



Effective Group Bible Study

It's six o'clock Wednesday evening. Your church's mid-week Bible study starts in one hour but you don't feel like going. The trouble is, you can't think of a fresh excuse and you don't dare to say what you, (and several others) would like to say: "Is this really what a Bible Study is supposed to be like?"

This scenario probably gets played out week after week, year after year, in the minds of countless believers. They trust that group Bible studies are important but stumble over how unedifying they often are. Can anything be done to help?

Effective Bible studies don't just happen. They are the Spirit-blessed product of persistent application of basic principles. The following are seven principles for fruitful group study.

Keep the Bible First

Scripture studies are almost always aided by a well-written guide. Some of the best guides are commentaries, especially those that began as a sermon series. Homiletical commentaries combine the best of careful exegesis and pastoral application.¹

One of the dangers, though, of using a study guide is that the Bible can become eclipsed by a lesser book. It is easy to subconsciously begin to treat the Bible as the "raw materials" and the study guide as the "finished product," favoring the latter.

To avoid misusing supplemental materials make them the last part of your preparation for the group study. First, work through the scripture passage in focus. Ask questions about the text. Note observations and applications. Use the study questions to stimulate thought *before* turning to the "answers" in the commentary. In this way the commentary becomes a sounding board for your ideas and conclusions rather than a source book. The Bereans took such an approach. They "...Received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

A related principle is that group discussions should be guided by Scripture not by personal opinion. This does not mean that a question or comment is inappropriate just because it is an opinion. It does mean that conclusions that are reached and counsel that is given should be biblically based.

Respect the Creeds

A study is not necessarily Christian simply because the Bible is used. Many cults zealously study the Bible. Christianity is a Faith, that is, a body of teaching that can be summarized with concrete propositions. So, for example, a Christian study will hold as basic beliefs the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed.²

In the interest of "free thinking," some groups might have the goal of being open at all points. As noble as this approach sounds, it is neither biblical³ nor helpful. Those who claim to have "no creed but Christ" overlook the fact that as soon as you say what you believe *about* Christ, you are articulating an unofficial, informal creed. Groups which have not clarified their basic biblical assumptions may find themselves debating core, settled, biblical issues and derailing the study for others.

Stick to the Plan

Bible study, whether personal or group, should not be haphazard using texts and topics chosen at random. Consistent and logical progression aids our learning because concepts build upon each other just as a course of bricks is laid upon the last. Without being too rigid, sticking to a nightly schedule and a weekly time-line helps the progression of group learning.

Be Prepared

Too often, group “studies” are an exchange of disconnected comments about a text or topic that participants barely considered ahead of time. That’s a problem since, for most of us, profitable speech flows from premeditated thought. *“The heart of the righteous **studies** how to answer...”* (Prov. 15:28).

To aid in preparation, leaders should consider using study questions which members can carefully and prayerfully complete. This will give the shy person courage and the verbose person self-control. Participants who put work into the lesson and develop thoughts to share with others will be better equipped to use valuable group time wisely when sharing.

Write it Down

When was the last time you lost a *really* profound thought because you failed to write it down? Such a frustrating experience illustrates the importance of note-taking. In fact, the written Word itself is a strong apologetic for written reproduction. It has been well said that, “Thoughts disentangle themselves as they pass from the mind, through the lips and over the fingertips.” Writing down your thoughts and drawing them together is one of the key differences between Bible reading and Bible study. For this reason, study questions should be answered in writing, not just by making mental notes. If we trust that God gives insights to others too, we should take notes during the study as well.

Study as a Group

The benefits of group study are different from those gained by individual study. We need to know what we are trying to achieve by meeting together.

Benefits of Group Cooperation

- Growing in love. Our chief aim should be to love our neighbor. Paul teaches that *“love is the fulfillment of the law”* (Rom. 13:10). Our goal should be to understand not only the Bible, but also each other, so that we will know better how to love each other.
- Sharing of experience. In most cases, Bible study leaders should view themselves more as discussion facilitators than information providers. In other words, there should be a difference between preaching a sermon and leading a Bible study. Small group studies give occasion for everyone to ask questions and offer insights.
- Entering into a holy communion. Group Scripture studies can do more to fit us for heaven than most other things we do in the week. Reaping this valuable benefit requires members to commit to attend and actively and holistically participate in the group.

If there are advantages to group study, there are also dangers; to be aware of them is the first step toward prevention.

Dangers of Group Study

- Inconsistency. There is a danger of becoming someone during Bible study that’s different from who you are the rest of the week. Beware of hypocrisy and aim for continuity both during the study and afterwards.

- Vulnerability. Ideally, small group involvement assumes a level of transparency that creates the possibility of broken trust. When sensitive topics are discussed, confidentiality must be strictly maintained.
- Superficiality. Because there is the possibility of getting hurt, group members will be tempted to hold back. But the more real we are with each other and with God, the more we benefit from community. Superficiality should be avoided. Sin should be discussed with sobriety.
- Animosity. Often, the topics studied in small groups are attended with strongly held opinion. In this context, hurt feelings are only a short step away from disagreements. We need to be respectful of each other, recognizing that we are all at different points in spiritual growth and that none of us has fully attained perfection ourselves.
- Prolivity. Unduly prolonged or drawn out talk has unfortunately become a trademark of many small group studies. Avoiding prolivity means resisting the urge to create a verbal monopoly or chase down “rabbit trails.” Use your comments judiciously. Group leaders too, should know when to stop talking (Eccl. 3:7).

Apply the Word

Too many faithful Bible study attendees silently wonder, as they pack up their materials and prepare to leave another study, “What am I supposed to do with this information?”

As with preaching, Bible study calls for a response. When Peter’s Pentecost audience heard his exposition of Scripture, “...*They were cut to the heart, and said ... ‘What shall we do?’*” (Acts 2:37). This same sort of question should be asked by the facilitators of group Bible studies. The answer will have something to do with our heads, hearts and hands.

Studying the Bible is inherently “dangerous” because the Bible is God’s sword (Heb 4:12). It changes our minds as it chops up our flawed human logic and selfish patterns of thought. It pricks our hearts and emotions by slicing through the veil that covers our deep idols. It energizes our slack hands by cutting away the weights and sins that ensnare us (Heb. 12:1).

Swords are dangerous. But if used rightly, and blessed by God, the end result is greater conformity to the image of Christ. There’s a goal that should breathe life into any group Bible study!

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¹ *Homiletical commentaries* by R.C. Sproul, for example, make great study guides because he presents the teaching of the text clearly, simply and practically.

² Many churches more specifically summarize their understanding of Scripture through historic confessions such as the *Belgic Confession of Faith* (1561), or the *London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689).

³ The Bible itself contains several short, non-negotiable summaries of the Christian faith (E.g. 1 Tim. 3:16).