

TheWordWorks

Small Group bible Study Module 1: For the bible study group leader How to lead a bible study

Leading a bible study

1. What is the role/function of the bible study leader?

The bible study leader is a **NOT** like a tour guide on a bus or a museum.

- He does not explain what the group is looking at
- He does not give answers to questions
- He does not do most of the talking
- He does not do most of the work of studying the bible

The bible study leader is more like **a guide on a camping or safari trip or up a mountain.**

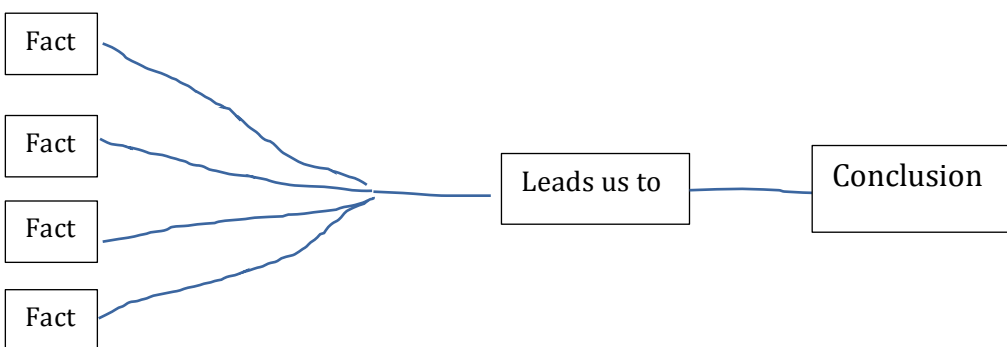
- He helps the bible study members move from their start point to the final destination by guiding them through the bible
- The bible study members have to do most of the hard work of travelling through the bible
- The leader makes sure that
 - no one gets left behind
 - the group doesn't fall off the cliff into error or wrong understanding
 - the group doesn't get stuck and never reaches the destination

Instead of guiding his members through fields and forests or mountains, the bible study leader will be guiding his members through a journey into the bible.

2. How do you guide the group?

Since you are guiding the group and not giving a sermon, you need to make the group do the hard work of working through the bible together.

That means that you need to keep getting the group to keep returning to the bible and thinking about it. The process is that the leader needs to keep pushing the group to go through the bible passage and identifying the facts and corporately come up with the right conclusion:



The tools that the group uses to find the facts is to:

- observe the text
- interpret the text
- apply the text

What this means in practice/action

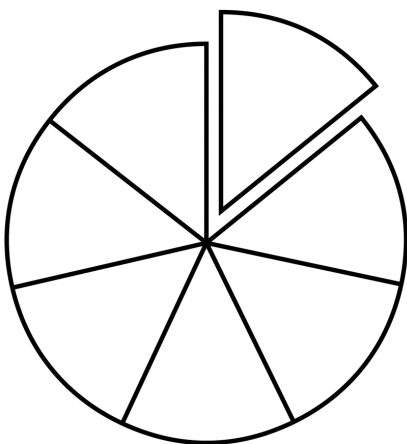
The leader needs to keep the group focusing exclusively on the text. Beware of outside inputs such as commentaries, study bible notes, what the person heard John Piper say about this passage on the internet.

Since every bible study relies mainly on the inputs of its members, every bible study will be different. The same bible study group may even be different on different occasions based on the mood or concentration and participation of members. The reason is that we give the group the freedom to interact together to make the correct observations, interpretations and applications to the passage.

However, the temptation for bible study leaders is to keep talking. It is very uncomfortable for the leader to have silence in the bible study group. Restrain yourself – let the silence go on and let the group step up.

One helpful model to have is the pie/pizza chart model. This means that the leader aims for everyone in the group to participate or speak the same amount in the group.

This is helpful as it ensures that participation levels remain high across all members of the group.



Each person including the leader has equal participation and speaking in the bible study

In any hike, it is up to the leader to keep motivation high and keep pushing the group on towards the destination. But a hike is not a military march with a full pack and a sergeant screaming at the soldiers. The group can set its own pace and stop at different spots of interest. The younger members can learn from the experience of the older members. It is meant to be an enjoyable and interesting experience.

In order for the group to keep its forward momentum, it is important for all members to be engaged and contributing. As a rule, if someone does not participate or contribute in the last 10 minutes, they may be less likely to contribute for the rest of the study. If this happens too often, discussion and contribution slowly disappears as the study goes on. By the end of the study, the leader is left having a small discussion with 2-3 more vocal members while the rest listen in. As such, it is important to keep your pie/pizza chart in mind and make sure that everyone has a bite/piece of the pie/pizza every 10 minutes or so.

This can mean deliberating addressing the men/ladies for an answer or saying that this side of the table has been quiet for awhile, let's hear what they have to say or even asking 3 people who have been quiet – 'Tim, Lynn and Loh, what do you think?'. Try to avoid asking individuals directly as this is

very confronting and can be very uncomfortable if the person cannot answer your question or answers wrongly. This may actually have the opposite effect and lead to the person not answering anymore questions again.

There must be a balance between Control and Freedom.

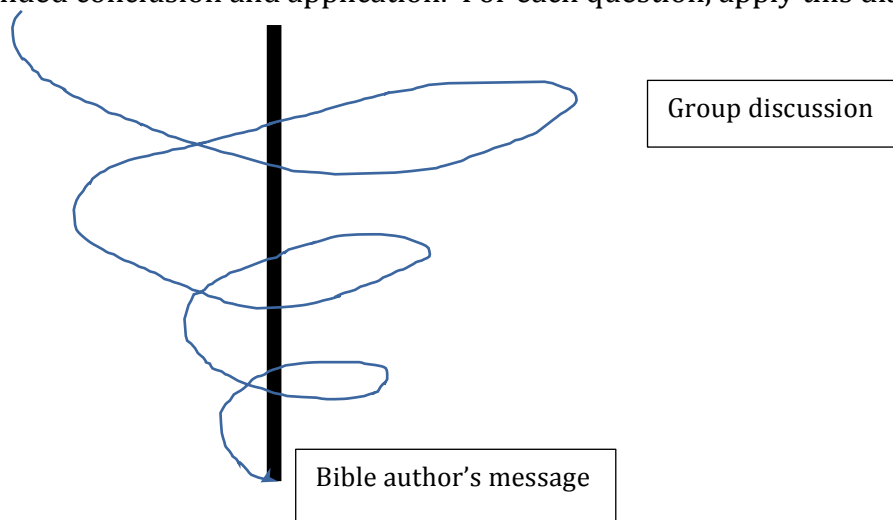
Too much control like a military march inhibits participation and discussion. What kills discussion? If the leader comes up with the right answer, corrects every answer, does not take into consideration the inputs of the group. Any action that shows control, evaluation, superiority will inhibit discussion. For instance, if the leader says ‘the commentary says this’ or ‘the Hebrew text says this’, all participation and discussion immediately is killed and momentum is halted.

The key is to continue to keep participation high and to make sure everyone is engaged and contributing.

At the same time, too much freedom can mean that there is no right or wrong answer and there is truth in what everyone thinks. When that happens, the group fails to reach its destination of what the bible actually says. Wrong conclusions are reached and the group goes away confused. In the worst-case scenario, this freewheeling consensus style of bible study becomes a judge of Scripture.

¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Acts 17:10-11

One helpful model is to see the leaders role as guiding the discussion closer and closer towards the bible’s intended conclusion and application. For each question, apply this diagram:



The group must come up with the right answer. The final answer must be a summary of the combined inputs of the group. If the group have not come up an answer that is close to the correct answer then more work needs to be done by the group.

We listen at church, we read in our quiet time but we talk at Bible study.

The key thing that the leader needs to do is ask questions, questions, and more questions!!!

The main tool in the leaders arsenal is asking questions.

The key principle must be: **Don't tell them what they can work out for themselves from the passage.**

Probing is the best description of the leader here. The aim is to get the group thinking and contributing through challenging, correcting, refining, and dismissing in a gentle way.

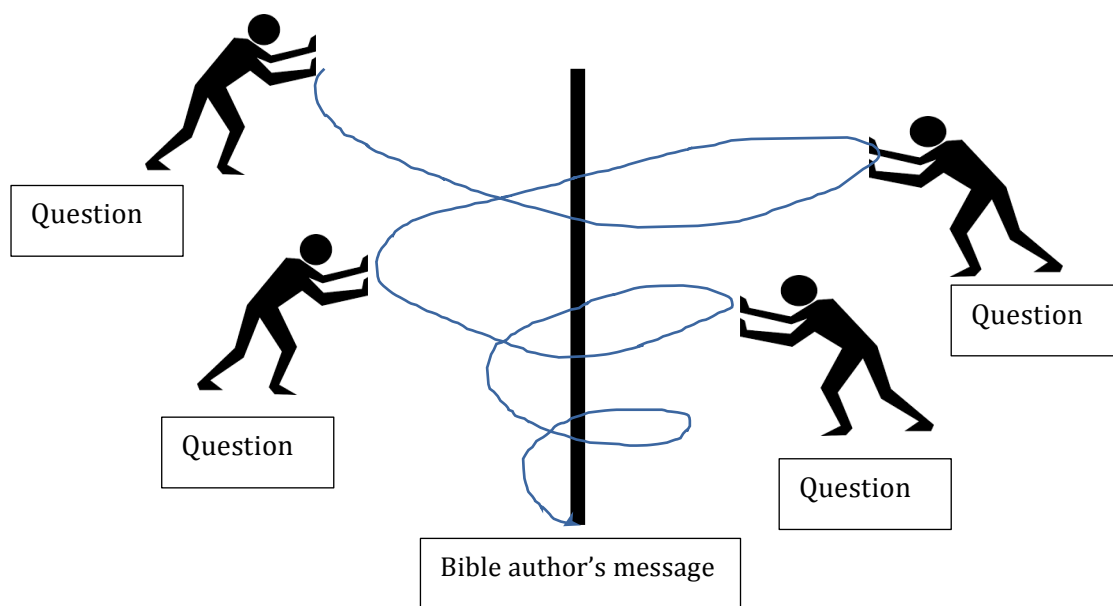
The goal of the questions is to keep getting them to go back to the Bible. The goal of the questions is to keep pushing closer to the right conclusion from the passage.

Ask questions such as:

- **Extending:** What can you add to that? Could you explain that more fully?
- **Clarifying:** What do you mean by that? Could you re-phrase that statement?
- **Justifying:** What reason can you give for that? Why do you say that? Can you explain that from the passage?
- **Re-directing:** What do others think? Jim or Jack, could you summarise what Jane said?
- **Reflecting:** So what you are saying is this? Is that right?
- **Confronting:** I hear what you are saying but why does verse 12 say this instead?
- **Restate** the Bible study question
- **Summarise** the answer and ask a question in response to the summary. **Refer** the group to what has been said so far and ask another leading question
- **Simplify** the question
- **Point** to the section of verses, ask questions about repeated key words or linking words or surprising words
- Get them to **break up** into smaller groups

Over time, with practice, you will get better at judging what type of questions to use for your group. Don't keep going back to the same well worn questions. Keep your group on their toes. Toss up different types of questions.

Using the previous diagram, questions are meant to push the group to the right conclusion of the text.



A certain subtlety and finesse is important in your leading. You do not know what sort of points will be contributed to by the group. Don't just try to bulldoze through the bible study questions or treat it all like a quiz to be answered. Deal with the topics and inputs as they come in. Let the group know you are listening to them and responding to their participation. Recognise that the group is genuinely setting the agenda and you are valuing their responses.

That is why preparation is very important for the leader. You must be fully engaged with what the group is saying and contributing. You cannot be thinking about what you want to say and what the passage is saying at this point. You need to know what the final destination is or the correct conclusion of the section and adjust your questions accordingly to help the group get there.

What makes a good question to extend and move discussion in the right direction?

Not all questions are the same. Some questions are better than others in facilitating discussion and input.

For example, a written bible study on a passage may be as short as 3 questions or as long as 25 questions. However, by asking good questions, the leader of both written studies will still arrive at the same conclusions by the bible study group.

Here are some good characteristics of a good discussion question:

- **Open ended, not closed.** Closed questions often can be answered with a simple 'Yes' or 'No'. They are by nature, limit the possible responses by the listener. Open ended questions require a thoughtful response. They often begin with 'What', 'Why' or 'How'.
Open question: What does it mean when you said this passage means that we continue to live in Christ?
Closed question: What are the 2 ways to continue to live in Christ?
Closed question: Is God concerned that we continue to live in Christ?
- **Doesn't anticipate the answer.** Questions should not be leading. Questions which lead the group in a certain direction to make the group think hard enough. It makes things too easy and is not challenging enough. In the law courts, this is commonly known as trying to frame someone.
Leading question: You killed him, didn't you?
Leading question: We should continue to live in Christ, shouldn't we?
- **Simple, not double-barrelled.** Questions that have 2 or more parts confuse the group because they do not know where to start their answers. Each question must only deal with one issue. This is especially true during the back and forth of bible discussion. The leader who asks double-barrelled questions is unlikely to get much response and he may also forget exactly what he asked.
Poor question: What does it mean to continue to live in Christ and why is it important?
- **Concise rather than complex.** Questions should not need further explanation or elaboration. Keep the question simple. Use simple words and short sentences. This is especially in group discussion time.
Poor question: In Paul's discourse on Christology, what is his view of practicing ethics in the context of justification and sanctification?
Good question: Why should Christians keep rules?

- Difficult to simple

The general principle with asking questions to the group is that each successive question should go from difficult to less difficult to simpler to simplest question. Once the group is able to answer to simplest question then you can then move up the scale to more and more difficult questions. That is why we always ask observation questions first then move on to more difficult interpretation questions. By getting the simpler questions right, the group gains confidence to do the difficult questions.

If the group is having trouble with an interpretation question, bring them back to the simpler observation question. Then break the interpretation question into simpler parts and ask that.

3. How to handle different answers from the group as well as silences?

Welcome silence and pauses

Don't be afraid of extended pauses or silence. These are essential for good discussion. Some group members also take longer to respond. By expecting quick responses, we may actually be getting a poorer quality of response from the faster members. If the group know that the leader is uncomfortable with long pauses, they may subconsciously wait for the leader to blurt out the answer.

Especially for application questions, some members may find it difficult to share from their own personal lives. Take more time to allow them to come out of their shell to share their application.

Value every contribution

Every input is valuable because someone has thought about the Bible and put in the effort to help the group understand it better. That means that you need to value it by:

- Actively listening. Do not be distracted thinking of the next question or what you are going to say
- Good body language. Lean forward, turn towards the person, make eye contact.
- Use actual words. Thank the person for their contribution. Show that you have taken their contribution into consideration by summarising it and using their own words in the summary
- Be enthusiastic. Commend the contribution to the group.

Handling wrong or inadequate answers

However, not every contribution will lead to the group getting closer to the right understanding of the passage. Some contributions are wrong. Some contributions are incomplete or inadequate.

If the leader jumps in straight away and corrects every wrong or inadequate answer, what will happen to discussion? It will grind to a halt. Nobody wants to stick out their neck to be chopped off. So the solution is not to chop off heads but to:

- We can ignore the error for the moment and ask for other people's thoughts
- We can probe further and say that the answer is partly right but why have they said this or considered this?
- We can point them to a verse and ask the group how this fits with what this person said

Handling right answers

We might think that handling right answers are easier than handling wrong answers. However, if the right answer comes right at the beginning of the discussion then it is a problem. That is because the rest of the group haven't done the hard work of getting the right answer.

What should we do when this happens? The leader should stay neutral and not give the game away by showing approval or endorse the answer. You might go on to ask the rest of the group what they think. The group or person may complain when they reach the conclusion some time later: "Lim already said that at the beginning!" True but only Lim understood it then. Now everyone does. Remember, the role of the leader is to make sure no one is left behind. One way that people are left behind is for the older, more mature members to monopolise the study and move the study along too fast for the less mature and prepared members. If that happens, then these people give up after awhile, become discouraged and no longer contribute.

4. What is the authority in the bible study?

The authority of the bible study is not the bible study leader! Neither is it the consensus of the group. The group is not there to sit as judge of over the bible. The authority must be clearly seen to be with the bible.

² ... *"This is the one I esteem:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word. Isaiah 66:2*

When the leader goes into the bible study, his attitude must be that he is not the infallible expert or guru and he is also able to learn from the group's contributions to the bible study. It can sometimes be helpful to say: I didn't see that before, that is a good point.

It is also helpful for the bible study leader to lead by example and share how the application of the bible also affects him. As we will see in the section on group life, this modelling shows that it is safe to be sharing vulnerabilities in the group and be sitting under God's word in applying it to difficult real-life situations.

There will also be times when there may be disagreements between the group and the leader. After a period of discussion, it seems that the group's conclusions are different from the Bible study leaders understanding of the passage. What happens then?

- It is possible that the bible passage allows for different valid interpretations. There are also times when the passage itself is not clear on a particular point. In this case, it is ok to disagree. Do not try to force through a conclusion which the passage cannot justify or that you cannot defend from the passage. You will lose the respect of the group and more importantly, the bible will no longer been seen as the authority of the group
- Invalid interpretations of the bible. Sometimes the group is just unable to get to right conclusion of the passage even after extended discussion. Time is running short, people are tired. What do you do? In this case, there may be exceptions where you have to give the group a helping hand by helping them with any obstacles in their discussion. You may wish to summarise the right things that have been said and add your own input to complete the missing link to the right conclusion.
- Don't know. Sometimes the group discussion veers off onto a difficult topic that you know very little about. Don't pretend you know everything. Admit that you don't know much about this topic and say that you will look into this topic. Or else get members to do some research and report back to the group. This approach is much more edifying than pretending you know something when you don't.

One common mistake that is often made is to refer to a commentary or what the pastor said or to the original language. This is unhelpful as it actually communicating that the bible is not the authority but it is the commentator or the pastor. It is also cheating/unfair in the bible study setting as the rest of the group do not have access to the commentary or the original language. If you say “I read that John Stott or Don Carson said this or that”, then all discussion or input ends. After all, if that is what John Stott says, then what more needs to be said?

If the authority is the bible and we are in a bible study, then we all must go back to the bible to get our answers. That means that the leader and the group are all working from the same source. That is why it is sometimes important to set the group guidelines by saying that we are not here to hear what the ESV or NIV study bible notes has to say but let’s work through what God has to say together.

5. What to do when we face controversies discussions/passages

If the bible passage concerns something controversial, the discussion can sometimes get very involved and heated. In order to keep the peace, it may tempting for the bible study leader to move on and sweep things under the carpet. This is because it feels as if we are losing control.

However, this can be a mistake because the very purpose of bible study is to study what the bible has to say – even about controversial and difficult topics. The group members must have the confidence that they are able to have the freedom to discuss all issues and the bible has something meaningful to say about it. If we try to skip difficult passages or topics, it can lead to a loss of confidence by the group in the bible and also in the very purpose of the bible study itself. It is as if we are putting some parts of the Bible off limits to discussion.

Often, discussing these passages result in the most interest, participation and discussion. It can lead to people to do their best learning and changing.

6. Apply the bible

Some bible studies think that bible study is all about knowledge. That is incorrect. The bible study is meant to lead to changed lives and changed attitudes and even emotions.

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. 1 John 1

This means that we must take the application questions very seriously and seek to get the group to share honestly with the rest. The group will comprise of many people from a myriad of ages, life experiences and backgrounds. As such, the bible applications shared should be rich and edifying.

However, application questions are challenging and confrontational. Part of being in a healthy group is to make sure that the bible hits home in peoples’ lives and there are real changes witnessed.

The danger is that the leader asks the application question only to be met with a wall of silence. Do not be discouraged! Perhaps share from your own experience. Split the group up into smaller groups. Keep waiting for people to share and wait out the silence.

7. Winding up

There are a number of less than satisfactory endings to a hike: people wandering around aimlessly for a few days, leaving one or two behind, ending up in wrong place. This is called getting lost.

Winding up the discussion helps people in the group not to get lost and to arrive well at their destination.

At the end of the study, you want to

- **Reinforce** the central Big Idea and supporting truths of the passage. Your summary should reflect the group discussion and not your prepared conclusion. If you give your own conclusions you worked out before, the group will feel duped by you. You played a game with them, never intending to take on board their contributions. Also, don't be distressed if everyone does not agree on every single issue. The bible study is a long-term process and people grow in understanding at different speeds and their thinking changes over time. Over time, as they humble themselves before God's word, the bible should do its work of changing them.
- **Highlight** the relevant application.
- **Pray** together about these applications. This part is often skipped because of lack of time but it is arguably the most important part. Don't just pray randomly about what has been happening in my life. Begin by praying about what was learnt in the study and how you want God to change you.

References:

C Marshall. Growth Groups. A Training course in how to lead Small Groups. St Matthias Press Ltd. 1995.

R and K Morris. Leading Better Bible studies. Essential skills for effective small groups. Aquila Press. 1997.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Andrew Ong is pastor in charge at Bethany Trinity Presbyterian Church, Singapore.