

Practical Ministry Skills:

Theological Discussions for Everyone

	Contents	PAGE
	LEADER'S GUIDE.....	2
	Overview	
	LOST GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES <i>by Ed Stetzer</i>	3
	Prepare to Lead	
	LEAD A SUCCESSFUL DISCUSSION WITHOUT A SEMINARY DEGREE <i>by Justin Marr</i>	4
	INTENTIONAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN SMALL GROUPS <i>by Amy Jackson</i>	6
	THE SPIRIT'S ROLE IN SMALL-GROUP LEARNING <i>by Tom Bandy</i>	9
	HOW TO READ THE BIBLE WELL <i>by J. Todd Billings</i>	11
	GET EVERYONE INVOLVED IN THE DISCUSSION <i>by Justin Marr</i>	14
Lead the Discussion		
FIVE QUESTIONS THAT KILL DISCUSSION <i>by Terry Powell</i>	17	
QUESTIONS FOR DIGGING DEEPER <i>by Jeff Arnold</i>	19	
THE POWER OF STUDYING THE WORD <i>by Amy Jackson</i>	21	
NOT EVERYONE LEARNS ALIKE <i>by Roberta Hestenes</i>	23	
Resources		
FURTHER EXPLORATION.....	27	

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

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How to Use This Resource

Take a quick peek here to maximize the content in this training download.

Discussing the Bible as a group can feel daunting. Especially when we have some group members who know a lot and others who are just beginning their walk with God. But the Bible is meant to be accessible for everyone, and your group discussions can open the door for great growth to take place. Rest assured, you can lead discussions that get everyone involved.

Prepare to Lead

Most small-group leaders don't hold seminary degrees—and that's okay! Justin Marr shares what to do if you don't have formal education. Then I'll explain how we grow and change so you can intentionally help group members take the next step. Tom Bandy talks about the Spirit's role in growth and helps you depend on God as you lead. J. Todd Billings explains how to approach the Bible faithfully in your discussions, and "Get Everyone Involved in the Discussion" trains you to lead discussions where everyone can chime in.

Lead the Discussion

Terry Powell shows five types of questions that kill discussion, and Jeff Arnold trains you how to create great questions for your group discussion. "The Power of Studying the Word" reminds you to help group members wrestle with questions rather than giving easy answers. Finally, Roberta Hestenes explains ways to reach everyone in your group with the Bible text.

—AMY JACKSON is Managing Editor of SmallGroups.com.

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THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

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Lost Growth Opportunities

Research shows less than 20 percent of churchgoers read the Bible daily.

By Ed Stetzer

Statistically, you can see a recurring pattern: Bible engagement is directly related to spiritual growth. While it may be possible to become a "better person" by attending church, it's not true spiritual growth. New life in Christ, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and regular Bible engagement are evident in the lives of growing believers.

God's Word is truth, so it should come as no surprise that reading and studying the Bible are still the activities that have the most statistical influence on growth in this attribute of spiritual maturity. As basic as that is, there are still numerous churchgoers who are not reading the Bible regularly. You simply won't grow if you don't know God and spend time in God's Word. Bible reading won't make you a Christian and you can't grow without the power of the Spirit, but engaging the word deeply matters.

However, if tangible life changes are statistically related to Bible engagement in the life of a disciple of Christ, why aren't more reading and studying the Bible?

We've released new research as part of the Transformational Discipleship study that shows only 19 percent of churchgoers personally (not as part of a church worship service) read the Bible every day. That is roughly the same as those who responded "Rarely/Never" (18 percent). A quarter of respondents indicate they read the Bible a few times a week, and 14 percent say they read the Bible "Once a Week" while another 22 percent say "Once a Month" or "A Few Times a Month."

From the release ([read the full story here](#)):

While the majority of churchgoers desire to honor Christ with their lives and even profess to think on biblical truths, a recent study found few actually engage in personal reading and study of the Scriptures.

"Bible engagement" is one of the eight attributes of discipleship identified in the Transformational Discipleship study conducted by LifeWay Research. The study produced the Transformational Discipleship Assessment, which measures an individual's spiritual growth in each of these areas of development.

—ED STETZER is the president of LifeWay Research; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today. This article originally appeared on [The Exchange](#).

Discuss

1. How does knowing that few of your group members are likely reading the Bible affect how you approach Bible and theology discussions in your group?
2. How might having regular fruitful Bible and theology discussions in your group change this statistic for your group members?
3. What has your experience been with reading the Bible? Do you fall into the 19 percent?

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Lead a Successful Discussion Without a Seminary Degree

How one person learned to lead without formal education

By Justin Marr

In college, the first day of spring was always cause for joyous celebration. Our desolate campus suddenly filled with Frisbee games, picnics, and short-sleeves—even though it was still too cold to enjoy them.

But for me, the first day of spring 2006 marked itself with nervous anticipation. I was headed to an interview that would assess whether or not I was qualified to be a small-group leader in our college ministry. The familiar face of one of my campus pastors greeted me as I walked through the double glass doors. He motioned for me to sit across from him at a raised table.

"Have you read every book of the Bible?" the pastor asked, trying to assess my level of knowledge.

"Not yet," I replied. "The first couple of books in the Old Testament and the first couple in the New Testament." He nodded and scribbled a few notes on his pad of paper.

"And how long have you been a Christian?" he asked with a smile. I scratched my forehead and tried to think of how long it had been.

"About four or five months, I suppose," I said. He scribbled a few more notes and made an exaggerated thinking face.

"In what ways do you feel that you're qualified to lead a small group?" I spent half a minute trying to think of a good answer to his question, but no clever statements came to mind.

"I just want to grow," I said finally.

The interview made me feel insecure about my lack of biblical knowledge. I hadn't grown up in the faith and most of my peers were much more qualified to lead a small group. I wanted to live out my faith and minister to others, but there seemed to be a wall between that reality and me. It often felt like I needed a seminary degree to be able to teach my peers something they didn't already know.

Despite my lack of experience, I was granted the opportunity to lead a small group. But that didn't change the facts: I had a great deal to learn. I wanted to lead a group, but I had no confidence in my level of knowledge. Chances were good that nearly everyone in my new small group would know more about the Bible than I did.

I began to panic. I imagined myself in a room full of people sitting in painful silence, waiting for me to teach them something profound. But luckily, my fears didn't manifest in reality. I spent the following four years leading college small groups without a formal education in biblical studies. My insecurities were not immediately dispelled, but I discovered several helpful aids along the way.

I found a co-leader. Two heads are better than one. It's a cliché statement, but it's often true. During my first year facilitating a small group, I led with a fellow who had been my leader the year before. This was helpful on many levels. Not only did he make up for my lack of Biblical knowledge, but also he balanced my personality as an introvert. On the other hand, I was able to bring fresh ideas to the table while being a counter to his extroversion. I helped him discern what a new believer needed to learn from our studies, and he helped educate me in the Bible.

It's extremely valuable to have a co-leader when you start a small group. Sometimes the ministry you're part of will even require it. But if it doesn't, don't be afraid to look for someone who will complement your personality and ask if he or she will lead with you. It isn't an absolute necessity, but it will definitely help bring more of a

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

knowledge background in your study planning. You can't know everything, and everyone brings different interests and understanding to the table. It can make a huge difference in the quality of your Bible discussions.

I learned from a mentor. If you're a small-group leader, you might have some type of mentor overseeing your duties. If you don't, I recommend that you find one. Seek out someone you look up to spiritually and ask him or her to meet with you weekly or biweekly. This is a flattering question and people are usually happy to help others grow—especially if you come eager to learn. Harness the opportunity to meet with someone who knows more than you. Ask questions and run your ideas by him or her.

I was vocal and honest about what I didn't know. You have nothing to gain by keeping quiet when you don't know something. I spent many years facilitating small-group discussions full of people who knew more about the Bible than I did. Lack of knowledge does not disqualify your ability to minister. If something comes up in your small-group discussion that you don't know about, be open and honest. Explain to the group that you don't have the answer. That's okay to do. In fact, by leading the way, you might inspire your group members to be open about what they don't know. This kind of vulnerability creates a great opportunity. Together you can charter new territory that wouldn't be possible alone.

I read (a lot). Leaders are readers. My college pastor loved to repeat this statement like a broken record. It got old quickly, but I'm glad he cemented the sentiment into my head. He was right. If you want to lead, you need to read. There is a wealth of information at our fingertips and all we have to do is pick up a book and spend the time reading it. If you're worried about not having a seminary education, then reading is your best friend.

Read anything you can get your hands on. Read New Testament and Old Testament overview textbooks, read biblical commentaries, and read theological material. If you run into a name or term you don't recognize, look it up online or in a Bible dictionary. I like using the [Faithlife Study Bible](#) which includes study notes, a Bible dictionary, photos, videos, infographics, and more. Plus, it's available online or as an app for many devices.

Don't forget to read the Bible, too. If you haven't read every book of the Bible, make it your mission to do so. As you read each book, you'll start to see how it all ties together as one intricate story. You'll be more prepared to help your group members see the connections between the different books of the Bible.

I found audio classes. If you still want more formal education, there are many opportunities. Thanks to the modern age, our options for education increase every day. There are so many ways to get a seminary level education without paying thousands of dollars. Many universities offer the ability to purchase audio courses for an extremely small fraction of the normal price. Audio courses are optimal for a busy schedule because you can listen to them at your leisure. I appreciate the audio courses from [Regent College](#).

It can be hard to teach others when you feel insecure about what you know. But it's important to remember that, as a small-group leader, it isn't your job to know all the answers. Instead, your task is to journey with others in spiritual growth and application. Focus on facilitating a good discussion and lean on others for support and guidance. You'll pick up what you need along the way.

—JUSTIN MARR is a small-group leader and blogs at [TheSocialHunger.com](#); copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you felt like you had inadequate education or training for leading a fruitful discussion?
2. Who is mentoring you and investing in you as a small-group leader? Who can you go to when you have questions?
3. How are you growing your Bible knowledge? What new methods might you try?

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Intentional Spiritual Growth in Small Groups

Understanding how we grow and change

By Amy Jackson

As small-group leaders, we want to help the people in our groups grow and mature in their faith. We want them to experience life change and walk away from our groups different from when they came in. And so we discuss the Bible or the sermon from Sunday or some theology we want our group members to understand.

Although we have good intentions, we may not see the change we're hoping for, and that's because so few of us have considered what it takes to really grow. James C. Wilhoit writes in *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, "Christian spiritual formation: (1) is intentional; (2) is communal; (3) requires our engagement; (4) is accomplished by the Holy Spirit; (5) is for the glory of God and the service of others; and (6) has as its means and end the imitation of Christ." A lot goes into spiritual formation—the process of becoming more like Christ—and yet we often enter into it with little to no thought. And then we wonder why we're not seeing results.

To get the results we desire, we must take a step back and ask, How do we grow? If we're to be intentional in our formation, we must understand the process. Essentially, all growth begins with a desire, a yearning for a change. We must decide that we want to grow. This desire may come as we read about the way things should be or we see a godly attribute in another. It may come when we've been humbled and shown a side of our self that we tend to ignore.

But the desire is simply not enough. If it were, we wouldn't struggle to keep our New Year's resolutions each year. Instead, we must allow our desire to propel us to gain knowledge that will help us see things differently. This knowledge will turn into changed behavior and a new way of life. As we experience this new way of life, we develop new desires for change and growth, and the cycle starts over again.

To flesh out this cycle, imagine that Sara has the desire to make a difference in the world, to have a life of meaning. It's a good desire, but without adding knowledge, Sara has no idea how to make a difference. Then, Sara's small group works through a Bible study on spiritual gifts. As she learns what spiritual gifts are, takes an inventory of her own gifts, and talks with others about how she might be gifted, she learns that there's a good chance she has the spiritual gift of encouragement. Understanding that spiritual gifts are to be used to build up the church, Sara feels compelled to serve somewhere using her gift of encouragement. She becomes a small-group coach to encourage and empower other small-group leaders in their role. Her desire to make a difference plus learning about spiritual gifts has led to change in her life. Now she knows she's making a difference in her church and in the lives of the leaders in her care. As she gets more comfortable in her new role, she begins to desire deeper relationships with her leaders so she can better encourage them. And so the cycle starts over again.

As we lead groups of 6–12, it seems much more daunting to cater to this spiritual formation cycle in each of our group members, but it is possible. First, we must work to create the right environment for this to happen.

Safe to Share

Without safety and openness in your group, members won't ever get close to sharing their heart's true desires and needs. What worries them? What do they hope for in life? What's one thing they wish they could change? What sin or issue keeps them in a downward spiral? What unhealthy patterns do they have?

Share your own desires and struggles to model healthy disclosure. Listen between the lines when group members share stories or prayer requests. Consider the events of group members' lives that repeat or keep them in a negative cycle. Listen for phrases that stand out to group members as you read through the Bible. Above all, show that you genuinely care about your group members, share from your heart, and keep judgments outside your discussion. If you're new to each other or haven't gotten to a level of sharing authentically yet,

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

invest time in getting to know one another, sharing testimonies and favorite verses, and praying for one another.

Cater the Curriculum to Group Members' Needs

Once you know the desires and felt needs of the group—whether or not they've been explicitly stated—you can begin helping your group members gain the knowledge they need to see life change. So, for instance, if several group members have expressed a desire for healthier spending habits, you may want to work through a specific money management curriculum, look through passages in the Gospels about money and wealth, or hear firsthand from someone in your church who has turned their finances around. You'll want your group members to hear God's Word on the subject, but how you get that message could vary, and it's okay to use different means.

Realistically, it's unlikely that your entire group will have the same specific desire like this at the same time. So instead of making the curriculum as specific as a financial curriculum, consider the underlying desires—the real needs—that several group members are experiencing. The person desiring healthier spending habits may have the underlying desire to depend on God more. That more general desire will also line up with the group member who is struggling with worry, the single women who wonders if she'll ever get married, and the overachieving workaholic. Focusing on the desire to depend on God more will appeal to many, if not most, of your group members. Additionally, it's a topic that regularly comes up in the Christian life, so even if someone doesn't currently feel this desire, he or she probably has or will sometime soon.

When you introduce your study or discussion, make sure to tie it back to this desire. Before you even dive in, let people know how it intersects with life. In other words, identify the issue that your discussion will seek to resolve. If your group members know the discussion relates to them in some way, they'll be more likely to engage and take the new information to heart.

Remain Open to the Spirit's Movement

The best leaders make plans but stay open to what the Spirit may want to do in the meeting. For most, this doesn't come naturally, but over time, you can get better at it. Our goal should be to work alongside the Spirit, allowing him to do the work of transformation. The leader's responsibility is to help create an environment where the Spirit can work.

Carol Lackey Hess explains the Spirit is "simultaneously expressed as the Presence of God which confronts us with our creaturely finitude and limit and the Presence of God which makes possible the opening up of our disruptive limits." So, the Spirit both "cuts us to the heart" and opens up our heart so transformation can take place. As Christians, we recognize that true change never occurs by our own hand. Yes, we must engage in the process, but in the end, someone totally other must do the work because we simply aren't capable of it on our own. The Spirit does this work, and even simply acknowledging this fact can have a huge impact on our growth. At the same time, this knowledge can't release us from this transformation dance with the Spirit that requires our engagement. We are never off the hook in the process. We must work alongside the Spirit to experience this change.

Move from Knowledge to Application

As we gain knowledge and the Spirit transforms our minds, we'll begin to see behavioral changes that reflect our new way of life. Our changed thinking will prompt us to apply these new thoughts and attitudes to our lives. Don't allow group members to simply participate in the discussion without seeking to apply the new knowledge to their lives. There should always be a focus on answering the question, Now what? Over time, group members will naturally end your discussion time with ways they will apply the new knowledge gained, and you'll begin to see change in their lives—and your own.

This kind of life change, however, can quickly slip away if we don't have a community to support and encourage us. Otherwise our will gives out, our knowledge grows fuzzy, and we begin to slip back into old patterns. Accountability may be highly structured and involve checking in with one another on goals, or it may be more general and consist of the group members continually reminding one another of their identity in Christ and all that the Spirit has been doing in them. Regardless, there must be an emphasis on recognizing and celebrating change.

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

Then take inventory. What new desires does this change stir up in your group members? These new desires will help guide you to your next discussion focus.

—AMY JACKSON is managing editor of SmallGroups.com and holds an M.A. in Christian Formation and Ministry; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How well do you know the desires and needs of your group members? What overlap is there among group members?
2. What discussion topics, Bible passages, or other learning experiences might work well to move the desires of your group members into action?
3. How well do you lead your group from knowledge to application? What might you do to ensure this movement always happens in your meetings?

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The Spirit's Role in Small-Group Learning

Here's what it looks like and what you should look for.

By Tom Bandy

It makes sense that small groups should be intentional about spiritual growth; after all, it's the dynamic of spiritual formation that transforms a gathering of people from a club into an authentic Christian community. We can understand that. But what we might not understand is that small-group leaders can be equipped to have even deeper discernment of the Holy Spirit moving through their group. Just as a river contains many little eddies or whirlpools, so the movement of the Spirit shapes small groups as intensive eddies of spiritual life.

Humility is the experience of awe, wonder, and even fear in reaction to the mystery of Christ. This leads small-group participants into *conversation* between themselves and with God as they explore the implications of living in the model of Jesus. In turn, that leads small-group participants to express newfound compassion for others, resulting in *action*, as they walk with Christ beyond the group. These acts of compassion lead them to surrender ego and be humble once more before the Lord, and so the process starts again.

What It Looks Like

This movement of the Holy Spirit in a small group cannot be structured as a curriculum, and it's the wisdom of the small-group leader that seizes an opportunity and nudges the group to the next step.

For example:

- A small-group participant suddenly weeps in a breakthrough of honesty, and another group member embraces him. In the pregnant silence, the group leader quietly invites the group into spontaneous prayer. And just when nervous participants are about to dry their tears, the group leader asks a question to prompt deeper conversation about what has happened. The group leader "goes with the Spirit" to shift from *humility* to *conversation*.
- A small group has been experiencing a lively discussion about Paul's repeated declaration that in Christ all class, gender, and culture barriers are broken in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Just when the discussion seems to end and participants are filing the information in an intellectual corner of their minds, the group leader asks: "How can we apply the principle of radical equality in Christ as a way to break down the biases of race, economics, or educational level in our workplaces?" The group leader "goes with the Spirit" to shift from *conversation* to *action*.
- A small group has found a way to translate their affinity into practical action that blesses other people beyond the group. In the midst of visiting chronically ill patients at a hospital, group members are overwhelmed by what they see—scenes of both courage and tragedy. Their rationalized constructions of sin and grace are broken, and they are silently asking questions about God they never asked before. The small-group leader abandons the routine discussion in order to debrief their experiences and voice their feelings, shifting the group from *action* to *humility*.

All of these examples illustrate how the Holy Spirit moves unpredictably through the lives of group members, and how the group leader watches for the movement of the Spirit and accelerates the flow of experience from one step to another.

What to Look For

I do not think that small-group leaders can *create* the "eddy" of the Holy Spirit, but they can watch for it and take the opportunity to accelerate it. This is their primary role for spiritual leadership. Of course, many small-group leaders will wonder if their own spiritual maturity can make them this observant. Remember that this is not about your skills. Even if you miss one opportunity, keep praying and watching, because the Holy Spirit will never stop flowing through the group.

The Holy Spirit always seems to move in unpredictable ways, visible only from the peripheral vision of our souls. When we look for the movement, we miss it. When we look away, we suddenly see it.

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

Sometimes the Holy Spirit moves softly and seems to whisper through the group. The Spirit uses the most ordinary routines of group process, and the most common conversations, to gently sweep emerging Christians in a new direction. Other times the Holy Spirit moves loudly and seems to shout at the group. The Spirit uses some extraordinary circumstance, crisis, or intrusion. No longer an eddy, the movement of the Spirit becomes a vortex that drags participants into the hidden depths of God.

Small-group leaders don't control the movement of the Holy Spirit, whether soft or loud, but they can center the group with their serenity of faith. The more you maintain your own spiritual habits in daily living, the more serene and observant you will be. The Holy Spirit always comes from and leads toward Jesus Christ. Your "center" is always your own experience of the real presence of Christ. That is the vantage point from which you can observe the movement of the Spirit and mentor the group to move with the Spirit.

—TOM BANDY is the founder of www.ThrivingChurch.com; copyright 2009 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. When have you experienced the Spirit moving through your group? How did you know it was the Spirit?
2. How have you seen the movement from humility to conversation to action in your group?
3. What can you do to improve your perception of and alignment with the Holy Spirit in your group meetings?

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

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How to Read the Bible Well

Because the Bible should be accessible to all.

By J. Todd Billings

A wide range of voices claims that a crisis of biblical interpretation is taking place. But contrary to many pundits, the crisis does not simply involve a decline in the Bible's authority. Even when the Bible is turned to as *the* authority, it's not necessarily interpreted *Christianly*.

Consider, for example, a recent Christian bestseller that offers a "Bible diet." The book claims to enable better concentration, improve appearance, increase energy, and reverse the process of "accelerated aging." To want to improve your appearance and energy level, do you have to be interested in knowing God or Jesus? Of course not. There is nothing intrinsically Christian about the advice.

Similar trends appear in Christian books that promise biblical solutions for success in finances, relationships, and family. These books can help Christians see implications of their faith for various aspects of life, but they often communicate that the Bible is the authoritative answer book to felt needs and problems. This message centers on the individual and his or her preferences, and does not interpret the Bible in a way that calls felt needs into question or looks beyond them.

The Spacious Rule of Faith

When examining how we interpret Scripture, we should pay attention to our functional theology of Scripture: how our use of Scripture reflects particular beliefs about what the Bible is. There are two common approaches to using Scripture today.

Some readers start with a detailed blueprint of what the Bible says, and then read individual passages of Scripture as if they were the concrete building blocks to fit into the blueprint. They translate each passage into a set of propositions or principles that fit the established details of the blueprint. This approach assumes that we already know the larger meaning of Scripture; our system of theology gives us the meaning. Thus, the task of interpreting Scripture becomes a matter of discovering where in our theological system a particular passage fits.

Others prefer a smorgasbord approach. Imagine a huge cafeteria loaded with food of many kinds for many tastes. You are at the cafeteria with the members of your small-group. Can you imagine what some of the other members of the group would choose to eat? I suspect that there might even be patterns based on age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, but each person chooses which foods to feast on based on his or her appetite. In the smorgasbord approach to Scripture, the Bible becomes the answer book for our felt needs and personal perspectives, and we focus only on the parts we desire to read.

With both the blueprint and smorgasbord approaches, we end up using Scripture for our own purposes. We are in control. The Bible may be viewed as authoritative, but it provides either confirmation of our preconceived ideas or divine advice for felt needs.

Blueprint readers rightly sense that one cannot read the Bible without bringing some understanding to the table; we each come with some theological assumptions about the Bible when we open its pages. Smorgasbord readers rightly believe that the Bible is a book through which God addresses us; it's not just a book of ancient history or doctrine or worldview. A theological reading of Scripture makes use of both of these assumptions, yet in a deeper and fuller way. Reading Scripture is not about solving puzzles but discerning a mystery. Through Scripture, we encounter no less than the mysterious triune God himself.

Early Christians also taught that Christians should—indeed, must—approach Scripture with a basic theological map in hand. They created a "rule of faith"—a measure—to use as they approached Scripture. It reminded early Christians that they read Scripture as followers of Jesus, baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It helped make sure that Christians held together the Old Testament with the New—that the God of creation and covenant is also the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. This "rule of faith" didn't decide

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

the meaning of specific Scripture passages in advance. Instead, it gives a sense of scope in the journey of reading Scripture, forging a path to deeper fellowship with the triune God.

The Bible Is For Disciples

Does the theological interpretation of Scripture require specialized training? Two dynamics are often overlooked in contemporary biblical interpretations, especially those grounded in historical-critical assumptions. The first is the work of the Spirit in illuminating Scripture, and the second is interpreting the Scripture "in Christ." Congregations around the world cultivate a sense of these two realities as they pray for the Spirit's illumination, worship the triune God, and apply Scripture to their community of discipleship and witness. Of course, these practices don't guarantee faithful biblical interpretation, but they are indispensable dynamics for interpreting the Bible *as Scripture*. The indwelling of the Spirit in the Christian community, as one located "in Christ," uniquely equips the Christian community to interpret the Bible as God's Word.

Of course, a theological reading of Scripture can have pitfalls as well. But the solution is not to surrender the Bible to scholarly experts. Rather, it is to regain a sense of the place of Scripture in God's drama of redemption, and to enter into the task of reading Scripture with openness to being reformed and reshaped by God on our path of dying to the old self and living into our identity in Christ. In *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine said that Jesus Christ, as the incarnate God-human, is the "road" to our heavenly homeland. Thus, all Scripture is interpreted in light of Jesus Christ. All scriptural interpretation must lead to our growth in love of God and neighbor.

Reading with Confidence and Humility

As John Webster, theologian at the University of Aberdeen and a key advocate of theological interpretation, notes, "reading Scripture is an episode in the history of sin and its overcoming; and overcoming sin is the sole work of Christ and the Spirit." Thus, "reading Scripture is inescapably bound to regeneration." As such, we read Scripture expecting to receive a divine word—one of comfort but also of confrontation. God's Word renews us as it confronts our cultural and personal idols, provides light for our paths, and equips us to serve the world.

Thus, to read the Bible as Scripture involves delighting in, memorizing, and dwelling on it. When tempted by Satan, Jesus responds with Scripture he has memorized (Matthew 4:1–11). Colossians admonishes believers to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The Gospel of John shows a Trinitarian dynamic of dwelling in Christ's word, for the Spirit sent to believers will "glorify" Christ, and "will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16:14). Delighting and dwelling in God's Word is supremely practical, relating to our finances, family, and bodies. However, we should not enter into it for worldly "success," but rather as part of our dying to the old self and participating in the Spirit's new creation in Christ.

In this way, we can read the Bible confidently, knowing that God acts powerfully through Scripture. We don't have to master Scripture and then make it relevant to our lives; through Scripture, God opens up a new place for us to dwell, a place of fellowship with Christ on a path leading to love of God and neighbor.

We never finish the journey of sanctification in this life. Likewise, we never finish our journey of meditating on Scripture, experiencing it anew in word and sacrament. We wrestle with it even as it sometimes tells us what we don't want to hear, as well as confirming and building up our new identity in Christ. In all of this, Scripture's value to us is inexhaustible, because the Spirit uses Scripture to testify to Christ, the Word of the Father.

Theological Interpretation in Action

Consider the well-known story in 1 Samuel 17 in which David faces and defeats Goliath. Let me give two possible approaches to this text. Neither sees it as simply an account of a border skirmish in ancient history. Both approaches understand the Bible as authoritative.

In the first approach, the character of Goliath becomes a metaphor for the challenges faced in daily life. Hearers are encouraged to identify the "Goliaths" in their own life—low self-esteem, financial challenges, or a family problem. David becomes a model of the underdog who dares to step up to his own inner "giants" and "challenges." The Bible is the answer book, showing us the way to face challenges in our personal life:

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

visualize a positive outcome like David (17:36), act with confidence in the face of a challenge (17:37), and take risks (17:48–9). In this way, the Bible helps us solve our problems. Who is the hero of this rendering of the story? David—more specifically, his courageous human will. David's faith in God may be noted, but it is David's courage that is highlighted. The living God is not a major character in this reading of the text.

In contrast, a theological interpretation of Scripture tries to understand the text as part of a God-centered drama. In this approach, God's saving action is at the center of the narrative. While the mighty Goliath can taunt the people of Israel, David confesses, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine" (17:37). Rather than seeing David as the self-actualized hero, the emphasis here is on the saving action of the almighty God, whom David actively trusts. For as the text repeatedly notes, it was not a "sword" of David that brings deliverance from the Philistines, for "it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (17:47; cf. 17:37; 17:50). Although David appears to be ill-prepared to encounter Goliath, David acts with covenantal trust in God that "The Lord ... will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine" (17:37).

Thus, we are invited to actively trust in this same God—the God of Israel who finally reveals the nature of his victory over his enemies in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the 1 Samuel narrative shows how God's surprising way of working contrasts with worldly appearances of power. Paul reflects on this mystery as it culminates in Christ crucified: "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:27–30). As disciples of Jesus, we are called through the David and Goliath narrative to renew our trust in God's deliverance, acting in confidence as we love God and neighbor and witness to God's power in Christ crucified. Our confidence is in the Lord (not our faith or our commitment), for it is the Lord who uses even those who appear weak and lowly to accomplish his purposes.

— J. TODD BILLINGS is associate professor of Reformed theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today. This article is adapted from an article that originally appeared in *Christianity Today*.

Discuss

1. Do your group members lean toward being blueprint readers or smorgasbord readers? How can you tell?
2. How can you help group members remember the "rule of faith" during your discussions and to keep all passages in context of Scripture as a whole?
3. What did you learn from the two examples of interpreting the story of David and Goliath?

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Get Everyone Involved in the Discussion

Dispel fear and meet group members where they are.

By Justin Marr

"What do you think James meant when he said 'faith apart from works is dead?'" We had just finished reading James 2:14–26. I placed my Bible on the coffee table and waited for someone to speak up. It was our third meeting and people were still shy. After a few moments, the silence was starting to get uncomfortable. I shot my co-leader a sideways glance.

"Do you guys have any initial questions before we get to that?" my co-leader offered. The group was comprised of mostly freshmen college students—except for one sophomore and a lone senior.

"I have a question." It was the senior. I nodded for him to continue. "Who's James?" My eyebrows rose involuntarily. I didn't expect a question like that to come from him. He had been part of our ministry for years and he knew the Bible well. The only reason he wasn't leading a group himself was due to his extraordinary class load.

I paused for a few seconds, and then answered his question. Once I finished, another small-group member piped up and asked a follow-up question. What came after was a vibrant conversation about James and how his life might have contributed to his views on faith and works. An hour and a half went by with very little pause in conversation.

After our meeting, I pulled the senior aside.

"Did you really not know who James was?" I asked. He smiled.

"You caught me. I knew," he said while pulling a backpack over his shoulder.

"Then why did you ask?"

"It seemed like everyone was too afraid to ask questions about the basics. I figured I'd break the ice. Someone had to."

That senior taught me something valuable about getting everyone involved in group discussions. It's difficult to know how to get everyone involved in a theological discussion. We're faced with many variables: lack of knowledge, fear, differences in spiritual maturity, and various personality types. Theology is complicated and your group members will likely come from many backgrounds. Every group is different. Sometimes the awkward silences are unavoidable and trial and error is the only way to learn how your group ticks. But there are some key tips that can help guide us in the right direction.

Dispel Fear

Don't assume your group members know basic concepts. Small groups are filled with people with different levels of knowledge. Some will be seasoned believers, others will be completely new to faith, and some might not believe at all. But small groups open up an incredible opportunity for people to learn and ask questions. Christianity is full of terms like sanctification, repentance, and justification. We've been around the block and we might understand these terms, but that may not be true for our group members. It never hurts to give a quick explanation before moving on. Even if others know the concept, it's good to brush up on the definition.

Don't be afraid to ask what people know. Sometimes we're afraid to put people on the spot, but occasionally that's the only way. Many people join a small group to learn more about Christianity, but we can't help them learn unless we figure out what they don't know. I once had a group member who confessed he wasn't a believer after he'd been part of our group for months. It would have been much better to know that earlier. It's okay to ask if you preface it simply: "I just want to know what we're working with here. Who knows about this topic?"

Make it clear that there are no wrong answers. Sometimes we forget to state the obvious. Small groups should be open and honest places. Casting vision for vulnerability, openness, and mutual support is often

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

needed. It's good to remind group members that faith is a journey and we're all in different places. There is no such thing as a stupid question, and sometimes all we need to do is remind people of that.

Admit your own lack of knowledge. A great way to dispel fear is to admit that you don't have all the answers. Group members often assume you know it all, and it can make them nervous. We all have more to learn, and there's no shame in admitting you don't know the answer. When you admit you don't know it all, you create a great opportunity to explore new ideas and questions with your group.

Meet Group Members Where They Are

Foster real community. Honesty and vulnerability are key for creating good discussions. This can be achieved if trusted community is established. If your group members don't feel comfortable around each other, they'll be unlikely to ask questions that reveal their level of knowledge. Get-to-know-you questions and icebreakers are helpful for establishing community and openness. It also helps to lead by example: If you share something vulnerable, your group members will feel more comfortable to do the same.

It also might be helpful to go around the circle and have everyone state why they're interested in being part of the group. This will help your group understand where everyone else is coming from. If you make sure the differences in spiritual maturity are accepted from the beginning, then people will be more likely to share basic questions.

Encourage mature members to help. Oftentimes leaders need to tap into the potential of their mature group members. If you recognize that a particular member tends to know more than the rest, feel free to sit that person down and explain how they can be a valuable asset in helping others learn. Like my story of the senior among freshman, more mature group members might ask questions they already know the answer to as a way to help others grow. Or they might ask follow-up questions to get group members thinking.

On the other hand, there is also the danger of having the knowledgeable member steal the conversation. If this happens there is no harm in pulling someone aside and explaining how he or she can help by letting less experienced members contribute first.

Write your own study questions. When it comes to your group and what they need to spark a good discussion, the most knowledgeable person is you. Sometimes we must tailor our questions to fit the unique needs of our group. Try to think about your group's specific qualities and create the discussion questions accordingly.

For example, your group might be very investigative and will benefit from exploring questions based on facts: Who's the author of 1 Timothy? What genre would this book of the Bible fall into? Who is mentioned in the book and why? Where is this all taking place? What is the main point or purpose of this chapter? What do we know about Ephesus in the ancient world?

Or perhaps your group really enjoys identifying personally with Scripture: What would it be like to have Paul as a mentor? What would you do if you had false teachers in your community? How do you think Timothy felt when he read Paul's charge in 1 Timothy 1:18?

To reach everyone in your group, use a wide variety of questions that challenge the mind and heart.

Notice the differences between extroverts and introverts. As group leaders, we want everyone to be able to participate. Sometimes that requires tough conversations. It's not ideal, but you may need to sit down with extroverts and explain that they need to slow down and give the introverts a chance to respond. In the same way, sometimes you need to talk to introverts and encourage them to speak up. Often all it takes is a simple conversation and encouragement to make the difference.

Focus on Application

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

Make sure to apply your discussions to everyday life. Discussing intangible ideas can be intriguing and beneficial, but we all need concrete ways to apply theology to real-life interactions. A good practice is to ask yourself: *What change do I want to inspire in my group, and how can our discussion help?*

Making sure everyone feels comfortable and safe in a theological discussion is tough, but the benefits far outweigh the effort. As a leader, you must be willing to pay attention and let the group dictate what they need. If you do this, you'll find people willing to engage in deep theological conversation without hesitation.

—JUSTIN MARR is a small-group leader and blogs at TheSocialHunger.com; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When has fear held you back from fully participating? When have you seen group members' fear hold them back?
2. How are you currently meeting your group members where they are? What else might you do?
3. How can you make sure both extroverts and introverts in your group feel welcome to share?

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

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Five Questions That Kill Discussion

What to avoid and how to construct better questions

By Terry Powell

Good questions are a staple of any worthwhile small-group discussion. They should be clear, using words that are easy to understand and that do not produce ambiguity. They should accurately uncover what God intended for the biblical text. They should be sensitive to the needs and life situations of your group members. And they should motivate people to think a little more deeply than they're used to thinking.

Of course, asking constructive questions is only the first step in building and maintaining discussion. The second step is avoiding the destructive questions that can tear any good conversation apart.

Below are five types of questions that can kill small-group discussions. (All of the example questions refer to Matthew 4:1–11.)

Subjective Questions

Some small-group leaders unintentionally transfer authority from the Bible to group members by instructing them to look inward for meaning rather than investigating the text.

Poor question: What does verse 11 mean to you?

Better question: What does verse 11 say about God the Father's sensitivity to the Son?

Long-Winded Questions

Questions get long when a group leader attempts to stuff several facts into a question so that group members will give the appropriate answer. But that kind of information is more easily assimilated by group members when it's put in the form of introductory statements.

Poor question: Looking at how the devil tempts Jesus in the wilderness, what specific qualities and strategies of spiritual warfare does he demonstrate that could also be used against us?

Better question: The tactics Satan used against Jesus will also be used against us. What strategies did Satan demonstrate in this passage?

Leading Questions

Rather than inciting curiosity, these questions may insult the intelligence of your group members. A leading question sags under the weight of your own opinion or predetermined notion, and the way you ask such a question actually reveals the answer that you want to hear. They usually call for a yes or no response that kills conversation. "Don't you think ... " or "Isn't ... " are typical ways of beginning a leading question.

Poor question: Don't you think the timing of Satan's attack on Jesus was significant?

Better question: This episode occurs immediately following Jesus' baptism and right before the launch of his public ministry. What can we learn about our enemy from the timing of his attacks on Jesus?

Compound Questions

Resist the impulse to fling back-to-back questions at your group without waiting for a reply to the first one. Either they will be confused about which question to answer first, or they will forget the first question by the time you finish the second.

Poor question: What did Jesus experience right before the first temptation, and what does this timing tell us about Satan?

Better question: What did Jesus experience right before the first temptation? [Pause for replies.] What does the timing of this first temptation tell us about Satan?

Compulsory Personal Questions

We want small-group participants to reinforce biblical truths with anecdotes from their lives. We want them to reveal needs exposed by God's Word so the group can pray specifically for them. Yes, transparency is a vital

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

sign of small-group health. But it's a bad idea to drop a question that requires transparency in the lap of an unsuspecting person.

Poor question: Marge, you've been a Christian for a few years. Can you tell us how you've experienced Satan's warfare against you?

Better question: Can anyone illustrate the persistence of Satan's attacks from your walk as a Christian?

—TERRY POWELL is author of *Now That's a Good Question!*; copyright 2009 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When has a question you've asked started a great discussion? When has a question fallen flat? Why do you think that is?
2. Which of these five types of questions are you guilty of asking?
3. How will you carve out time in your schedule to prepare constructive questions for your group discussions?

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Questions for Digging Deeper

Open up your Bible study by strategically introducing these angles on the text.

By Jeff Arnold

Whether your group is working through a study guide or you're creating questions each week for your group, there are a few questions you should work in each time you meet. These questions take you beyond the average, ordinary small-group experience and into the realm of exploration and learning. The idea is to enable your group to dig deeper into a text by adapting the four questions that follow. If your group purchased study guides, they will come equipped with questions to guide your group time, but one or all of these questions, sprinkled carefully throughout the existing questions, could open up your study. If you're not using a study guide, you could first read the text and discuss it, follow with these questions, and conclude by trying to arrive at the key idea or theme of the text (a modified approach to inductive study).

When asking these questions, it's best to come across as truly curious and looking for an answer. So frame your questions with something like, "I was wondering ..." or, "I'm curious about this." It also might be helpful to provide a Bible dictionary or concordance.

What words or phrases appear to be key to understanding the text, and what do they mean in this context? These words or phrases might appear familiar (for example, *grace*), but by examining them carefully in their sentences, and perhaps breaking out a concordance or Bible dictionary for further study, you could learn much about the meaning of words and ideas.

What thoughts, images, or phrases are puzzling and must be understood if we are to understand this text? We must, for a moment, set aside what we think we know so that we might explore the meaning of words and concepts. For example, in John 3 do we truly understand what "born again" meant to Nicodemus? Exploration of that idea might lead us to research how the Pharisee group developed and what they held dear, to carefully parse Nicodemus's words to understand his intent, or to think about what birth and birthright mean to a Jewish person. In the end, at the very least we will have covered some interesting ground.

What memorable word pictures or images are located in this text? This is one question you could ask of almost any text in Scripture. Western Christians can rightfully be accused of attempting to read the Bible as a how-to work. In doing so, we often miss the color and passion that flow, often line by line, from the authors' pens at the guiding of the Spirit.

For example, examine these two verses for images or word pictures:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39).

I purposefully chose a very familiar set of verses to demonstrate how this question works, since we can easily imagine a group shrugging off the verses by simply saying, "God loves us very much, and nothing can take us from that love." But look again. Paul lists a significant number of items, each with visual possibilities. Why? Because he wants us to see, in our minds' eye, the very things that can't take us from God's love!

So spend a few moments looking over the images (I see no fewer than nine specific word pictures). What would happen if your group uncovered them and discussed them in greater detail? Or perhaps say to the group, "I see nine images here; I'm going to read the passage slowly several times and ask you to listen for one of the images that especially grips you."

What story line do I find in this text? Because Scripture primarily uses images and stories to communicate God's truth, we must learn to discern the story that is often being woven. For example, in the first chapters of Galatians, Paul presents a unique twist on his own testimony to make a point about being justified by faith. In Hebrews, the author carefully weaves the Jewish history and beliefs in a clear and systematic manner while

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

presenting Jesus as superior to everything they knew. In Malachi, we confront a defeated and discouraged people of Israel in dialogue with God. And so forth.

Bible readers confront three challenges related to story line: First, where does this book of the Bible fall in the Scripture storyline? Second, what is this particular book's unique story? And third, what is this particular passage's unique story? The Scripture will begin to come alive when, for example, you discover that Psalm 23 was most likely written during Absalom's rebellion when David, an old man, was fleeing for his life; or that Jesus' words in John 14 about his Father's house having many rooms were in reality the words used when a young man asked for a woman's hand in marriage.

—JEFFREY ARNOLD, from *The Big Book of Small Groups*, (InterVarsity Press, 2004). Used with permission.

Discuss

1. How might these questions get everyone involved, regardless of prior knowledge?
2. How can you ensure your group members are able to ask questions about the puzzling parts of your study?
3. Which of these questions stands out to you as especially helpful? Why?

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The Power of Studying the Word

Ways to help your group members learn directly from the Bible

By Amy Jackson

While attending a conference, I heard Jim Putman ask a telling question: Do we teach people to wrestle with their faith, or just tell them what to believe?

This question hit me especially hard because I've experienced both. I can distinctly remember a well-meaning youth sponsor telling me shortly after I'd started following Christ that I had to cut ties with my non-Christian friends in order to live the Christian life. Looking back, I understand why this was her advice. After all, it's a lot easier to cut ties than to deal with the mess of redefining relationships. It's a lot less risky, too, because it would eliminate the temptation to return to my old lifestyle. But it didn't change me—it simply told me something to do because, well, someone had told me to do it.

On the other hand, I've had amazing men and women ask me difficult questions to help me process my situation, wrestle with difficult answers, and trust God. Through those situations, I've grown in my faith, navigated the gray areas of life, learned to listen to the Spirit, and developed a well-defined identity in Christ.

As we lead discussion in our groups, it's easy to focus on the "right" answers and totally bypass the opportunities to allow our group members to wrestle with the gray and listen for God's voice. It gets us through the study faster, and we feel pretty accomplished, too. Although our group members may learn valuable Bible knowledge, they miss something more important: how that knowledge applies to their life.

A few weeks ago, my women's group was discussing John 7 which briefly mentions the Festival of Tabernacles. One of the women asked the purpose of the festival. Another talked briefly about being in the desert for 40 years. Together, the women pieced together the story. Forty minutes later we'd talked about the use of festivals in Jewish culture, the reason only the high priest could approach God once a year, and how Jesus had changed all of that.

It was a tangent to be sure. John 7 is actually about Jesus speaking with authority to the Jewish people at the festival and the fact that some believed and others didn't. But our tangent led us somewhere important when one of the women exclaimed, "Wow! God did all that so I can have a relationship with him!" The sentiment sobered the group, sending everyone into deep thought. Slowly they started to respond. And tear up. And explain that they weren't investing in that relationship like they could. It led to real prayer requests and thankfulness and ideas about how to build an authentic relationship with Jesus. It led to a shift in our hearts and minds. And it was obviously the work of the Spirit.

It all started with letting God's Word speak directly to the group, being open to tangents, and allowing group members to wrestle with what they were reading. It's easier to point people back to what they're supposed to get out of a passage. Or even to draw the same conclusion without letting group members get there on their own. But that doesn't focus on discipleship or transformation or wrestling. And that's what small groups should be focused on—even if it's a plan that's a lot trickier to follow.

Here are a few suggestions to help your group members learn from the text for themselves:

Build a culture of wonder. Far too often people race through Bible passages without stopping to think and wonder about what's happening in the text. To get group members thinking, pause and use an "I wonder" statement. For instance, in a discussion on the Sermon on the Mount, say, "I wonder what it must have been like to sit on the side of a hill in the heat listening to Jesus give directions that threw everything they knew out the window." These statements will encourage others to wonder and even ask questions about the text they may not have thought about before.

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

Continually involve others in conversation. Sometimes an unhealthy pattern forms in a small-group discussion: the leader asks a question, one person answers, and then the leader moves on to the next question. A true discussion that allows group members to interact with the text and be changed by it will get multiple group members involved in each discussion question. A simple way to keep the conversation moving: ask "What do the rest of you think?"

Clarify points with Scripture. Inevitably, someone will give a response that's a little theologically off. Rather than halt the conversation to correct the person, ask, "Where do you see that in Scripture?" This will give your group members an opportunity to search the Scriptures themselves for the answer. This works especially well with the person who responds with, "I've heard the Bible says ___ about divorce . . ."

Allow for two sides. While some issues really are black or white, there are plenty of topics that remain somewhere in the gray zone. When a "gray" topic comes up, help your group members see both sides to the issue by introducing Scripture that supports both sides, or showing how two different conclusions could feasibly be drawn from the same text. Allow group members to share their thoughts based on Scripture rather than what they've been taught. This not only allows good discussion, but also teaches your group members to love others even if they don't always agree.

Look at Scripture in context. Yes, it's common for us to do topical studies that pull a short passage of Scripture out and examine it, and this isn't all bad. The best way, though, to allow the Word to really speak to your group members is to get the full picture. Consider reading through an entire epistle together over a few weeks or taking a longer chunk of time to work through the Gospel of John. As your group members see these familiar passages in their fuller context, they'll naturally start making connections and seeing the bigger picture.

Connect it back to the gospel. One of the best ways to keep the message of Jesus front and center in your group is to help group members connect every part of Scripture with Christ. Whether you're reading about Old Testament festivals like my group was or you're reading Paul's words to the Ephesians, tie the information back to the gospel and the person of Christ. As your group members see how all of Scripture is connected, they'll have meaningful "aha" moments.

—AMY JACKSON is the managing editor of SmallGroups.com and holds an M.A. in Christian Formation and Ministry; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When have you experienced a leader who was too quick to simply give the "right" answers? What is the downside of this method?
2. Would you describe your current group discussions as "wrestling" with God's Word? Why or why not?
3. Which of the suggestions would you like to put into practice at your next group meeting?

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Not Everyone Learns Alike

Use a variety of methods to get the message across.

By Roberta Hestenes

John lays floor tiles for a living, eight hours a day, day in and day out. He's not much of a reader, but he's eager to learn, and he's looking for something from the group I'm about to lead.

Peter is a lawyer, driven, compulsive, and a bit of a snob. He is a reader, and a skeptical one at that. In fact, he's vowed that if this group doesn't grab him, he probably won't bother with another.

Joanne's husband left her a few months ago, and now she's trying to support herself and her two children on a clerk's salary at Penney's. This is the first job she's had in 25 years. She doesn't think she's capable of anything better, and she feels absolutely powerless.

Michael owns his own small corporation; he's pretty much in charge of his time. He talks flippantly about time pressures and taxes, but he knows he's got it good. But he's feeling a vague sense of guilt about what to do with himself outside of his job.

These people and more sit before me as I'm about to begin a new Bible study. Only some vague attraction to the topic, a Bible study on Romans, binds them together. For a brief moment, I despair: *Each of these people comes with unique concerns and unique situations. How can I possibly communicate with all of them?*

This great diversity is one of the most humbling realities for a leader. So over the years, I've learned to depend increasingly on the Holy Spirit to touch the diverse lives of my group members. I've also learned that by God's grace some teaching techniques can address that diversity.

Let me begin by showing how I deal with the variety of emotional and spiritual interests present in a group.

Putting Needs into Perspective

Before I become overwhelmed with the variety of needs present, I try to put people's concerns into perspective. That happens especially as I pray and reflect on these truths:

Only God knows people's real needs. Only God knows where people are. Only God can judge the heart. This means two things.

First, I can draw on God to give me sensitivity to the real needs of people. That means I must pray for the members of my group. Praying for them, person by person, not only lifts them to God, it sensitizes me to their situations. It helps me "see" them, so that they are registered in my mind as real persons.

Second, as I immerse myself in prayer, I begin to trust God to work despite my ignorance of the private needs of people. I don't have to work myself into a frenzy trying to figure out all the needs present. Naturally, I must learn as much as I can in conversation. But ultimately I have to recognize that I can't possibly know everything necessary about people. In fact, God often guides my thinking and planning so I end up meeting needs I'm not even aware of.

Someone is looking for God. Over the years I've learned that no matter how committed the group looks, someone there is in the midst of making a major decision about God.

In one Bible group I enjoyed the presence of a school teacher; she was one of the most active participants. Only in a personal conversation some months later did I discover that she didn't consider herself a Christian when she joined. She had never joined the church because she had never "gotten around to it," but the real

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

reason was she didn't feel she had a personal relationship with Christ. She had prayed for that a number of times, but "nothing had happened." She had sat through my group hoping that somehow God would touch her. That insight led to a deeper conversation and reminded me that I must not take people's faith for granted.

Someone is about to give up on God. The longer I've been leading, the more I assume that life is beating hard on somebody in the room. Someone is concerned deeply about their marriage or a wayward child; perhaps someone has just lost a job. Whatever the cause, someone feels as if God is absent, and wonders, *Is this the time that I give it all up?* So I constantly pray that I will be sensitive to the one or two in my group who are on the edge.

Most are spiritually interested. In every group, there will be bored people, like the husband who attended only at his wife's insistence. A few others are there because it's the religious thing to do, but they don't have a vital concern about God; they're just going through the motions. I want, of course, to excite these people about Christ, but I also recognize that they constitute only a small percentage of the group. I don't want to focus on 3 or 4 uninterested people and miss the others who for whom faith is a vital concern.

So as I prepare, I ask myself, *Who is the most likely to be responsive to what I have to give this week?*, and then I prepare for those people. I think about the bored, and I try to entice them at various points in the discussion. But I won't let them tyrannize the lesson.

Illustrations that Cover the Canvas

Although I can't hope to know and meet every concern, I can address a great variety. Naturally, the subject itself will answer a good many of the needs people bring. But the other way I can ensure that I touch a variety of people in a number of ways is by the effective use of illustrations. This means several things.

Use real situations. Illustrations will connect with a variety of people if they speak about real human situations. I try not to use hypothetical illustrations—"If I were fired, I would . . ." because, though they show the relevant application, they never quite touch the heart. Nor do I often use dramatic examples, like Mother Theresa or Billy Graham, because their situations are so unlike those of my group. I prefer that my illustrations come out of the life of the congregation. If I'm teaching on witnessing, I ask myself, *What does effective witnessing look like among these people?*

Slice them socially. Some illustrations make sense to many women, but wouldn't connect with many men. So I will often use two illustrations to cover my bases. In addition to targeting both men and women, I try to include some illustrations that work for couples and others for singles, some for those employed outside the home, others for those who work raising children in the home. I want to touch those who have children and those who don't, those in white collar and those in blue collar professions, whites and blacks and Asians and Hispanics.

In short, I want to use illustrations that come from the worlds represented in my group, for those worlds bear directly on people's emotional and spiritual lives. I don't have to touch every group at every point illustrated, but I intentionally mix them up.

Slice them experientially. I also try to slice my illustrations to cover the variety of experiences people have had. If I want to illustrate how someone can be disappointed with God, I may be tempted to illustrate it mainly with the young mother of an infant and two toddlers who lost her husband to cancer. But not many people know that experience. So I may also mention other disappointments with God people experience: a young political activist who is upset about incipient racism, a man who didn't get a longed-for promotion, the teenager who didn't get accepted to the college of her choice. Everybody experiences anger, grief, doubt, hope, pain, and love, but I can't assume that one illustration will cover every person's particular experience.

Keeping Methods in Their Place

In addition to their emotional and spiritual differences, people also learn in a variety of ways: some learn best by hearing, others by discussion; some by seeing, others by doing. Fortunately, we have a variety of teaching techniques that can connect with that type of variety. We can show a video or work with clay or break into smaller groups or do a "trust walk" to reinforce a lesson.

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

I don't want these methods, however, to become mere gimmicks to entertain people. And the way I prevent that is by asking myself three questions as I think about what method I want to use.

Does it tie in with the lesson? I want people to enjoy learning, but I want the teaching technique to do more than help them appreciate learning. Any method I use must tie in directly to the goal of my lesson. If I'm teaching Genesis 1, about creation, and I want people to experience the power of creativity, I'll have them write a poem or work with clay. If I want people to recognize afresh the beauty of creation, I'll pass around copies of *National Geographic* and ask them to pick out a picture that does that for them and have them talk about it. If I want people to get to know one another as a part of the lesson, I'll break them into smaller groups to talk about the most moving experience they've had outdoors.

I also want people to be clear about how the exercise connects. People are generally conservative about trying something new, and they'll be thinking, *Why are we doing this?* So I usually tell them; "To help us understand some of what goes into creating, let's try this . . ."

Is it proportionate to its importance? I don't want to play an exercise for more than it's worth. If I do, I risk losing people, who will stop attending because they'll feel the group is too gimmicky. For instance, in studying Jesus' healing of the blind man, it may be helpful to have people identify with the blind man. If the lesson is finally about the light of Christ flooding our lives, it may be worthwhile to take time to do a "trust walk," where people break into twos and take turns leading one another around the church, the led person being blindfolded. Then people can grasp in a fresh way the transformation Christ works in us.

If, however, I want to emphasize the obedience of the blind man following his healing, spending so much time on identifying with his affliction would be inappropriate, distracting the group from the main point.

Is the group ready for it? The number and type of methods I employ depends on the nature of the people I'm leading. For example, if I'm leading a group composed of somewhat conservative men and women in their fifties, I'm not going to work with clay or write poetry, even if it fits in with the goal of the lesson. That group's traditional expectations for what is supposed to happen would get in the way of their enjoying the new technique. If I'm leading singles between the ages of 25 and 35, who want to build relationships and enjoy being creative, I can be much more innovative.

Is it dessert or the main course? People enjoy being surprised, and one of my goals is to remain somewhat unpredictable. That's been especially important when I've been in a church for more than five years. If I'm not careful, people will be able to finish my sentences for me. But in an effort to keep people alert, I don't want to offer so many creative exercises that they become the main course of our time together. I use no more than one new exercise in a meeting and may not introduce one for four or five weeks.

Visual Variety

Because we live in a culture dominated by the visual, it can be helpful to include a visual element in your group. That could mean looking at a physical Bible, watching a video clip, or reading a handout or magazine article. You don't have to do this every week, but having some visual variety can go a long way.

Tactile Teaching

Many people don't learn well unless their sense of touch or smell is put to use. So when the subject is conducive, I will include a tactile exercise. In studying the creation story once, I had the group try to make a human figure out of clay. Then I asked them questions like "What goes into creating?" and "What do you have to do to create?" Having worked with the clay, the class was much more sensitive to the dynamics of creation.

Writing is the simplest tactile exercise. So I often ask people to write something in response to a question. Other times I'll ask people to circle the most significant words in the passage we're studying. I don't know why, but there is something about writing that focuses the mind.

Tuning in with Music

We were looking at 1 John at a week-long family camp for members of our church. I wanted people to memorize key verses and ideas of the book, so as we went along chapter by chapter, I taught people a hymn or

THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS FOR EVERYONE

song that summarized the teaching or helped them memorize a verse. I still have people from that retreat who tell me how helpful those sessions were.

Use of Imagination

Actually, nearly every creative teaching technique requires people to draw on their imaginations, but sometimes the attempt is more direct. Once when teaching about the healing of the blind man outside of Jericho, I said, "Now close your eyes and imagine you are a member of the crowd. What does it feel like? Is it hot or is it cold? Hot. Okay, it's hot. Is it rainy or, no, it's dry and it's dusty. Well, what does it feel like when a lot of people are milling around? Now you hear a cry, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.' What are you thinking?" And on it goes.

The Power of Silence

Some people can grasp new truths only when they have time to reflect on them silently. So sometimes I use silence as a teaching technique, especially carefully guided biblical meditation. When I've taught from Psalm 62, "For God alone my soul awaits in silence," I've asked people to take five minutes and meditate on the word *wait*. "You can use the time in any way you want," I'll say. "You may move off to a corner of the room or stay where you are. Write your thoughts down if you want. If you have no idea what to do, let me suggest you think on these things: How well do you do at waiting? What do you think it means to wait for God?"

Meditation can be a moving exercise for some people, so I don't want to end it abruptly. At the end I will close with prayer and gently move that group back into the normal ebb and flow of conversation.

Creating Learning Space

Recently, I was speaking with a group of students at Eastern College, when one of them asked me, "Shouldn't everybody on this campus have the same view about how Christianity relates to justice and lifestyle in American culture?"

"No, I don't see it that way," I said. "We all need to be centered in Christ and under the authority of Scripture, but within those boundaries we have the freedom to ask questions and wrestle with the shape of our obedience to God."

When the meeting broke up, a student approached me and said, "I've come from a background where everybody told me what I had to think and believe about everything, including politics and lifestyle. Frankly, it was starting to make me less of a Christian. I cannot tell you what it means to hear you say that here I am given space to explore what I really believe. Thank you."

I not only want to give people space to ask questions but also space to seek answers in a variety of ways. Just as there are no biblical directions to some aspects of our faith, so there is no one right way to learn about Christ.

I think that's why Jesus constantly employed variety in his teaching. He cursed fig trees, knelt, drew in the dirt, made mud, pointed to the lilies, among other things. He knew that not everyone learns alike.

—ROBERTA HESTENES has served as a pastor, professor, and college president. This article is excerpted from *Mastering Teaching*, copyright 1991 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How can you put the needs of your group members into perspective?
2. What different teaching methods have you used in your group in the past?
3. Which of the teaching methods above are you interested in using in your group?

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you lead great discussions

[SmallGroups.com](#). We specialize in equipping churches and small-group leaders to make disciples and strengthen community.

- [Bible Study Methods for Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Discussing Doctrine and Theology](#) (Practical Ministry Sills)
- [Exegesis and Hermeneutics for Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Leading 101](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Leading a Life-Changing Bible Study](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Minister to Multiple Spiritual Maturity Levels](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)

[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](#). A website with practical training tools for various church leadership roles.

[LeadershipJournal.net](#). A website offering practical advice and articles for church leaders.

[GiftedforLeadership.com](#). A website ministering to women leaders.

[Field Guide for Small Group Leaders: Setting the Tone, Accommodating Learning Styles, and More](#) by Sam O'Neal. This go-to guide helps leaders prepare their groups for the adventure of a collective encounter with a great God (IVP Connect, 2012; ISBN 978-0830810918).

[How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth](#) by Gordon D. Fee. The Bible is meant to be read and comprehended by everyone from armchair readers to seminary students (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 978-0310246046).

[The Bible Study Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to an Essential Practice](#) by Lindsay Olesberg. This book lays a foundation for why we read the Bible, what attitudes and expectations are most helpful as we enter into serious Bible study, and what methods and practices yield the most fruit (IVP Connect, 2012; ISBN 978-0830810499).