

Some churches¹ like to set out a list of rules that the members of a Bible study group will agree to abide by. This agreement is often named a covenant. Elsewhere on this website Roger Green has written about this and connects the idea of a covenant with the objectives of a Bible study group. Some churches take this further by having a set of rules that the Bible study leaders are supposed to agree to in relation to the church they attend.

One church that I attended had these rules for their Bible study leaders (taken from a handout in 2007):

- a personal relationship with God through Jesus
- a commitment to the church staff and members
- a commitment to prayer and godliness
- attendance at a service at church each week
- regular attendance at your Bible study group
- attendance at training/planning meetings
- an attitude of service and giving
- recommendation of your church to others
- a commitment to information sharing and unity

Note there is nothing about having good Bible knowledge or social skills or even if the person was good at *leading* a Bible study. Instead, a Bible study leader has to be someone who would do what their church wanted them to do. But the main problem I have with this is that the New Testament doesn't have any rules like this. Instead the New Testament writers say we should love each other and love God and everything else flows from that. What happens if a Bible study leader was good at leading Bible studies but didn't want to follow all the stipulations that the church set out for him/her²?

Larry Osborne in his book Sticky Church has similar rules for his Bible study leaders or "sermon-based small group leaders" as he calls them. He has covenants to be signed by each group member including the leader, end of quarter evaluation forms, a responsibility list that the leader has to agree to before he or she can lead, insistence that the leader and members listen to the sermon and answer the questions before they attend the group, and listen to the weekly "Leader's Training". In his responsibility list (pages 178 and 179) he has:

- prepare and lead the meeting
- attend all training meetings
- track the needs of group members
- communicate tough issues to ministers
- complete weekly attendance sheets
- visit members in hospital

I've been in Bible study groups without any of these covenants and I found that different people in the group did all the personal stuff whether they led the group or not. We didn't need a list of obligations because you cared for each other naturally. Surely the pastoral aspects of a Bible study group should be done by everyone in the group, not just the "leader". Some people are better at certain things than other people. The "leader" is not always good at all the

1. What I mean by church is that organisation you go to, usually on a Sunday, where you sing hymns or songs, someone reads from the Bible, someone preaches for about 30 mins, someone prays etc. – you get the idea. If "church" is a gathering of Christians (= *ekklesia*) then what we do in a Bible study group is also church but in common language it's not described that way. For the purpose of this document I will make the distinction by using "church" and "Bible study group" as completely different things.

2. Some churches don't allow women to lead Bible studies if there are men and women in the group. It is ok for women to lead women's groups but not for women to lead mixed groups. Men can lead men's groups and mixed groups and they would probably be allowed to lead women's groups if there were no suitably approved women leaders. The Hunter Bible Church has three discussions on this issue available through their "Maturity Podcasts". Larry Osborne doesn't comment on this issue in his book Sticky Church.

stuff on the list and nor should he/she be expected to be. The leader doesn't have to have all the gifts. That's why we need different people with different gifts to make up the body.

The word "covenant" as it is used above, is about all the things group members or leaders are supposed to do. But the *new* covenant is all about what Jesus has done for us, not what we are supposed to do. So maybe covenant is the wrong word. Maybe "love each other" would be better. Or maybe it goes without saying.

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