence and organization of ideas and concepts.
- *making learning more permanent. They project upon the mind's eye images and pictures that are permanently etched. They are pass-on-able!
- *aid in personal growth. They emphasize the problems and process and not just the product of growth. What kind of visual aid can best be used in a Bible study? I must be:
 - *simple and clear, containing only the essentials.
 - *suitable for the group. Don't shock them!
 - *pertinent. Its main point should be clearly related to what is being discussed.
 - *easily concealed after its use to prevent distraction.

Sources for ideas include your local library, church media department or bookstore. You can also write publishers and producers for listings of visual aids. Ask to catalogues, listings of films, filmstrips, slides, pictures, overhead transparencies, etc. The Bible study leader wants to do more than just meet with a group of people, ask questions, talk about applications and bid them farewell until the next week. All of us need occasional individual help outside of regular group Bible study hours. We need someone for counsel. Sometimes we just need a person to listen to us. Maybe you're saying *I'm not a counselor. I'm not skilled in handling problems*. You don't really need to have abundant abilities and gifts. The only imperative is a love for God and a willingness to give your life to people. Helping others will test your hold on your time, sleep and many times, patience. But God has chosen to love His children *through* His children. And when we agree to be that channel, their lives and our lives becoming pleasing to God and, in the process, others see His goodness. And *that's* the real purpose of Man.

Getting into another's "shoes"

God beckons Christians to this deep love. "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart" (I Peter 1:22).

To love from the heart, we have to try to understand and to identify with one another. Here are three questions that will help you do that with a particular person you may be helping.

1. What is the *reality* of this person?

- *Family history
- *Major good and bad experiences
- *Religious background
- *Current environment
- *How he's previously reacted to God's teaching

2. What are possible *feelings* this person has?

- *Despite his reactions to major experiences, what are his true emotions?
- *What are the prevailing feelings he has at this point in his life? Are they honest feelings or is he trying to hide something?
- *What problems, if any, do these feelings point to?

3. How might this person, with his reality and these feelings, *act*?

- *Are his actions and words consistent with his reality and feelings or do they conflict?

4. With this information, how can you practically *help* this person?

- *Possibly suggest a course of action
- *At times listening is the best help or
- *Look through the Word *together* on the subject or
- *If problem is too complicated for you, refer him to other, more experienced counsel.

Remember, throughout this process you are trying to understand this person to help him, not to analyze him.

11. TRAINING OTHERS TO LEAD

One of the goals of the discussion group has been personal growth. A possible result of a person's maturing is the ability and desire to become a leader himself. You should be sensitive to this and begin to decide if there is one person in the study you would like to train as an assistant. This person could eventually replace you or be the leader of an offshoot group. When choosing an assistant, look for a person who will:

- *pray with you for the group on a regular basis.
- *help you lead the group more effectively by reviewing the evaluation with you after each session. Discuss with him what happened, why it happened and how to improve. Often, he will be able to see more clearly what is happening in the group because he is not under the pressure of asking, redirecting and answering questions.
- *learn how to lead a group himself so that if you happen to be absent he can take the responsibility to lead it.
- *be prepared to start and lead another group.

When people want to join a group after it has begun, you can do one of two things: either invite them to join another existing group in its early stages or start another group.

As the number of people in the group grows, make plans for starting another group. A maximum of six persons is best. Your assistant, who has been helping you and learning about leading a group, is probably the one you will ask to lead the new group.

Frequently the group will not want to divide. After all, it may be the first time they have really gotten to know other Christians well. So you will need to share some of the reasons for dividing.

If the group grows too large, all of the advantages of being a small group decrease: fellowship becomes less intimate, personal involvement diminishes, stimulation to prepare and opportunity to share lessons and the atmosphere becomes less of a group of close friends and more of a committee meeting. On the other hand, in a small group:

- *each member counts and knows it. He will be missed if absent.
- *there is time for each to contribute.
- *regular study is stimulated.
- *participants are likely to have more personal applications.
- *each person feels more free to share.
- *all can know each other better.
- *the members can meet in most homes or rooms.
- *more people are willing to lead and, thus, have the opportunity to grow in spiritual leadership.

Help the new leader arrange a place for the new group to meet. Let all the members know of the new arrangements. Allow the new leader to exercise his responsibilities but be available for advice and encouragement. As you and your previous assistant choose assistants and train them to be leaders, you will be able to see how you have begun to start a process that will result in an increasing number become disciples of Jesus Christ!

12. COMMON ERRORS IN LEADING GROUPS

Problems are not always caused by errors, but errors will *always* turn into problems if left alone. Here are some common errors of Bible study leaders:

- **Not making the questions sound conversational.* Even though you prepare and write out your questions beforehand, speak them in a conversation tone. And use your own vocabulary.
- **Being afraid of silence after asking a question.* Don't be impatient or nervous. Give everyone time to think.
- **Limiting yourself to asking questions.* The leader is also a participant in the group. Share freely your answers and observations but don't dominate the discussion
- **Combining two questions in one.* Ask one question at a time.
- **Not explaining what you want the group to do.* You're in charge. Don't hesitate to step in from time to time to influence the direction of the discussion, to end the discussion on time, to call on someone to pray, and so on.
- **Trying to maintain too much control.* If the discussion "takes off" don't worry about it as long as the group doesn't wander too far from the Scriptures.
- **Asking a question which can be answered "yes" or "no".* This type of question hinders discussion.
- **Asking questions that are too complex.* State each question simply and clearly.
- **Emphasizing your own viewpoint or application.* Don't expect everyone to be deeply impressed with the same things in Scripture that deeply impress you.
- **Not being familiar enough with the material.* If you don't feel comfortable with the material, then you won't feel free to lead the study.
- **Not ending the study on time.* If you promise the study will last only to a certain time, keep your word.
- **Lecturing, not participating.* Lecturing by the leader is the "kiss of death" for a study group.
- **Not summarizing the main ideas as they are presented.* Summarizing allows you and the other group members to stay focused on the subject and reach the session's goals.
- **Not adequately discussing how Scriptural truths can be applied.* It's possible to concentrate so much on understanding the Word that we never apply it.