

GOD of the WORD Bible Studies: Leading a Discussion

I. Advance Preparation: *Prior preparation* is the key to successfully facilitating a discussion.

A. Complete your own lesson first. Underlining the key word or phrase in the question will enable you to identify exactly what the question is asking for at a glance (a name, a verse number, an opinion, a phrase, a list, etc.), in case you get distracted during the discussion or the group veers off track.

B. Plan the timing of your discussion in advance.

- Your group will be frustrated if you fail to discuss all of the questions. Invariably, someone’s favorite question will be one of those at the end. Additionally, you have probably presented the study as an 11, 12, 13, or 14-week study. If you carry over questions to the next week, you will fail to keep what is perceived by your group as a commitment to end the study on a certain date.
- To assist you in keeping the group on track, place a clock time (for example, 10:00, 10:03, etc.) next to each question on your own lesson (the challenges of monitoring the time while allowing the group to have a meaningful and lively discussion are covered later in this guide). As a guide to determining how much time you might spend on each question, consider the nature of each question.
 - Level 1 Questions (sometimes called “open and shut” questions): These are questions with a clear and succinct answer that should be apparent to the group. Give these the least amount of time, since no real discussion is generally needed. It is not true that there is “no such thing as a wrong answer.” If the question asks for the name of Jesus’ mother, obviously the only answer is, “Mary.” Allow one person to give the answer and immediately move on. Asking, “Does anyone have anything to add?” only confuses the group and wastes time. Contrary to the example above, many “open and shut” questions do not have answers that the average person knows without consulting the text. It is important for you to know what the correct answer is, so you don’t move on until it is given but do move on once it is.

- Level 2 Questions (requiring thought and research within the Bible text): The time you allow to discuss these will vary greatly depending on the question. In your preparation, you must evaluate each question, gauging how enriching it's discussion will be to the spiritual lives of the individuals. Questions that lead to the clarification of Bible doctrines are critical to spiritual growth, while questions that ask for personal opinions or speculation have far less value, even though they may be fun to discuss. Also, some questions will simply take longer to answer than others.
- Level 3 Questions (personal application): Ideally, the most amount of time should be devoted to discussing the personal application questions (each lesson generally has five), but the time will vary depending on the particular question. Discussion facilitators are leaders, and as such, accountable to the Lord to encourage the group members to *apply* what they learn, both by example (sharing your own personal and specific life application from time to time) and by regularly reminding the group that *life change* is the ultimate goal of discipleship. Personal application questions are given priority since they move us to that end.

C. Bring a watch you can easily read to keep track of time, unless a clock is available in the room in which you meet. Find a creative way to keep it within your line of vision, yet out of the line of vision of your group: you do not want to give the group the impression that watching the clock is a higher priority than listening attentively to what they share. Learning how to balance good stewardship of time with genuine interest in those in your group is critical. If your temperament is task-oriented, monitoring the time (or checking answers for completeness) can take too high of a priority. On the other hand, if you are people-oriented, time may easily escape you. Ask the Lord to develop you into a well-balanced leader.

D. Using nametags on an ongoing basis will save you the embarrassment of forgetting the name of someone in your group and help others get to know one another. It is helpful to keep a stack with the items you bring to the discussion each week or to ask someone in your group to take this responsibility.

E. Pray! Pray! Pray!

II. Setting Group Expectations

A. Your First Meeting: Ideally, you will meet once with your group before your first Bible study discussion to talk about the nature of the study, to establish group expectations, and to hand out the first lesson. Your group needs to know what they can expect from the study, what they can expect from you, and what you expect of them. Setting group expectations in the beginning prevents confusion and helps avoid complications that can arise in group discussion. Should certain difficulties later occur, it also gives you a basis upon which to address them. *GOD of the WORD Instructions* was designed to help you explain and establish such expectations. In presenting them, try to avoid using imperatives, such as, *Don't* (do this)," or "*Make sure you* (do that)]," or "*You must* (do this)." Instead, emphasize the ways in which they benefit each group member, and the group as a whole.

B. Ongoing Reminders: Most of your group will immediately recognize the benefits and happily comply, but for a few, the methods and approach will be new and challenging. Occasionally, you may also have a group member with emotional needs that strain or hinder healthy group dynamics. For these reasons, you will do the entire group a great service by reviewing *one* of the agreed upon expectations in a brief statement every week or two. The idea is to try to head-off difficulties before they develop. If a particular problem does occur, review the expectation that addresses it the very next week. It is best to do this just before the discussion begins. Again, be positive, focusing on the benefits, but also be clear. For example, you might

- remind the group that you would like the discussion to be well-balanced. If they have had one or two opportunities to share their answers, ask them to kindly allow others the same opportunity before giving additional input.
- remind them of a goal: "Our goal is to have an interesting discussion and hear some ideas that get us thinking, not necessarily to exhaust everything that can be said about each question."
- a reminder of your role: "My role is to facilitate group discussion by ensuring we have an interesting, informative, and lively discussion. Since the purpose of this time is *group* sharing and discussion, I won't be directly answering the questions for you."

III. Beginning the Discussion

A. Tone: Begin every meeting by welcoming your group warmly. Use good eye contact and smile. You set the tone for the group. If you speak very quietly, they will also; if you act disinterested or bring too little energy to the group, they will become bored with the discussion; if you interrupt others, they will too.

- B. Opening Statement:** Take less than a minute to give an opening statement. Beginning with a “thank you” or an encouraging statement about having experienced rich sharing the previous week, great attendance, etc. will have a very positive influence in the group. Follow up (every week or two) with a very brief reminder of one of the goals or expectations. Your opening statement is not a time to give devotional thoughts, quotes from sermons or radio teachers, readings, interesting news items, etc.
- C. Getting Lessons and Bibles Ready:** Ask the group members to pull out their lessons and open their Bibles to the appropriate place. Opening Bibles to the focus passage(s) before you begin will save time later when someone references a specific verse in their answer.

IV. Leading the Discussion

A. Keep the focus on the group, not yourself: Maintain an attitude of servant-leadership. You are there to serve others, not to be served. For this reason, talk as little as possible during the discussion. You will read the questions, inform the group when it is time to move to the next question, and give a brief word of encouragement or acknowledgment to those who share (one important exception is described later in this guide). This can be difficult for individuals with teaching gifts, but once you begin offering answers to the questions, your group will be less and less willing to participate in discussion. If they believe you will eventually give “the answer,” sharing their own thoughts and discoveries will seem unnecessary. In the *GOD of the WORD* studies, a Closing Summary (final talk/lecture) follows the discussion. If you are the one giving the Closing Summary, then that is your time to talk and share.

B. Body language is important!

- Smile when you talk.
- Turn your body toward the person talking.
- Ideally, your legs and arms should be uncrossed (an “open” posture).
- Give eye contact and show you are following what is being said with facial expressions (nodding, smiles, raised eyebrows, etc.).

C. Reading the Questions

- Read each question *number*, along with the question, so that people who have gotten distracted or lost their place in the lesson can quickly find it.
- It is boring for the group to listen to you read long lists of scripture references that sometimes appear within the questions. Shorten the question by substituting a phrase like, “from the listed passages” or “in the verses from Deuteronomy, Romans and Revelation,” skipping all the reference numbers.

D. Discussion Leading Strategies

- After reading the question, allow some silence, but if too much time passes and no one has volunteered an answer, call on someone, particularly individuals who haven't yet shared anything.
- From time to time, call on individuals by name just to keep everyone alert and the discussion from dragging. However, if you do this for every question, the discussion will feel too controlled.
- On a rare occasion, if the group remains silent, it may be necessary to say, "Well, if no one has anything to share then we will move on." Usually, upon hearing this, someone will be prompted to speak. If not, follow through and move on. However, you shouldn't do this regularly.
- Be gracious but clear that you plan to stick with discussing the printed questions. They are certainly not the only good questions that can be asked about the Bible passages in the lesson. However, they *are* the questions your group has pondered prior to your meeting. Please never interject additional questions to those on the printed material or your group will feel free to begin doing the same. Although many "think tanks" operate successfully this way, it is the sound advice of experienced Bible study leaders *not* to lead your Bible study in such a fashion. In addition to a host of other problems, the group will be frustrated that they have prepared answers to questions that you will not end up having time to discuss. This causes them to lose motivation to prepare their lessons in the future. Allowing for interjection of additional questions also alienates some of the group, since one or two deep thinkers or especially talkative folks usually end up dominating the discussion.
- Be prepared to graciously but firmly move the group on...
 - If someone "corners" another class member by asking them to answer a question they pose, or tries to give them advice.
 - When someone's sharing leads the group off on a secondary subject.
 - When you have exhausted the time planned for that question. ("This sharing has been great, but if we don't move on we might not get to the last question, which might have been the most important for one of us this week.")
 - When someone's sharing is so personal that it is inappropriate for the group to hear. This rarely happens, but it can be very awkward for the entire group. Examples would be sharing details concerning one's sex life (especially within a mixed-gender group), or giving information about a friend or relative that the individual surely wouldn't want shared. Interrupt the person by speaking their name. You then might say something like, "*I'm concerned that you are sharing something you might later wish you hadn't shared with all of us [or that the person of whom you're speaking wouldn't want shared]. I can tell this is important and I*

would love to talk with you about it after our meeting.” Another approach would be, “*This sounds so important that I would like [name your co-leader] to take you to [name a private space that you and your coleader have prearranged for such circumstances] and pray with you right now.*” This second approach is perhaps best, but it is dependent on advanced preparation for such a circumstance. If you do not have a co-leader, you might ask one of the more mature and trustworthy members of your group to be ready to take this role.

- If everyone seems confused about a question, trying rereading it emphasizing the key words. If you are sure the group understands the question yet there is still confusion or uncertainty, suggest they listen for the answer in the Closing Summary. On the rare occasion when everyone in the group is very wrong in their thinking you may need to read together the verse(s) where the answer can be found.
- If there is no immediate response by anyone in the group to an application-oriented question, be prepared to share your own personal application. Doing this from time to time will allow the group get to know you better. It is also an opportunity for you to model *appropriate, current, and personal* sharing. This is the one exception to the policy of the discussion leader not answering the questions.

E. Responding to Answers

- The group will not know how to interpret your silence if you say nothing after someone shares an answer. The key to responding appropriately is careful listening to what each individual says.
 - When you respond, address the individual by name. Give them eye contact, a smile, and a very brief phrase or sentence of acknowledgement, such as, “You obviously read the text very closely,” “Good insight,” or “That is interesting.” Sometimes, a nod or a simple, “Thank you, [name],” is sufficient.
 - The counseling technique in which you regularly repeat or rephrase a person’s response back to them is not beneficial in small group Bible study discussion. The group (or at least that individual) may begin to feel they are unable to communicate clearly enough to bother sharing. However, occasionally someone may have misspoken and you might need to ask for clarification so that the group isn’t left confused.
- When someone gives a questionable or unscriptural answer:
 - Ask for the scripture reference the individual used to get their answer.
 - Thank the person for their response and then call on someone you believe has a better grasp on the teachings of the Bible. For example, “That’s interesting, Steve. Joan, how did you answer this question?”

V. Practicing Balanced Leadership Ask the Lord to give you *gracious authority*. It takes grace and courage to be a good leader. Sometimes, leading well means you must confront an individual who refuses to follow courteous guidelines. If you fail to address problems, you have let down the rest of the group. Group members will be silently frustrated and eventually, may not return. On the other hand, a group will also be frustrated if they feel the leader is too controlling.

A. Be gracious:

- Allow some silence and pauses, but don't allow too much wasted time.
- Smile, give eye contact, and give loving and meaningful responses or a nod after someone has shared.
- Make sure you are not the center of attention; give short, affirming responses without repeating back everything a person says or asking unexpected personal questions of them.
- Seek assistance from experienced leaders in handling sticky situations with grace.
- Work at creating a relaxed atmosphere in the group, not a rigid one.

B. Be authoritative:

- Don't let someone else take over your role as the discussion leader. Allowing someone else to steer the conversation will confuse and frustrate the group. Pray God will give you confidence to do the job He has given you.
- Don't allow one individual to do most of the talking.
- Tell the group when it is time to move on.
- Call on people to share, as needed.
- Keep your group on the subject.

C. Your personality: Your own temperament will probably cause you to naturally tend toward being a bit of a “drill sergeant” (an autocratic, dictatorial, controlling leader) or a leader who is easily overrun by others (a passive, “too soft” leader). You know yourself. Work toward the middle ground – that place where you exert gracious but definite leadership. When your leadership style is well balanced, your group will feel relaxed and more eager to share.