

What to Study

Scenario 1: You are in a Bible study group at the beginning of the year. Most of the people in the group go to the same church¹ and that church has already decided what they would like their Bible study groups to study. How did they arrive at that decision?

Scenario 2: You are in a Bible study group at the beginning of the year. The members go to different churches, or not at all, and so the people make their own decisions on what they do. How do you decide what you are going to study?

Scenario 1, the church decides.

My wife and I went to the same church for 20 years and I kept a record of what we studied every term. The senior minister used my list to help him decide what to study next. I think he didn't want to study books we had recently done. His yearly system (with some variations) was to study, term by term, a gospel or part of a gospel, a New Testament letter, an Old Testament book, and a series on doctrine. Consequently, the New Testament was studied much more than the Old Testament.

The ministers at this church showed a strong preference for commercial booklets (Matthias Media Interactive Bible Studies and Pathway Bible Guides were favourites). So their selection of what book of the Bible to study depended largely on which booklets were available.

Ministers rarely ask their congregation what they want to study. Once in 20 years the ministers asked what topics we'd like to study in conjunction with the sermons because they were having a series of evangelistic sermons and wanted to know what people were interested in. Never did they ask which book of the Bible we'd like to study.

Another time some groups had departed from doing what the ministers had prescribed and had studied Rick Warren's The Purpose Driven Life over two terms. Next year the ministers wrote a very similar booklet called The Purpose of Our Life which they wanted all the Bible study groups to do.

Scenario 2, the Bible study group decides.

Here are some things you might like to consider:

- Discuss ideas on what you might study e.g. a book of the Bible, Old Testament or New Testament, overview of the whole Bible or just New Testament or just Old Testament, topic or series of topics, doctrine, a Christian book (one group I was in worked through Knowing God by J.I.Packer chapter by chapter).
- Sometimes a number of members are interested in the same issue like prayer, the Holy Spirit, work, refugees, church, sex before marriage, gifts, money and giving, judgement, growth, evangelism, war, politics, New Age, the occult etc.
- Ask what other groups are doing.
- Are there good commercial Bible study booklets available and choose from one of those?
Are there websites where can download booklets?
- How much time do the leaders have in order to prepare the studies from scratch? If preparation time is limited then it might be better to go for a pre-written booklet and modify sections to suit your group.

- Think and pray about your decision before making it.

Whether the church decides or your Bible study group decides, I personally like to be asked what I'd like to study. Even if my preferences never get taken up it is nice to be valued enough to be asked. Once the decision has been made it is a good idea to explain the reasoning behind the selection.

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 two completely different things.