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HOW TO LEAD A GROUP BIBLE STUDY-DISCUSSION

WHAT A GROUP BIBLE STUDY-DISCUSSION IS

Group Bible study-discussion means exactly what the expression implies—a group of believers meet regularly to study the Bible by means of discussion. In order to avoid the misuse of the term, three things need special attention and elaboration.

IT IS A GROUP-DISCUSSION

Group Bible study-discussion stresses the importance of the participation of each member in the study-learning process. In other words, group Bible study-discussion allows no “spectator” or “audience” as in the case of a lecture. Every member, including the leader, is a participant and has the responsibility to bring helpful contributions to the group discussion.

IT EMPHASIZES STUDY

If the group discussion is to be effective for true learning to take place, the discussion must be accompanied by study. Facts must be examined, meanings

must be studied, and the truth discovered. Without such preparation and information, discussion is likely to degenerate into an “opinion-exchange” or even into a “group therapy.”

IT FOCUSES ON THE BIBLE

If the group Bible study-discussion would be true to its name, the Bible must occupy the central place. The group needs to be constantly reminded that its task is to study the Bible, and not books about the Bible or church doctrine. The discussion must be centered on the biblical text of the day. The group must guard against the danger of going off on a tangent or turning the meeting into a social visit.

THE PURPOSE AND THE GOAL OF GROUP BIBLE STUDY-DISCUSSION

The group members must know that the purpose of Bible study is not only to discover what the Bible says, but to understand what God is saying to each member through the passage studied. That is, Bible study does not and must not stop at the *acquisition* of knowledge; it must go beyond to the *application* of that knowledge. That means that each member must come to grips with these two questions: What is God speaking to *me* here and now through this study? and How am *I* to translate it into experience and action? Each individual must be willing, if the study is to be effective, to search his or her own heart honestly for the answers and share

them with the group. Obviously, the goal of group Bible study-discussion is to help its members to learn and to grow in Christian knowledge and experience; to let the Word of God shape the life of each individual so that that individual may develop Christlike character.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF GROUP MEMBERS

Since group Bible study-discussion depends very much on its members, the responsibilities of each member must be clearly explained at the outset. The members must come to see that the quality and the outcome of the group study are determined by the following factors.

PRESENCE

The importance of attending the meeting regularly by the group members hardly needs any comment. Obviously, no group is worth meeting if its members drop in at their convenience or only when they happen to have nothing more interesting to do.

PREPARATION

A faithful preparation of the assignment before the meeting by each member is something that cannot be overemphasized. If the group is to experience “in-depth” Bible study, the members must bring the rich resources of careful preparation to the study-discussion. In other words, the quality of the meeting is in pro-

portion to the amount of study and thinking that the members of the group give to its lesson before the meeting.

PARTICIPATION

Since it is learning together as a group, active participation in discussion by each member must be emphasized. In fact, the give-and-take of the learning process brings both interest and satisfaction to those who participate. Generally, those who have studied before the meeting are likely to participate because they have something to contribute to the group.

PRACTICE

The members of the group need to be constantly reminded that the heart of the matter is personal, and the goal of the Bible study is practical. Each member has the responsibility to *translate* the acquired knowledge into action.

PRAYER

Since group Bible study-discussion is a corporate searching for the message of God, for the group as well as for the individual, the members of the group must be willing to pray for one another so that the purpose of the group and the goal of each individual may be realized.

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE GROUP LEADER

It is true that the success of group Bible study-discus-

sion depends on its members. But, it is equally true that much depends on the leader of the group. A group leader should have the following qualifications:

BE A GROWING CHRISTIAN

A good leader must:

Love to study the Word of God

Experience the Lordship of Christ in his or her daily life

Understand the work and the leading of the Holy Spirit

Know the secret and the power of prayer.

HAVE A WELL-ROUNDED PERSONALITY

A good leader is:

Genuine and sincere. A group leader does not pretend to be someone else, but says what he or she means.

Emotionally stable. Such a leader must not be irritable nor easily offended. He should never be defensive but face criticism honestly and objectively.

Intellectually honest. Does not hesitate to acknowledge personal limitations. A leader should be quick to learn from others and allow others to disagree with him.

Friendly. A leader accepts others as they are. He or she makes every member feel at home and that

each has worthwhile contributions to make to the group study-discussion.

A good listener. A leader must be skilled in listening as well as in speaking. He must have the ability to get others to think and talk, to contribute, and to learn from active participation in the group.

Tactful in dealing with people. A leader must be able to handle even difficult situations without embarrassing the participants.

IS A RESPONSIBLE PERSON

A good leader:

Takes his commitment seriously.

Prepares work faithfully and prays for the group regularly.

Tries to improve skills, to increase his or her knowledge, and to understand the group members.

Evaluates personal performance honestly.

Is not self-seeking, but willing to take the role of a servant.

THE ROLE OF GROUP LEADER

It will help to define what the role of a group leader is by stating first what a leader is not:

1. The group leader is not a “teacher.” The relationship between the leader and the group is not one of “teacher-student” relationship; the teacher

who has answers and the student who has questions.

2. The group leader is not a “lecturer.” Again the leader’s relationship to the group is not a “lecturer-audience” relationship; one who does all the talking and the group listening.

THE LEADER AS A HELPER-GUIDE

Then, what role does the leader play? A leader’s role is simply a “helper-guide.” Though maybe not so obvious, the role of a helper-guide is a significant one because of its primary tasks, which are:

1. *To motivate the group to study*—Make the study relevant and discussion interesting, and help the members to set personal goals as motivating factor for study.
2. *To stimulate the group to think*—Help the members to do their own thinking and to discover the truth for themselves.
3. *To guide the group in study-discussion*—Keep the discussion going and guide it in the general direction of the planned goals or objectives.
4. *To encourage the group to participate*—Help the members learn to express themselves and to interact with one another.
5. *To challenge the group to put into practice*—Suggest ways or opportunities for personal response or application.

An effective group leader must first come to see the significance of such group study and then seek to understand how to provide opportunities for the purposeful participation of the members. However, a leader must be constantly on his guard as the danger to dominate the discussion is always there. And the temptation to parade knowledge always lurks at the corner. It will help if the leader would keep in mind that people learn best when they work at it; when they do their own study and thinking.

HOW A LEADER PLANS FOR A GROUP BIBLE STUDY-DISCUSSION

As far as meeting-place, time, size of group, or frequency of meeting are concerned, there is no rigid rule. They must be determined by the members of the group both by reason and prayer. However, the following suggestions may serve as guidelines.

MEETING-PLACE

The physical setting must be conducive to learning. Generally, the meeting-place should be as attractive and comfortable as possible. A home setting is an ideal meeting-place, because it provides an informal, relaxing atmosphere.

TIME

For the best results, a meeting lasts an hour or an hour and a half at the most. Remember, discussion beyond this point usually brings no benefit.

SIZE OF THE GROUP

The ideal number of group members is probably somewhere between seven and ten. That is small enough to have the much-desired openness, honesty, and personal interaction. At the same time, it is large enough to have the diversity of background.

FREQUENCY OF MEETING

Weekly meetings are highly recommended. That provides enough time for preparation, and yet not too long as to lose the continuity of thought and eventually the loss of interest.

NUMBER OF MEETINGS

They could be scheduled for a short term or a long term according to the desire and the convenience of the group members. For a short term, the group should begin meeting right after Labor Day and end before Christmas, or begin in January and end in May. For a long term, meetings generally begin in September and last until May, the following year.

STUDY MATERIALS

It is very important for the members to take part in selecting the topics for study. They are likely to be more interested than when study materials are chosen by others. Whatever the decision may be, the group members need to know the portions of materials to be studied week by week.

HOW A LEADER PREPARES FOR A STUDY SESSION

BEGIN WITH PERSONAL STUDY

A group leader needs to remember that unless he or she masters the passage and comes to grips with its message, he cannot prepare the lesson intelligently or lead the group study effectively. While studying, the leader must follow “The Law of the Spirit” (consult chapter 1, “Study the Bible with Both Heart and Mind”) and cover the following steps:

- a. Look for the relation of the passage to its context.
- b. Seek to understand the passage in its original setting.
- c. Try to visualize the scene and the event.
- d. Find the structure of the passage.
- e. Observe the significant facts of the passage.
- f. Study the meanings of the words or phrases.
- g. Look up the references or parallel passages.
- h. Read other translations for different shades of meaning.
- i. Interpret the thoughts of the passage (consult outside aids).
- j. Make comparisons with corresponding views or customs of the present days.
- k. Find illustrations from one’s own experiences.
- l. Try to paraphrase the passage in modern language.

- m. Summarize the central teaching of the passage and make an outline.
- n. Draw principles or implications suggested in the text.
- o. Consider personal applications.

MAKE A GENERAL PLAN

After a thorough study of the passage, the leader should work out a general plan for the meeting by which he expects to guide the group in study-discussion. It does not mean that the plan must be rigidly carried out. However, a general plan gives the leader both the direction and the confidence needed to lead the discussion. If the leader has no plan, he will be left without resources when things do not go well, will feel lost, and will possibly even feel a sense of failure at the end. The plan should include:

Aim. Every study-discussion should have an aim that the leader keeps to himself. The leader will have a clear-cut aim if he answers these basic questions, “What do I want to accomplish through this lesson?” or “What should the group members learn and experience through this study?”

Introduction. An introduction is determined by the aim, the nature of the passage, and by the nature of the group as well. The leader should ask himself, “How do I get started so that it will create interest and secure the

attention of the group?” The following are examples.

- Review the preceding lesson(s)
- Present a problem
- Introduce the historical-cultural background out of which the passage arose
- Brief survey of the passage
- Present an outline of the passage
- Use visual aids

Content. It is obvious that not every statement found in the passage has equal significance and value in the light of the chosen aim. In order to accomplish the objective in mind, the leader should ask himself, “What portion of the text do I select for emphasis?” “What is the outline of the lesson?”

Conclusion. The leader should ask himself, “How would I conclude this lesson?” “In what specific way can I make this study personal?” “How do I challenge the members to put it into action?”

Method. Generally, group study-discussion is one of the best methods of learning, for it offers greater opportunity for participation by its members. However, there are several other possible variations of the discussion method which the leader should try occasionally in order to maintain interest in the group and to avoid monotony. At each preparation, the leader should ask, “What is the most appropriate method for studying this

particular passage by this particular group to achieve a particular objective?"

PREPARE A WEEKLY STUDY-DISCUSSION GUIDE

It is highly recommended that the leader prepare a weekly study guide for the group members, for that will help in their own preparation and also in group discussion. The study guide should include at least two things:

Background information. The leader should indicate the source where such information could be obtained, if it is needed to make the understanding of the passage intelligent.

Thought-provoking questions. The leader uses the outline of the passage to be studied as a framework to prepare questions for the group to think about before they come to the meeting. Those questions serve both as a guide in personal preparation and a catalyst in group study-discussion. But the leader must emphasize that each member does his own study of the passage first before using the questionnaire.

HOW A LEADER PREPARES A QUESTIONNAIRE

FUNCTION OF QUESTIONS

The method of questioning, by no means, is the only method to study the Bible, but it is an effective method. A good question has at least the following functions:

- It creates interest and secures attention.

- It stimulates the thinking and sets the mind to work.
- It directs attention to a new thought and helps to gain insight.
- It helps create a learning experience.
- It generates good discussion.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Generally, there are three basic types of questions:

Questions of information. Questions that help to observe significant facts.

Questions of interpretation. Questions that help to unlock the meaning of the author and that open doors to new insights.

Questions of application. Questions that make one think about personal application and challenge one to put it into action.

TESTS FOR GOOD QUESTIONS

Unless the group chooses to use a study course, the leader should prepare a questionnaire. But he soon will discover that to frame questions skillfully is not an easy job, it requires much practice. However, use the following tests as guidelines in the formation of questions:

- Is the question clear and easy to understand?
- Does it give enough information to guide the thinking?

- Does it have a definite answer, or will it lead to speculation?
- Does it stimulate the thought processes?
- Does it make a point worth discussing at this time by this group?
- Does the question reveal the answer?
- Is the sequence of the questions geared to the continuity of the event or the thought of the passage? Does it direct toward the aim of the lesson?

Probably, the best way to test a questionnaire is for the leader to try to answer it himself. Questions that are too vague or too involved; questions that can be answered by “Yes” or “No”; and questions whose answers are self-evident have no value and should be omitted.

HOW A LEADER LEADS A GROUP BIBLE STUDY-DISCUSSION

GROUND RULES FOR GROUP MEMBERS

Certain basic principles govern the quality of study-discussion groups. Those principles must be followed if the group members desire to have an effective study-discussion group meeting where true learning actually takes place.

1. The group members must realize that little can be accomplished unless the entire group cooperates actively.

2. The group members must help to create a relaxing atmosphere of understanding and acceptance where each member feels free to participate and to express himself. Each member must be himself and accept others as they are.
3. Each member should be attentive. Listen carefully to what others say and try to understand their points of view.
4. Each member must be willing not only to learn from others, but also to subject his or her ideas to the judgment of the group.
5. Each member must be considerate of the others, for example:
 - No one should monopolize the discussion in such a way that it gives no chance for others to talk or to react.
 - No one should insist upon his or her own viewpoint and refuse to consider that of anyone else.
 - No one should be argumentative or critical (in a negative way) in discussing conflicts of opinion.
6. Each member should genuinely be concerned for one another and minister to one another's needs.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR THE GROUP LEADER

Business matters.

1. In a study-discussion meeting, the members, including the leader, should seat themselves informally in a circle or around a table so that they can see each other. Leave a few chairs near the door for the occasional latecomers.
2. The leader should know the individual members by name and make sure that the members of the group get acquainted with each other.
3. The leader should begin each meeting promptly and close on time. Never wait for those who are late or drag the meeting on beyond the prearranged time.

Study-discussion procedure.

1. Prayer—The meeting must begin with prayer seeking the illumination of the Spirit and proceed with an expectancy that God will speak to the group through the study-discussion. (Remember “The Law of the Spirit,” chapter 1) .
2. Reading—It is wise to ask the group to read the passage to be discussed in silence or have one member read it for the group. This will help them to gather their wandering thoughts and focus their attention on the passage.

3. Introduction—This can be done by the leader or by a member arranged ahead of time.
4. Questions from the members—It is highly recommended that the leader prepare a chalkboard and write on it a logical division of the passage with references. Before the discussion gets underway, give the group an opportunity to raise questions that the passage might suggest to their mind and that they would like to be discussed. Have a member assist by writing the questions on the chalkboard under the appropriate divisions. The leader incorporates those into the questionnaire he has previously prepared.
5. Study-discussion—Use paragraphs as basic units of discussion, and examine each verse carefully. Here are some tips for leading a discussion:
 - a. Pertaining to questions
 - Remember that the questionnaire is meant to be a guide and not to be followed slavishly. Be flexible and skip any questions that do not fit into the flow of discussion as it progresses.
 - Make sure that the questions raised by the members are discussed.
 - Never answer your own question. Don't be afraid of silence! If necessary, rephrase the question and ask again.

- Always direct questions to the group as a whole first, then to a particular member in the group.
- b. Pertaining to discussion
 - Make sure that the discussion is carried on in an informal atmosphere of friendliness and openness, so that no one feels hesitant to participate in discussion or to ask questions.
 - Exercise care to keep the discussion centered on the passage and avoid going off on a tangent no matter how interesting the direction.
 - Be sure to keep the entire scope and aim of the lesson well in view and keep discussion moving from one important point to another. Don't let discussion become bogged down by minor points or nonessentials.
 - Be sure to spend enough time in discussing the meaning of the text (interpretation) and the meaning of the passage for today (relevancy), so that the group finds itself discussing real issues in the lives of its members.
 - Don't be satisfied with the first answer, especially when it comes to interpretation.

Encourage interaction and comments on one another's answers and ideas.

- If someone should ask a question during the discussion, do not try to answer it. Turn the question to the group for answer first.
- Receive all contributions warmly regardless of its merit. In case of a wrong answer, don't correct it bluntly. Ask the group to comment on it. Be sure to avoid embarrassing the participant.
- Be sure to give each member a chance to participate. Tactfully hold in check those who tend to monopolize the discussion and draw out those who are more inhibited.

c. Pertaining to the leader

- As a leader, try to know the strengths and weaknesses; the special interests and problems of each member.
- As a leader, give the members self-confidence and a sense of security to express themselves.
- As a leader, don't talk too much! Express your own views as a member of the group.

- As a leader, always be ready to help the group to distinguish between fact and opinion; to clarify the differences of viewpoints in case of controversial issues; to bring out the main issues in discussion; and to summarize the conclusion as it is needed.
6. Conclusion—It is the responsibility of the leader to close the meeting on time. Never allow the discussion to drag on so that the members leave one by one. Be conscious of time! The leader must see to it that enough time is spared for the following:
- a. Be sure to summarize the main teachings of the passage in an outline form at the end of the discussion. Have a member assist by writing them on the chalkboard.
 - b. Be sure to spend time sharing personal applications and what the members of the group learn through the study.
 - c. Be sure to close the meeting with a period of prayer. Make a genuine effort to make the group Bible study-discussion a “study-fellowship-prayer group.”

OUR MODEL: BEREAN BIBLE STUDY GROUP

“For they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed” (Acts 17:11).

RECEIVED	<p>—implies <i>openness, readiness</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without reception, the words would have fallen on rocky ground.
WITH . . . EAGERNESS	<p>—implies <i>keen desire, enthusiasm, alertness, attention</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are fundamental factors which promote effective learning.
EXAMINING	<p>—implies an <i>inquisitive, active mind</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It means to investigate, to scrutinize. • To examine means “to look into critically or methodically in order to find out the facts.”
EXAMINING THE SCRIPTURE	<p>—implies the <i>final authority of the Scripture</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Man’s word must be tested by the Word of God. We must bring the message of the preacher or the word of the teacher under the scrutiny of the Word of God
EXAMINING . . . DAILY	<p>—implies <i>diligence, persistence, effort</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember the essential ingredients to success in life are clear-cut goals, determination, effort, sacrifice, and persistence.
EXAMINING . . . TO SEE WHETHER THESE THINGS WERE SO	<p>—implies <i>caution</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuine faith must be built on the Word of God, and not on the word of man (John 4:41).