

# Set Booklet and its Use

There are advantages and disadvantages with using a set booklet or a set list of questions.

## Advantages:

1. You don't have to re-invent the wheel. The author has already done the hard work and so you don't have to re-do it to prepare the study. It takes a lot of time to prepare a Bible study from scratch and the leader may not have that much time. You can still incorporate your own thoughts and questions into the set booklet or list and/or modify or ignore some things.

Karen & Rod Morris have a different view<sup>1</sup>: "A fallacy about study guides is that they do not require as much preparation as a normal study. Our experience is they take as much time to modify for your own use as writing a study from scratch does." Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen & Rod Morris page 103.

2. "[G]ood quality study guides are useful if they help to ensure the quality of your content when doing thematic studies." Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen & Rod Morris page 103.

3. The set booklet or list has questions which members can answer before coming to the meeting. It is better to have at least read the passage before the meeting and better still to have done some thinking about it, which is hopefully what answering the questions will do.

4. In Sticky Church (pages 84-85) Larry Osborne wants members to answer the set questions before coming to the Bible study because he says it improves the quality of the discussion. To make sure everyone has done their homework he recommends leaders periodically ask members to read out their answers. He says this has two advantages. "First, it keeps extroverts and those who like to shoot from the hip from dominating the meeting. Second, it undercuts the natural tendency we all have to let the first person who speaks set the tone and framework for everyone else's answer." Osborne's methods may be too high control and pushy for an Australian context.

## Disadvantages:

1. The author of the set booklet or questions has his/her own interpretation of the passage which may not be the same as the leader's.

2. The author may want to emphasise things that the leader does not e.g. some authors see evangelism in nearly every passage. "Most published studies are based on the comprehension question technique, and many use a passage as a jumping off point rather than the focus of the study. They stretch a text in order to develop an idea." Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen & Rod Morris page 103.

3. The set booklet or list may be dumbed down to suit an audience that is not at the same level as your Bible study group. I've found that booklets are more often dumbed down than over our heads. The leader should have a good understanding of what the group is capable of handling and maybe make his/her questions a little more challenging to stretch the group's thinking.

4. Sometimes members get disappointed if you don't go over all the answers to the set questions. So the leader needs to make it clear what he/she is going to do with the use of the booklet and whether or not members should do the questions before coming to the meeting. A compromise may be what is needed by using some of the booklet's questions and some of the leader's own questions.

“Study guides become a problem if the aim of the group becomes to complete the questions rather than to understand the passage. It is OK not to answer every question. Many discussions have been cut short so the group could move on in order to complete the questions. This is a problem! **A study guide is an aid to understanding a passage. The passage should never become an aid for completing the study guide.**” Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen & Rod Morris page 103 (their emphasis in bold).

5. Sometimes no-one does the homework (by answering the questions in the set booklet or list) and the leader gets disappointed. You need to communicate your expectations. Leaders need to be prepared to lead the group through the passage to get them to a stage where they are capable of answering the questions and even having a go at the more challenging questions.

6. People can become dependent on study guides and commentaries rather than think for themselves about the Bible passage.

7. Sometimes the booklet has too many questions or too few questions to fill the time for the study. Don't be afraid to finish early. Sometimes people appreciate an early night. If there are too many questions don't be afraid to cut some out and have a good finishing question to aim for, to round off the study.

“Most published studies are intended for use in sessions of 60 to 90 minutes, while many groups have only 45 to 60 minutes available. The group can easily find itself consistently running out of time and consequently failing to apply the passage. We suggest you work through the study yourself in order to check that it deals well with the passage and focuses on its central theme. Then prepare a leader's version by deciding which questions you will answer and which ones you will ignore.” Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen & Rod Morris pages 103-104

8. Some of the set questions may be for private study. In a Bible study group you want questions that promote discussion rather than too much introspection.

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Personally, I prefer to write my own studies to suit my own Bible study group. Most of the members go to the same church<sup>2</sup> which issues a set booklet in conjunction with a sermon series. Some people like to follow the set booklet and are annoyed if I don't. So I try to compromise by using some of the set questions and some of my own.

1. I've quoted extensively from a section called “A comment on study guides” from Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen & Rod Morris. Colin Marshall also has a useful section called “Using pre-packaged Bible studies” in Appendix 2 in his book Growth Groups.

2. 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.