

The Leader's Toolbox

Leading a Bible study can be hard and often it's more of an art than a science. Whether you are reigning in an off-topic conversation or trying to get answers out of complete silence, a good leader has to know how to adapt to the specific needs of the group. Here I have provided some tips and tools you can use to get the most out of your small group time:

Ask Good Questions

While you may be tempted to think that the best bible study leaders are the people who have all the *answers*, it's actually the leaders who ask the best *questions* that get the most out of their group. The study guides will give you an easy place to start the conversation with the questions provided, but *asking good follow-up questions as a leader* will spark the best conversations, will facilitate interaction, and will help your group make their own observations and draw personal conclusions. Here are some characteristics of a good small group question that can shape your discussion:¹

- 1. A good question is asked in a natural order.** Questions should generally move from easy to difficult and from objective to personal. Start with simple observations and be patient, looking for natural opportunities to press in on a particular topic or expand on a certain idea. If your conversation follows the natural order of the questions in the study guide, you'll see that the conversation will generally move from broad observations into questions that are more particular and personal in their application.
- 2. A good question is asked with humility.** If there is an air of pride or superiority in your tone as a leader, it's almost certain that you will not cultivate open and honest participation in your group. Look for any opportunity to encourage your group when they have a good insight. Don't immediately come down hard on someone who has a bad or a wrong answer. Ask further questions, like, "*How did you come to that conclusion?*" or, "*Where do you see that in the passage?*" to gently encourage them towards the best conclusions.
- 3. A good question is tethered to the text.** In a Bible study it's all too easy for a conversation to veer off in different directions that distract or detract from our primary goal of digging into God's Word. Even *good* things, like someone sharing personal stories, voicing theological curiosities, or discussing current events or social issues can distract from the best thing, which is considering together what God has to say to the

¹ Krol, Peter. *Sowable Word*. Cruciform, 98.

group in this particular place in Scripture. Our natural inclination will be to look away from the text, so your job as a leader is to keep guiding your group back to the passage at hand. Ask questions like, *"Where do you see that in the passage?"* and *"How can we connect that to Paul's main idea here?"*

4. **A good question is open-ended.** Fill-in-the-blank and guess-what-I'm-thinking questions are usually not conducive to fruitful interaction. If you ask the group, *"What privileges of the Jews does Paul list in Romans 9:4,5?"* someone will list out exactly what is written down, but the conversation will hit a dead end because your question has been answered. But what if you phrased your question, *"What do you think Paul has in mind when he lists Israel's privileges in 9:4,5?"* That question is still tethered to the text, it will still require the reader to consider the list, but it opens the group up to a broader conversation and stimulates further dialogue about why Paul does what he does.

Moderate the Messiness

Group interaction is a great advantage of being a part of a Bible study like ours, but it can also be one of the greatest challenges. Your group is a collection of different personalities, levels of spiritual maturity, theological perspectives, and likely both believers *and* unbelievers. Those differences will inevitably result in disagreements, differing perspectives, and an overall less-than-perfect small group experience. As the group leader, your responsibility and privilege is to lead your group in a way that embraces those differences and leads your group closer to the Lord and closer to each other. This is no easy task, but with God's help, God can and will use you to do just that. Here are some key principles to keep in mind week-by-week as you moderate the messiness:

1. **Lead by Example.** The most effective leaders are not those who dictate over their followers, but those who influence them through example. Consider the example of Jesus as he washed the feet of his disciples in the Upper Room (John 13:12-16) As your group looks to you as the leader, you have an opportunity week-by-week to model for them how to ask good questions, humbly articulate your opinions, respond kindly to criticism, navigate awkward moments, and participate meaningfully in the discussion.
2. **Prioritize Relationships.** Conflict is always best dealt with in the context of a relationship where there is some level of care and concern between the individuals involved. Surely you know from experience that an admonition is much easier to receive from a friend than it is from a stranger. It's unlikely that you will become best friends with every member of your group, but look for every opportunity to learn about their life, ask how you can be praying for them, follow-up on how they are doing, and

let them know you care. When there is a problematic person in your group, pursue them. You may learn things about their life that will make sense of why they can be difficult and help you know how to lead them well.

3. **Individualize Expectations.** The more that you build relationships with those in your group, the more you'll learn about what to expect from them as they participate in the study. For example, if in your group there is an unbeliever attending out of curiosity about the Christian faith and a mature believer who has been faithfully involved in the study for decades, you should have different expectations for their involvement in the discussion. It might be appropriate for the unbeliever to sit silently through most of the small group time as they process new truths that are completely foreign to them, while that wouldn't necessarily be appropriate for the mature Christian. Remember that Christian growth looked different for you at the beginning of your walk of faith than it does now, so be sensitive to that same reality for those in your group.
4. **Be Patient and Prayerful.** Never forget that we want the Holy Spirit to be the supreme leader of our groups. We want him to be the one who guides the discussion, convicts us of sin, shows us the truth, and changes our lives. As much as God will use you as a means to those ends, remember that those are things that you ultimately cannot control. When you are frustrated or discouraged about your small group, remind yourself that we only plant and water, it is God who must make things grow. So be patient and pray persistently to God for the unity, growth, and change you want to see in your group.

Direction not Perfection

You can count on the fact that small group bible study discussion will never go *exactly* how you want or how you planned. To be sure, there will be days when you will leave your group encouraged, built up, and excited about the time you spent together. However, there will likely be times where you leave discouraged, confused, and maybe even doubtful of your ability as a leader. In both of those instances, we do well to remind ourselves that our objective is not perfection, but to imperfectly but progressively lead our groups in a certain direction, that direction being a growing love for God and love for others (Matt. 22:36-40)

You haven't necessarily failed if you weren't able to perfectly identify the structure of the passage or come up with a outline or main point. If you spent time prayerfully wrestling with the text, that is time well spent and God will use that to grow you in your Bible study ability.

You haven't necessarily failed if you spent a long time talking about one question in particular and weren't able to completely finish the rest of the study. It's likely the Holy Spirit intended for your group to dwell on whatever truths were there in that particular section.

You haven't necessarily failed if there are people in your group who aren't showing visible signs of growth or they're persisting in the same frustrating behavior throughout the entire year. God is often working below the surface in ways that we can't always see and we should persistently pray that he would do just that. God doesn't demand visible results from you, he simply calls you to faithfulness in the role that he has placed you, leave the results up to him.

Follow Jesus First

The greatest gift that you can give to your group as a leader is your own personal holiness and love for Jesus. The closer you are following Jesus yourself, the better you will be able to lead your group to knowing, loving, and trusting him for themselves. Loving Jesus will be your greatest advantage, and conversely, neglecting Christ will be your greatest danger. Consider what Tim Keller says about the dangerous calling of leadership:

Often your heart will not be in a condition to say such a thing [that God is so wonderful] with full commitment and integrity. You then have two choices. Either you have to watch your heart more closely, warming up continually so you can preach to people what you are practicing; or you have to learn to put on a ministerial air and become something on the outside that you are not on the inside... I continually observing that preaching, teaching, and leading amplifies people's spiritual character. It makes them far better or far worse Christians than they would've been otherwise."

Leadership will either make you holy or it will make you a hypocrite. Pray every week that your love for your group might simply be an overflow of the love of Christ that is poured into your own heart. Before you ask any questions to anyone in your group, be sure that you have first asked yourself, "Do I really believe this?"

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. John 15:4,5