

Leading a Bible Study Using a Set Booklet or List of Questions

For this article I will begin by assuming that Bible study leaders have been given a booklet for the topic or book of the Bible being studied. If you want to create a Bible study from scratch check out my article called "Leading and Writing a Bible Study from Scratch". That article and this one have a good deal of overlap.

At times the set booklets were criticised for being at a level that could be easily done by new Christians but more mature Christians found the booklets lacked challenging questions and questions that provoked further study. The booklets were set for the lowest common denominator. In answering this criticism ministers said that the booklets were only a guide and Bible study leaders could improvise if they wished.

1. At the simplest level all the leader has to do is **read the set questions** and wait for people in the group to answer them. I know leaders that do this. They have prepared their answers to each question and they read out their answers if the group comes up with a different answer.

Often the Bible passage to be studied is divided up into smaller passages and one or more questions relate to these smaller passages. The way I handle this is to ask the first question *before* the passage is read then get someone to read the passage aloud while the others follow it in their Bibles. This way people keep the question in mind while reading the passage. After the passage is read I ask the same question again and wait for people to give their answers allowing for the possibility of having a discussion on those answers. Then I go through the rest of the questions on this small passage. The same procedure goes for the other small passages.

One problem is that you can become so focussed on small passages that you lose sight of **the big picture**. You need to lead to bring out the relevance of the small passage to the book or topic you are studying and even the relevance of the passage to the whole Bible. You should continually move from small passage to big picture and back again with extra questions that encourage this way of thinking. I've got an example of this in my article "Big Picture, keeping it in sight".

You can do more than just asking the questions. I don't want to give you too much because if you try to hold too many things in your mind you may become confused and lose your way. So, if you want you can ignore all the following and the Bible Study will still be ok. I've numbered some of the extra steps you might like to take and expanded on those ideas later in this article.

2. Have your answers prepared.
3. Work out your goals.
4. Thinking on your feet.
5. Be flexible.
6. Group dynamics.
7. Work out your own questions.
8. Add variety.
9. Opening, closing & timing.
10. Feedback.

2. Have your answers prepared.

You can do as little or as much work on this as you want or have time for. The more work you do the better you will be able to explain things and follow the conversation amongst the group.

To understand the passage read it a few times and write down things that occur to you while you are reading e.g. the bits you don't understand (group members probably won't understand those bits either), questions for discussion in the group, themes that might be worth exploring, and personal stories that come to mind. You can explore these things later but you need to write them down before you get distracted and forget them. Keep reading the passage until you feel you've got a good grip on what it is about.

Work out the context: the Biblical context, the cultural context, the political context and the historical context. I like to explain the context of the passage before I ask members to read it. Occasionally, I've seen people use Bible passages, out of context, to support their argument but when I looked at the context I found it wasn't related to their argument at all. So I try to avoid that sort of misrepresentation by always giving the context to each passage I use. You should also consider the structure of the passage and the literary type. It seems like a lot of work but with practise

you can do a lot of this quickly. There are books to help you like Postcard from Palestine by Andrew Reid which is presented as a series of Bible studies.

Work through your notes that you made while reading the passage multiple times. You may need to do some research to understand the things you had problems with. Work on these until you have a clear and simple explanation for yourself and the group. If you've got personal stories that fit in with the passage work out roughly where to put them in the study. Try not to dominate the study with all your stories. One or two stories, if they are short, may work out well and prompt other people to tell their stories. By "stories" I mean personal experiences that can be shared with the group and relate to the passage.

Now work through the questions in the booklet and write your own answers. Keep in mind the context of the passage(s) and you may have to explain the context if the booklet has not done so. During your research you may have found a way to explain a difficult idea better than you can, so quote it. Work out where to tell your personal stories. Bible study groups are personal and it is important that something of your personal touch and your character comes out while you lead the study. The set booklet will have the author's personality stamped on it but that may be a lot different to what you are like.

Sometimes you prepare studies weeks before you have to lead the study. I suggest you go over your answers on the day of the meeting or the night before. Go through it step by step answering the questions as if you were one of the members and not the leader. Imagine what will happen at the meeting. This will refresh your memory and may alert you to something you missed when you originally prepared the study. Or you may think of something you could say better than the way you had planned.

3. Work out your goals/objectives.

Work out your goals in leading the study. For some leaders their goal is to get through all the questions. They might succeed in this but they can miss all the other things going on in the group. Others try to impose their knowledge on the group and the Bible Study becomes a sermon rather than a discussion. Other goals might be evangelism, relevance or improving friendships in the group. I try to get everyone participating in the study - my first goal. If I can get everyone talking then that is a fair indication that they are involved. If someone is falling asleep then I usually get them to read the next passage. That wakes them up, at least. I try to cover the material in the study but I like to challenge people to think outside the square – my second goal. If people answer in clichés or "book answers" then I know they are not thinking, just reciting. One way to challenge people is to present them with a practical situation that they may encounter and asking what they would do. For further ideas see my article "Objectives of the group" and Roger Green's "Objectives and Covenant".

Richard Sweatman in Writing a Small Group Study looks at goals differently. He thinks that the leader should work out goals in terms of what members should understand by the time the study is finished. I think this approach is mistaken because it is about what the *leader* wants for the group rather than what the Spirit might be trying to teach. You can be so focused on achieving your goals that you can neglect or completely miss other things that are happening for people during the study. Rather than the leader setting these types of goals let the passage/God set the agenda as you work through the passage. Setting goals in terms of what you want people to understand may be more appropriate in school/college/university settings than in a Bible study situation.

4. Thinking on your feet. (I've quoted from parts of my article called "Listening".)

If you are well prepared you can comment on what people say and carry the conversation into interesting directions. To do this you need to think on your feet i.e. react to what people say rather than always reading out your prepared answer. You may even anticipate the questions people may ask. Go with the flow of the discussion rather than stopping the rapport by moving too quickly to the next question.

It is helpful if you are a good listener. But this is not just about listening for the "correct" answers. Listening is about people – how they react, detecting what they are like and where they are coming from – and remembering who said what so that you can get back to them.

Listening will give you some idea about what the group understands from the Bible passage. You need to react to those answers to decide if you need to ask another question to clarify the point or if you can go deeper into the topic or move on to the next question.

One thing that can be very encouraging is that, if the leader is listening well, he or she can say something like "Bill brought up that idea earlier, can you say something more about it?" or "I can see Sue's point of view but from what Bill said earlier I don't think you would agree with her would you?" Or, if you don't want to put Bill on the spot ask "What do the rest of you think?" It shows that you are listening to people, valuing their answers and allowing their

words shape where the study is going rather than ploughing through question after question from a prescribed script. You need to listen to what people say, remember who said it and mention their name when referring back to what was said.

5. Be flexible.

The meeting does not always go as you had planned. All sorts of unexpected things can happen e.g. you got the timing all wrong and you have only done half the questions before it's time to go home or someone has a crisis that they are going through and it can't wait or a particular aspect of the passage grabs the group and the discussion becomes more relevant and interesting than anything you've prepared or people go way off beam and it is difficult to get them back on track or someone dominates the group and it is hard to get him/her to let other people have a say or someone starts crying. You need wisdom and flexibility to handle these things. You don't have to stick legalistically to what you have prepared. Be flexible enough to go in a different direction if that is required. Don't think that it is imperative to finish all the questions. The study is not all about the leader and what he/she wants to do. It is for the good of the group.

6. Group dynamics.

How do the people react to each other? Who likes whom? Who always seems to disagree with whom? Why are people falling asleep? How will a new person effect the group? What if a non-Christian comes into the group? What do you do with someone who answers every question so that no-one else gets a word in? Some people talk so much you have a job trying to stop them. Other people say so little that when they do say something one of the "talkers" will interrupt and talk over them. I like to handle this by going back to the non-talker when the talker has finished and probe into the non-talker's point by asking questions to get them to expand on their thoughts. These are all questions about group dynamics. I've already touched on some of this in "4. Thinking on your feet". More useful information can be found in books like Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen and Rod Morris (ch 6 Sustaining group members) and Growth Groups by Colin Marshall (ch 7 The games people play).

7. Work out your own questions.

If the booklet caters for the lowest common denominator and your group is more mature than that then you could change the questions or write completely new ones. Think carefully because you want these new questions to be better than the booklet questions.

Some group members are conditioned to answering the booklet questions only and they object if you change things. They may be disappointed that they didn't get the chance to give their answers. You may have to compromise by using some booklet questions and some of your own. You could give your group your questions a week before the study to give them time to prepare their answers. I've been in a group that were so conditioned to answering the booklet questions that whenever I introduced my own question they criticised the question itself rather than attempting to answer it.

Another group I met with never used a set booklet. A different person would lead each week and they would make up all their own questions. It usually worked well and certainly provided a lot of variety to the studies.

There are different types of questions that you need to devise i.e. an opening or launching question, comprehension questions, investigative questions, challenging questions, application questions, curly questions and a closing question. Sometimes it is better to come up with opening and closing questions *after* you've worked out all the other questions. This is because you need an **opening question** that leads into the general ideas of the study (and you don't know those general ideas until you've finished preparing the study) and a **closing question** that sums up the study and/or that encourages members to think further on some of the ideas presented by the study. I've written more on the opening question in my article "Opening question and its importance".

Some other types of questions that you might like to use are:

Review question. After the opening question it is good to review what you studied last time. I usually write a section in the study called "The story so far . . ." but instead you could have a review question. Here are some examples taken from Writing a Small Group Study p. 75 by Richard Sweatman:

What was the previous study about?

What have you learnt so far from this book?

If you were to choose a soundtrack for this book so far, what would you choose?

Here's a quiz from our previous studies, best score wins a prize.

Comprehension questions are also called observation questions. These are helpful to make sure members have read the passage, understand what it says and start them thinking. Don't make these questions too easy or it will seem like you are treating your members like little kids. In Sticky Church (page 71) Larry Osborne says "one of the most annoying things about being in a small group is what I call the idiot questions. It seems as if every workbook and study guide has plenty of them. They're the questions with blindingly obvious answers. I used to think, "Come on, can't we skip this stuff?" But in reality we can't. The idiot questions are a necessary part of the process. They make sure everyone is on the same page and understands the background and context to the more substantive things we'll talk about later, There's really no way around them."

Investigative questions are also called into-the-Bible or interpretation questions. These questions move your group from observing what is there in the passage to understanding what it means. The aim of these questions is so that members can put the author's ideas into their own words i.e. members will be able to say "I get it".

Application questions make the group think how they can apply the passage to their daily lives. For example "How can you promote the unity of your church?" or "How is the gospel bearing fruit in your life?"

Challenging questions should get people to think outside the box, maybe challenging long held assumptions or ideas. For example "What role does the Old Testament law play in a Christian's life today?" or "Is a Bible study group just as much church as what we do on Sundays?" Some studies group the comprehension questions together and the investigative questions together and the challenging questions together. You might have a couple of comprehension questions first then mix investigative and challenging questions together as they come up in the Bible passage.

Curly questions and challenging questions are similar except that a particularly curly question may be appropriate as a closing question to finish the study and leave members with something to think about. For example "Can you be a Christian and not go to church?" or "How much of what people believe is because of their ignorance and how much is an act of the will?"

Summary question. At the end of the study, instead of giving the summary yourself you could ask a question to get group members to summarise what you have studied.

For example "If you had to summarise tonight's passage in a single sentence what would you say?"

Combine your sentence with people from the rest of your group to hone and settle on a summary."

Work out questions that are consistent with the interests, intellectual level and maturity of the group. Don't ask questions that are too easy or they will get bored or think you are being condescending. Ask questions that will stretch the group's thinking but not so hard that they go over their heads. Be careful to word your questions so that it is clear what you are asking. Ask questions which are relevant. Bible studies don't have to be all questions. Use variety e.g. film clips or music. Try different things but don't be put off if something doesn't work. Modify it if you can and it may work next time.

8. Add variety. (I've quoted from parts of my article "Variety".)

Even if the booklet questions are good they hardly ever incorporate any variety. Variety is a great way to enliven your group. The Bible has life-giving words but it is possible to present it in the same way week after week so that it becomes monotonous. The Bible itself is full of variety e.g. poetry, songs, narrative, apocalyptic, humour, parables and letters to friends. So why not add a bit of variety to your Bible studies? It doesn't take much extra work but, strangely, it is seldom encouraged.

Occasionally you could use:

- videos (e.g. Rob Bell made a series of 24 short videos (10-14 mins) dealing with topics like security, love, church, prayer, forgiveness, assurance, harmony, hope, wealth, anger, identity, freedom, suffering, generosity and grace).
- excerpts from films
- songs (make sure you give everyone a copy of the words)
- soundbites from talks or sermons (keep them short)
- pictures and maps (you'll need a fairly big screen and make sure everyone can see it. PowerPoint is a handy program if you can hook the screen up to a computer).
- guests (You don't *have to* do a Bible study every week. You could invite a guest speaker once in a while e.g. someone with some interesting ideas, someone with a special ministry that you want to encourage or a visiting missionary. You could invite a Bible study leader from another group to lead your group just for a change or swap your usual Bible study leader with the leader from another group.)

- activities (You could specify particular activities like writing a letter of encouragement to someone or visiting a refugee centre or doing evangelism or doing odd jobs for old or disabled people. Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen & Rod Morris has a section (pages 135-142) on games and activities. These are intended to help people get to know each other better but some of these could be modified as an opening question or activity for the study.

The possibilities for variety are endless. Use your imagination but make sure it is relevant. Ask what other Bible study groups are doing. Craig Hamilton in Wisdom in Leadership has some interesting ideas in helping you think more creatively (see chapter 60).

9. Opening, closing & timing. (I've quoted from parts of my article "Opening question and its importance".)

At some stage the study will finish and everyone will go home. The leader needs to keep an eye on the time as there is probably a pre-arranged finish time. Working back from that finish time you may want to **summarise** what has been covered in the study and then ask an interesting question that will keep people thinking after the study is over. If, during the course of the study, you realise you are not going to get through all the questions then you may want to skip to the summary and then ask the **closing question**.

Most Bible studies begin with tea, coffee and biscuits and a bit of a chat with people. Eventually everyone is sitting down and ready to begin. Someone prays and the leader asks his first question. What do you want to do with this **opening/first/launching question**? Soon we will be moving into serious matters about the Bible and how we are to live. So we are moving from superficial chatting to getting serious. A good opening question should fit in between the chatting bit and the getting serious bit and the question could provide some fun as well.

The leader should know roughly where he wants to take the group in the course of the study. A good opening question can start people on that journey. Ideally, a good opening question will be able to introduce the theme of the study. If possible the opening question should be one where everyone can give an answer. If you have a question which has a correct answer then as soon as someone gives that answer then that's the end of it. No-one is going to give the same answer again. So the question needs to be one which doesn't have a right or wrong answer but everyone can answer differently according to their own experiences and feel comfortable about giving that answer - nothing too personal at the beginning. If you can get everyone involved at the beginning then it is more likely they will participate in the subsequent Bible questions.

If possible it is nice to have a closing question that both relates to the whole study and is somehow connected to the opening question. If you can do this then it gives the feeling that the study has been unified in its purpose and you have made progress during the course of the study.

10. Feedback.

Feedback from wise and discerning members can help you prepare better next time. Saying it was good doesn't help much. I'd rather have critical analysis on specific areas. Criticism is an opportunity to find your mistakes and be better prepared next time.

Ask other leaders in other Bible study groups how it went for them. Did they do anything a bit different or innovative for their studies and how did it go? Have group members grown? How can you tell? What did their members think of the booklet?

The success of a Bible study doesn't necessarily depend on the extent of preparation by the leader. One of the best studies I went to was led by a lady who admitted not having much time to prepare and she wasn't sure how it would go. In that case the study was a success because it excited conversation and involvement in the members. But this is not an excuse for poor preparation. Do whatever you can in the time you have available.