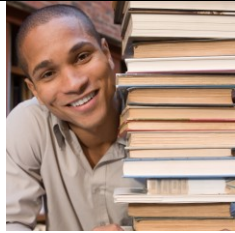


Practical Ministry Skills:

Find the Right Study for Your Group

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FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

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How to Use This Resource

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

It never fails: just as you're finishing a small-group study, your mind begins to wonder, *What should we study next?* And if you're like most small-group leaders, that question strikes fear into your heart. But it shouldn't! This resource will help you determine what you should study and what study format you should use. Use it alone for your own education, or use it in a group setting with other small-group leaders. Together you can decide what's next for your groups.

Where Are We At?

These two articles will help you understand where your group is at: What critical small-group elements are missing from your group? Have you discussed goals and expectations? Be sure to start here.

Different Study Types

Sam O'Neal gives an excellent overview of different types of studies available, laying out pros and cons. Then JoHannah Reardon explains three essentials for all good studies, and Terry Powell helps you evaluate the questions provided in pre-printed studies.

Make the Choice

The five articles in this final section will help you make the choice for your next study. These articles will help you decide what your group needs, what you can handle, and what format will work best.

—Amy Jackson is Associate Editor of SmallGroups.com.

Need more material or training on another small-groups ministry topic? See our website at www.SmallGroups.com.

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Three Elements of Vibrant Small Groups

How vibrant is your group?

By Bill Search

Not many people take a Sunday drive anymore. But when I was a child, my father would refer to slow, clueless drivers as Sunday drivers. Sure, they were in a car, heading toward a destination, but they didn't have a clue what the destination was. They were just lollygagging down the road.

A lot of small groups are like Sunday drivers. They might enjoy the journey, but they don't know where they're heading and don't have much motivation to get to their destination in a timely fashion. So let's determine where your're group is heading—or needs to head.

Three Patterns of Vibrant Groups

So what are the core pieces of a healthy group? In my years of experience leading groups and leading small-group ministries, I have identified three core patterns of healthy groups. You can add to this list, but you can't reduce it without harming the group. The three patterns are connecting, changing, and cultivating. You will notice that all three of these words are verbs—simply put, they involve action. They don't *describe* community; they are the *actions* of a vibrant community.

Connecting

The first pattern of a healthy group is the relational pattern. You have to build a relational bridge strong enough to hold the weight of truth. Imagine in your first group meeting the leader reads James 1 and asks each new member to share a trial or temptation they are facing. How would you reply? Would you be 100 percent honest and transparent? I doubt it. If you are like me you might say, "Well, I'm tempted to be too generous. And sometimes I have a short fuse." However, if you know the people in your group and you are comfortable with them, you will likely feel safe enough to share what is really going on in your life.

If you don't build the relationships within the group you won't have a group for long. A few years ago, Gallup conducted research on church health. One of the important factors that contributed to enthusiasm for church was friendship. If you have no friends at church you will likely wander away. If you do have friends—people who call you when you're absent, ask how you are doing spiritually, and encourage you—you will likely have a strong commitment to your church. Likewise, you will have a strong commitment to your small group.

Simple things you can do to develop the connecting pattern in your group:

- Start each meeting with an icebreaker.
- Plan out group meetings at least a month or two in advance so everyone knows when to meet.
- Deal with negative group dynamics (like the person who dominates the conversation in the group).
- Call and e-mail people who miss a meeting.

Changing

The second key pattern of a healthy group is the growth pattern. Some call it edification or sanctification. Simply put, it's change! A vibrant group helps you change into the person God intends you to be.

In his book *Change or Die*, Alan Deutschman discovered some clues to how people change. His big secret was community! If you want to change you need the right kind of relationships that reinforce the right kind of behavior. This is confirmed by my own life.

Through much of my middle and high school years I was a champion cusser. I think I received my freshmen letter in creative swearing. It was the '80s, after all, and the era of Eddie Murphy stand-up routines and *Beverly Hills Cop* movies. But the biggest influence was my friends. Most of my friends played on the varsity swearing team, too.

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In the summer of 1988, I attended a Youth for Christ conference and was challenged to turn over my life to Christ. In the next few months, I fell into a new crowd—one that told me I really didn't need to swear in order to impress them. In fact, most of my new friends rarely swore. And before too long, my vocabulary improved.

Hearing truth is one part of change. But a community that challenges you and reinforces that change really matters. As Deutshman said in his book, it's hard to eat a salad if all your friends are gorging on wings!

Simple things you can do to develop the changing pattern in your group:

- Study the Bible for application. Answer the question, "So what do we do with this?"
- Invite each member to share areas they are trying to improve and offer accountability.
- Create a judgment-free zone where members can share what's going on without feeling judged by the group (or feeling like a special project).
- Keep the focus on Jesus Christ who gives us the strength to change.

Cultivating

The third key pattern of a vibrant group is the missional pattern. The other two patterns are very exclusive. They focus on the group and the individuals within the group. This pattern is inclusive and focused on others. You might call it service, outreach, mission, or evangelism. I use a farm metaphor. As you cultivate hearts for other people you are turning up the soil in your life (and hopefully in others).

Have you ever noticed that a healthy family reaches out? My wife and I have been blessed with three wonderful children. I love family time around the table. My wife and kids are my favorite people to watch movies with, eat dinner with, and vacation with. I love my family.

In a decade or so, all three of my kids will (hopefully) move out. They'll start careers, get married, or start families of their own. Then my dinner table will just need two chairs. But that is exactly how it should be. If you look at my family right now, you'll notice my beautiful wife and darling kids. But if all three of my children still live with Karyn and me in two decades, you'll think there's something wrong with our family. Family movie night that involves snuggling with my 39-year-old daughter while her 36-year-old sister grooms a doll's hair, and my 32-year-old son plays his Nintendo DS is disturbing!

A small group that is only focused on keeping the band together will actually ruin the very thing they are attempting to protect. If you want to have a healthy, vibrant group, you need to have a mission beyond caring for the people in your family room.

Simple things you can do to develop the cultivating pattern in your group:

- Study evangelism and spiritual gifts in the group with the purpose of practicing what you learn.
- Have each person identify at least two non-Christians they are praying for (and ask for a progress report every couple months).
- Adopt a needy part of the world, and learn as much as you can. Pray for the country (or countries) and perhaps support a mission there.
- Serve at least quarterly as a group or encourage every group member to serve regularly.

Wrap Up

Starting a group is easy, but developing a healthy, vibrant group takes effort and intentionality. Guide your group to become a group that is connecting, changing, and cultivating. As you focus on these big patterns of vibrant small groups, the other aspects of small groups will fall into place.

—BILL SEARCH is author of [Simple Small Groups](#); copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss:

1. Which pattern is most prevalent in your small group? What have you done to emphasize the values of that pattern?
2. Which pattern(s) is absent? How can you communicate value for that pattern?
3. What study topics or materials would help your group develop the pattern(s) they're struggling with?

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Set the Stage at Your First Meeting

What you need to cover

By Will Johnston

One of the most important things you need to cover with your group is where you're heading—what your vision is for your time together. The best time to do this is at the first meeting, but even if you don't do it then, you'll need to cover it at some point. The first meeting makes sense, though because the people who are part of your group want to know what you'll be doing together. It will also allow you to start thinking about which curriculum would work best for this group.

Answer their questions by considering:

- Why are we meeting?
- What do we hope to accomplish?
- Are we a group that requires consistent attendance or is it okay if people pop in and out?
- Do we have a group covenant?
- Will we have weekly homework?
- Are members expected to attend service projects?
- How long will the group last?

If your church has a set idea of what your group will be about, you'll simply communicate these expectations. If you have flexibility over what you'll be doing, studying, and accomplishing, you may want to involve everyone in answering these questions.

Remember that it's much easier to set these expectations at the beginning than it is to change the culture of the group later on. And if a problem does need to be addressed in the future, it's helpful if the expectations were communicated up front.

—WILL JOHNSTON is the Small Group Catalyst for National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How and when have you discussed your group vision? If you haven't, why not?
2. How involved were your group members involved in the creation of your group vision?
3. What does your group vision tell you about possible studies you should tackle?

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An Overview of Small-Group Material

Learn the basics in order to avoid buyer's paralysis.

By Sam O'Neal

Do you remember the last time you tried to pick out a new type of snack at the grocery store? It's no easy task. First you have to figure out what kind of snack you're in the mood for—ice cream, cookies, chips, pastries, popsicles, candy, the whole range of Little Debbie's products, and more. Then you have to figure out what brand you'd like, what's on sale, how many calories are included per serving, and on and on. It's exhausting!

Sometimes there are too many choices. In fact, there's actually a state called "buyer's paralysis," which is when a consumer gets so overwhelmed by the number of available options that he or she gives up and doesn't buy anything at all (or maybe buys one of everything) instead of making a choice.

Of course, buyer's paralysis isn't limited to snack foods. It can happen with all kinds of potential choices—including when small-group leaders try to figure out which type of study to use in their groups.

The only defense against buyer's paralysis is to become educated on the options available, which allows you to make informed decisions. Therefore, let's spend time reviewing the basic types of small-group curricula—plus the different situations for which each type works best.

Bible Studies

The most basic type of small-group curriculum is the general Bible study, which can take a few different forms. For example, many groups will gather and study a specific book of the Bible in a very loose and spontaneous way. They'll show up, read some verses, share what they think, and move on.

If you're purchasing a general Bible study that's been published, however, chances are good it will be an inductive Bible study. These studies focus on a specific portion of Scripture and are usually constructed around three components:

- **Observation:** What does the text say?
- **Interpretation:** What does the text mean?
- **Application:** How is the text relevant to my life, and how should I respond to it?

One of the strengths of inductive Bible studies is that they have a laser focus on the Bible. They rarely include a lot of fluff or filler, opting instead to connect the study participants directly with God's Word. Inductive studies are also easy to understand and have a clear direction for group members to follow, given the structure of observation, interpretation, and application.

A weakness of inductive Bible studies is that they can leave things too open when it comes to interpreting and applying the text. Because inductive studies have a laser focus on God's Word, they usually don't provide a lot of help in terms of commentary and context regarding Scripture passages. This can allow small-group participants to drift into the dangerous territory of mistaken (and sometimes heretical) interpretations.

Also, most inductive Bible studies include a little bit of reading combined with a lot of discussion. That's great for people with auditory or reading/writing learning styles. But inductive studies are often less than satisfying for visual and kinesthetic learners—which usually includes men and younger adults.

Topical Studies

While inductive Bible studies have a concentrated focus on specific Bible passages, topical studies concentrate on a broader range of experiences. These include general Christian living, marriage, work, parenting, social justice, and so on. Topical studies can also help group members practice specific skills (such as prayer and evangelism) or interact with various elements of popular culture (such as movies and literature).

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The primary advantage of topical Bible studies is that they have a targeted appeal to small-group participants, usually in the form of meeting a felt need. Think of a group of young couples working through a marriage study together, for example.

The primary disadvantage of topical Bible studies is that they can sometimes become disconnected from the Bible as a source of authority and instead jump totally into experiences and opinions surrounding the given topic. If left unchecked, this can transform a small group into a Christianized version of pop-therapy sessions.

Sermon-Based Studies

In recent years, many churches have adopted a sermon-based approach to small groups. This is where home groups (and sometimes Sunday school classes) study the same material and/or Scripture texts that are addressed during the weekend worship services.

Many publishers (including SmallGroups.com) are now producing "campaign" material to fit this church-wide model of ministry. The most famous example is *The Purpose Driven Life*, of course, but many new campaign kits hit the market each year. In addition, a number of sermon-based churches have chosen to write their own material in-house. This is typically done by a staff member or layperson directly connected to the small-group ministry.

The greatest advantage of sermon-based studies is that they provide a lecture/lab atmosphere for learning and application within a church. Participants get a broad overview of each week's material during the sermon (the lecture), but then they have the chance to ask specific questions and identify areas of application within their smaller groups (the lab). It's a great combination, especially for newer groups or ministries.

The primary disadvantage of sermon-based groups is that group leaders usually lose the ability to choose a curriculum option that fits the specific needs of their group. When everyone studies the same thing, there aren't any other options. For that reason, sermon-based groups are sometimes frustrating for established groups that want to go deeper or explore a specific topic.

Book Studies

Many small groups prefer to interact with a well-known book instead of using shorter curriculum guides. These are usually the "cream of the crop" from Christian prose, including titles such as *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman or *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Some groups enjoy digging into controversial works—*The Shack* by William P. Young would be a good example. Many of these books are now accompanied by journals or workbooks designed for use in a small group.

There are several advantages to this approach. For one thing, books that have weathered the test of time usually contain genuinely life-changing material. They are great books, pure and simple, and they can have a deep impact on small-group participants. These kinds of studies are also a nice break from the "same old, same old" feel of many curriculum guides. They offer something new and a little more exciting.

The danger of taking this approach is that it can be hard to pair these books with an in-depth study of Scripture. The material in the book usually takes precedence over God's Word. That's okay for a six to eight week break every now and again, but it becomes less appealing if a group wants to study these kinds of books most of the time. At some point, things transition from a small group to a book club.

Another disadvantage of this approach is that it can be quite expensive, especially if you are asking group members to purchase both the original book and a group-based study guide.

Video Bible Studies

With video Bible studies, the primary focus of your group's attention is transferred away from a printed book or guide and toward a television or computer. (Most video Bible studies do come with a printed curriculum guide, as well, but they are much shorter than traditional study guides and mostly serve as a way of taking notes.) These studies typically feature a well-known author, pastor, or personality who speaks about the topic of the study.

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The main advantage of video Bible studies is that they can be very effective in a visual culture like ours. Most people today have grown up watching screens, which means they usually feel comfortable receiving information through a visual medium in a small group. The best video Bible studies also include diverse visual elements—including landscape shots, different points of focus and camerawork, visual aids (like charts and graphs), Scripture references on the screen, and more. These are great for visual learners, including men and younger adults.

The primary weakness of video Bible studies is that they often cause group leaders to lose focus. Sometimes we think that having a mega-pastor speaking to our group means we no longer have to do the work of a leader—we just need to push play and let the expert take control. This is not true. A pre-produced video can't guide a discussion or interact with the Holy Spirit. It can't conform the material to meet the needs of individual group members. Those elements remain the job of the small-group leader.

There are other types of small-group studies, of course, but these are the major options. And now that you're more familiar with what's out there, you've got a better chance of making the right choice for yourself and the members of your group.

—SAM O'NEAL is author of [The Field Guide for Small-Group Leaders](#) and an Editorial Advisor for SmallGroups.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What kinds of materials has your group used in the past? Which ones worked the best?
2. Which type of study appeals most to you? Why?
3. Based on the information given in this article, which two or three types do you feel best fit your small group?

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What Makes a Good Study?

The answer may not be what you think.

By JoHannah Reardon

Henry (not his real name) tried really hard. He wanted to become a regular Bible study writer, so he sent me a rather impressive résumé of his theological training and experience. I happened to need a writer at that moment, so I gave him a trial assignment.

What I got back showed a good grasp of the subject matter and Bible text that it was based on. He obviously knew what he was talking about. In fact, he knew more than the average small-group member would be able to decipher. He wrote in theological language that you needed a PhD to understand. He also had no idea how to put the subject matter into a form to discuss. He was a teacher and was used to imparting information, not creating conversation.

That experience with Henry sums up why it's so difficult to find a really good group study. We want the study to increase our knowledge, but also create a lively group experience that's applicable. Finding all those things in one study can be tricky. So look for a study that includes each of these elements.

Increase Your Knowledge

Nothing is worse than an overly simplistic Bible study. What makes us want to study the Bible in the first place is its complexity. That doesn't mean it's impossible to understand, but it does mean that it should get us beyond surface level. For example, a study on the Ten Commandments should include more than a simple recitation of all ten commandments. If we are studying those commandments, we want to understand what they are truly saying. Otherwise we could just list them and be done with it.

But many Bible studies today do the equivalent of just that. They direct us to a Bible text and then ask us to parrot back the exact words written there. This can be useful to set the context, but it can never move us beyond a simple observation to understanding the meaning and applying it to our lives. And it's an absolute discussion killer. All a person can do is answer the question and move onto the next one. There are no opinions expressed or deeper meanings gleaned.

Then again, we don't want to fall into Henry's problem of making the text so complicated that we have no idea what it is saying.

So what's the answer? Look for a study that is theologically sound but not difficult to understand. Try to find a study that includes solid passages of Scripture. If the study just throws in a verse here and there to support a point, you won't be getting into the meat of the Word. Instead, look for studies that put longer passages of Scripture into context. If someone just uses a snippet, they may be trying to bend the Scripture to prove their point. So if the study is talking about forgiveness, it should use a section of Scripture where forgiveness is the topic—not a random verse where forgiveness is mentioned in passing.

Also look for a study that is not afraid to admit that there are things we aren't sure about. It should let readers know that, for some issues, there is no definitive opinion and that the best of Christians disagree.

Create a Lively Group Experience

If a study is going to create a good group experience, it should include great open-ended questions that require a thoughtful answer. Avoid studies that include only yes or no questions, or ones that simply parrot back the information in the text. Instead, the questions should require a thoughtful answer.

For example, for a study on the Trinity, if the questions are along the line of, "Do you believe in a triune God?"—that requires only a yes or no answer and kills discussion. Instead it should ask something like, "What difference do you think it makes that God is triune?" or "How would you explain the Trinity?"

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If a study does ask a yes or no question, it should always ask for an expansion. For a study on forgiveness, if a question asks, "Do you struggle with forgiveness?" it should follow it up with, "Share your story." Knowing that can help you turn less than ideal questions into ones that will create a better group experience.

A great study should also have engaging, excellent writing. In fact, studies should be as engaging to read as any article or book. Here are some examples of great writing in a Bible study. It's from a study called "Pulling Weeds in the Church Yard":

Christian faith has been used to justify acts as violent as the Crusades, the lynching of blacks in America, and the bombing of abortion clinics. And maybe not as violent—but certainly as vicious—can be the rhetoric Christians use in public political and moral debates. However, faith requires Christ followers to put ourselves under the Word of God, not the other way around, to fit our agendas.

Doesn't that intrigue you and make you want to know more of what the study is about? It certainly sets the stage for a lively discussion. Here's another example from a study called "Can I Trust My Bible?":

The Bible is not an arbitrary collection of cute, nice, or even wise writings that simply amassed themselves together in some dusty corner of a Jewish rabbi's personal library; it is a set of literary creations built on the foundation of God speaking words of covenant relationship.

That makes me want to know everything I can about the Bible and to know this God who wants to have a relationship with me.

Make Sure It's Applicable

Finally, make sure the study is practical. Remember that the point of all group studies should not be to simply impart knowledge—it should produce change. The study should present the Word of God as the living, active thing it is. It should help us to savor the Word of God as a precious morsel and allow it to ask questions of us, rather than we simply asking questions of it.

For example, if a study approaches the story of the rich young man whom Jesus tells to sell all his possessions and follow him, it shouldn't make up an analytical interpretation to explain this away. It should force us to listen to Jesus' words as if they are directed to us and consider what they mean for our lives. In other words, it should avoid making God in our own image and let him make us in his.

Look for a Bible study that digs into the meaning of the text but also provides a way to apply it. We can study the Ten Commandments until we've completely dissected them, but if we don't figure out how to obey them, our study will be meaningless. We can debate all day what it means to "honor your father and mother," but unless we figure out how to do that, it's not going to do us any good. So keep in mind the highest form of knowledge is wisdom. As you are looking at curriculum, decide whether it's merely imparting information or moving you beyond that into wisdom.

Of course, the best study in the world can fall flat. So pray that God will give you and your group a thirst that is never quenched in a mere hour a week, but that each person will want to know more because they can't get enough of it.

—JOHANNAH REARDON is managing editor of ChristianBibleStudies.com; copyright 2009 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How do your past group studies measure up to this list of necessary components?
2. What are your biases: which components do you tend to look for, and which do you tend to overlook?
3. What principles from this article will guide you the next time you are looking for a group study?

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Evaluating Bible Study Questions

Four things to look for when using pre-made questions

By Terry Powell

My wife asked me to read several lessons in the published Bible study guide used by her women's group. "Pay special attention to the questions," she said.

My perusal identified the same problem that frustrated her as a serious student of Scripture: every single question sought factual replies. Repeatedly, the questions limited investigation to facts in the Bible passage, and then spoon-fed timeless truths to the reader. Not once did a question encourage analysis of facts or spur thinking about application.

When it comes to the quality of Bible study questions, not all published materials are created equal. Whether you're scouting for a Bible study guide for all participants to use, or a Leader's Guide for you to facilitate discussion, consider the following guidelines. To illustrate the evaluative criteria, I'll use questions on Matthew 4:1–11, Satan's temptation of Jesus.

1. Is there a balance of observation, interpretation, and application questions?

Observation questions rivet group members' attention to what the biblical writer says or what's happening in the context. Their purpose is to highlight significant details and set the stage for interpretation.

- What were the three temptations Satan threw at Jesus?
- What was similar about Jesus' response to the three temptations?

Interpretation questions require analysis and articulation of truths or principles implied or illustrated in the text.

- What insight for handling temptation did Jesus demonstrate?
- What do we learn about Satan from this incident?

Application questions enable learners to connect truth to their lives.

- We discovered that Satan is persistent at spiritual warfare. How should this truth affect us day-to-day?
- Persistence should describe our approach to spiritual warfare as well. In what ways should our persistence show?

Limiting questions to factual replies doesn't challenge group members. Starting with analytical questions doesn't provide a solid foundation for interpretation and may lead to excessive subjectivity. Omitting application questions falsely assumes that participants will link truth to life on their own. A strong discussion guide will include all three types of questions in this order: observation, interpretation, application.

2. Is the Intent of Questions Clear?

Inspect questions for ambiguity. Look for these two foes of clarity:

"What About" Questions

Beginning a question with the words "What about...?" can lead to blank stares from your group members. For example, "What about the fact that Satan quoted Scripture in his confrontation of Jesus?" The logical reaction to this question is a shrug of the shoulders, and a question of their own: "Well, what about it?!"

The author of this question wants to explore a vital fact about our enemy. But here's a better way to do it:

In verse 6, Satan quoted from Psalm 90. What does this tell us about him?

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Long-Winded Questions

A second nemesis of clarity is the long-winded, or wordy, question. A good question is lean enough to appear in a Weight Watchers commercial! If there are too many words, group members must work hard just to decipher your intent.

Which of the two questions below from Matthew 4:1–11 gets your vote for less complicated?

- Since we see the devil in action tempting Jesus in the wilderness, what specific qualities and strategies of spiritual warfare that he will also use against us does he demonstrate?
- What do we learn about Satan from this incident?

It's pretty obvious, right? A sure way to prune the clutter from the questions is to precede them with introductory remarks. The following question is too long and cumbersome:

In light of the way Jesus responded to each of the three temptations by saying, "It is written," what principle about succeeding in spiritual warfare can we learn from him?

Instead of this long question, use a short question preceded by introductory remarks:

Look again at the verses recording Jesus' response to each temptation. On each occasion he employed the phrase, "It is written." What insight about handling temptation did he model for us?

3. Do Questions Provoke Thought?

Watch out for the following types of questions that don't incite the intellect.

Obvious Answers

In adult groups, the following questions on Matthew 4:1–11 are far too easy:

- Where did this clash between Satan and Jesus occur?
- What did Satan say to Jesus in verse 9?

It's possible to craft observation questions that make data-gathering more of a challenge. The best observation questions require learners to read two or more verses and find multiple answers.

- What three temptations were thrust upon Jesus?
- How did Jesus respond to each of the three temptations?

Yes/No Questions

Avoid materials chock-full of questions that only require "yes" or "no" answers. Otherwise, you'll need to do a lot of revising. Here are two examples along with helpful revisions that provoke more thought.

- Did Satan recognize Jesus' identity? Revision: What words in the text suggest that Satan was aware of Jesus' identity?
- Have you ever succeeded during a time of spiritual warfare by recalling a verse or truth from Scripture? Revision: How has knowledge of God's Word come to your rescue during a time of temptation or spiritual warfare?

Leading Questions

A leading question sags under the weight of the curriculum writer's or group leader's personal opinion. The intent is to solicit agreement rather than stir thinking. These questions have no place in a Bible study:

- Don't you think the timing of Satan's attack on Jesus was significant?
- Isn't the fact that Satan tempted Jesus three times, not once, revealing?

Both questions assume the importance of a fact without directing the learner to consider why it's significant.

4. Do Questions Facilitate Biblical Accuracy and Objectivity?

The following types of questions shift the spotlight away from the Bible passage, or encourage subjective contemplation rather than direct investigation.

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Speculative

A speculative question tries to satisfy curiosity about a fact that God didn't choose to reveal. It's a waste of time to explore answers to these questions:

- If Jesus had listened to Satan and jumped off the pinnacle of the temple, what do you think would have happened?
- When the devil left, angels came and ministered to Jesus. How do you think the angels ministered to him?

Background

When background or contextual information is essential to the grasp of a passage, the study should provide it. Questions that seek information that's not in the text, or which a typical group member doesn't know, are insensitive. Don't ask these unless you've previously provided information that would allow them to answer:

- What Old Testament book did Jesus quote?
- What was significant about the pinnacle of the temple?

Confusing Meaning with Application

Studies shouldn't include questions like, "What does this verse mean to you?" This wording gives people a green light to look inside themselves, to dredge up past experiences, to recite an opinion they've come across—anything but investigate the verse itself. Meaning always originates in the text. On the other hand, a verse can have varying significance to an individual's life. Significance describes a relationship between the verse and one's life. I've seen group Bible studies that *began* with a meaning question, before exploring timeless truths. Discussion of significance should come only after clear, biblical interpretation.

Use the guidelines in this article to evaluate materials you're considering or to polish the questions you prepare for your own group. Doing so will keep group members engaged rather than frustrated.

—TERRY POWELL teaches church ministry leadership courses at Columbia International University and writes regularly at terrydpowell.com; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. As you look at your potential new study, does it have a balance of observation, interpretation, and application questions? If not, are you able to add in a few questions of your own, or would it more work than you're willing or able to give?
2. How clear and thought-provoking are the questions? Will the questions stimulate an engaging conversation?
3. How well does the study align with your church's theological stance? Will any differences promote healthy discussion or lead group members astray?

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

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Find the Right Study

How to choose helpful material for your small group

By Rachel Gilmore

Here is a question that strikes fear into the heart of many small-group leaders: what are we going to study next? Like the proverbial fork in the road, choosing new material can seem deceptively simple. Yet the wrong choice can be filled with potentially disastrous consequences. Some studies are too hard, some are too easy, some are too homework-driven, and some are too unrelated to life—all in all, there's nothing worse than getting your group members all moving in the same direction only to have people immediately get lost or wander off track.

Know Your Destination

In order to find the best material for your group, you first need to know what your group's study goals are. Consider whether or not your group wants to:

- Begin building biblical knowledge.
- Use existing biblical knowledge to dig deeper into a particular book of the Bible.
- Focus the study time around issues that connect faith with real life—things like Christian dating, marriage, parenting, developing spiritual friendships, finding a personal mission field, keeping true to Christian values in the workplace, and so on.
- Devote study time to a particular area of spiritual formation: prayer life, becoming more compassionate or merciful, resolving conflict peacefully, living patiently according to God's timing and so on.
- Spend most of your time together serving others.
- Support and encourage one another emotionally and spiritually, building up friendships first, faith second.

Just as God created us to be individuals, all small groups are also fearfully and wonderfully made. What works for one group may not work for another, so don't be discouraged and don't waste your time comparing yourself to others. When your group formed, hopefully you talked about your study goals. (If not, now's the perfect time.) However, the longer a group has been together, losing and gaining members, it's possible that these goals have changed or become assumed and unspoken.

The next time you approach a fork in the study road, make time during your meeting to talk openly about group goals. Pray for God's wisdom and discernment. Then come to a consensus—affirm your group goals and prepare to move in the direction of your goals with your next curriculum choice.

Note: Don't be offended if some members choose to leave the group and take a different path at this time. God's Word lights our way, and we need people to be traveling different paths in this world in order to make disciples of all nations. Bless those departing and continue on, secure in the knowledge that you have prayerfully asked for God's guidance and are moving forward according to the Spirit's leading.

Know Your Group

Once you know your destination, make sure you know the individuals travelling with you. Having a sense of your members' background and current lifestyles, along with your own, will also help you choose. So ask yourself:

- Have any of these people done a group study before, or is this a brand new experience for most?
- Do I have any non-believers or seekers in this group?
- Do our members attend worship regularly at our church? Another church? Not at all?
- How willing and/or able are the participants to do homework in between meetings?
- Do the people in my group like to talk, or do they typically keep their thoughts to themselves?

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

- Can our members discuss different perspectives/opinions calmly, rationally, and respectfully?
- Does my group see me more as teacher/instructor (having more knowledge) or facilitator (I'm the tour guide in this learning journey)?
- How much time do I personally have for study and preparation?
- How comfortable is our group with incorporating technology into our study time—such as watch a DVD or have follow-up conversations on Facebook?
- Do any of our members have any special learning/physical needs that would impact learning/group discussions?

If your group is made up mainly of people who have limited group study experience, or if you have non-believers or seekers attending, you will likely need to choose a low key, user-friendly study that is straightforward, incorporates personal stories, makes practical connections between Scripture and real life, and does not assume deep Bible knowledge. On the other hand, if you have a group of mature Christians who can handle Spirit-led debate, you can don the facilitator hat and lead the group through an in-depth analysis of Job or James, or maybe a character-building study on how to faithfully raise children to be in the world but not of it.

Other group dynamics to consider are the age, gender, cultural/ethnic background, and financial situation of participants. These factors may affect, for instance, your group's ability or willingness to utilize technology or discuss certain topics. Don't assume that everyone likes watching DVDs, is comfortable reading out loud, has access to a computer, is comfortable using a computer, or shares the same political opinions. Take time to get to know your members and find your shared values and interests. The more you know, the clearer the curriculum path will become.

Know Your Options

Now that you've identified your destination and the needs of the people travelling with you, it's time to find the best vehicle for getting there. Equipped with the answers from the questions above, consider these final questions before perusing the local Christian bookstore or online retailer:

- Would my group do better with a study that covered Bible basics (key people/events/timeline), a particular book of the Bible, a relevant life experience theme, a spiritual formation topic, or something else?
- Would my group do better with a DVD-based or book-based study?
 - If DVD-based, would they prefer to watch an expert teacher/speaker present a lesson, or watch a "real life" vignette to illustrate the lesson's point?
 - If book-based, would my group prefer a fill-in-the blank workbook or open-ended reflection questions that correspond to life stories or Bible passages?
- Can I choose a study that requires homework in order to be prepared for the next lesson?
- How long will our group meet? (Consider both time dedicated for study during the meeting and total number of weeks/months you'll be together.)
- Do I need to stay within my denomination or use church-approved authors/publishers?

Note: It's always good to preview a new study before introducing it to your group. If researching online, make a short list of titles to take to your local Christian bookstore (or your church's small-group library). Plan to spend some time, maybe with another group member or two, looking for your top three to five choices. Or if you're financially able, order a copy of your top three choices online and preview them at home. Just be sure to check the return policy before ordering.

Psalm 119 reminds us that it is only through God's Word that we can find our way in this world. "I'm single-minded in pursuit of you; don't let me miss the road signs you've posted," the psalmist begs God (Psalm 119:10, MSG). As you approach the next fork in the road, be prepared to slow down, read the road signs, and plan carefully the way your group should go.

—RACHEL GILMORE is author of [The Complete Leader's Guide to Christian Retreats](#) and [Church Programs and Celebrations for All Generations](#); copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

Discuss

1. How have you selected study material in the past? What criteria did you use?
2. Did the material meet the needs of the group? If not, why do you think it didn't?
3. What questions from the article will help you better focus the direction of your next study?

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

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What Should We Study Next?

Five questions and principles that will help you answer

By Michael Mack

Leading a successful small group is a lot like sailing a ship at sea. Your job as the captain is to navigate your fellowship through a variety of obstacles and hazards, staying on course to reach your destination. An effective captain knows the right questions to ask.

As you lead your group, you need to know the answers to at least five important questions. These questions provide you with five principles for selecting the next study for your group.

Question: Why does the group exist?

Principle: The main purpose of every group should flow out of the mission of the church.

The mission of the church where I lead is this: "To team with God in turning unchurched people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ." Your church's mission statement is probably similar in that it relates to carrying out the commission Jesus gave his church (Matthew 28:19–20).

Once you have clarified your group's mission, write it down. Then answer the question, "What can we study next that will help us carry out that mission? What should we study that will help us make disciples or make fully devoted followers of Jesus?"

Question: Who is in my group?

Principle: The small-group leader's main function is that of a shepherd who knows his or her sheep.

Here are a few questions a good shepherd will ask:

- **Where are my people spiritually?** As a shepherd, you must know where people are individually and where the group is as a whole. Are participants newborns in the faith, spiritual teenagers, or mature adults? (For discussions on how to shepherd people at different spiritual levels, see passages such as 1 Peter 2:2; 1 Corinthians 3:1–3; and Hebrews 5:11–6:1.)
- **In what areas do they need to grow?** Do your group members need more knowledge about beliefs and doctrine? Do they need to learn the disciplines or practices of the Christian life? Do they need to understand the virtues of the Christian life or the fruit of the Spirit? There are several effective tools you can use in your group to assess their spiritual maturity in these different core competencies (e.g., [The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool](#) by Randy Frazee).
- **How do they learn best?** Do participants in your group tend to learn best through application-oriented discussion? Do they learn best by doing, hearing, or reading—or is it a combination? Would individuals learn better in a group, or would some one-on-one mentoring be helpful?

Good shepherd-leaders will ask these three questions. They are concerned for the sheep. Like the Good Shepherd, they know their sheep by name and are intimately involved in their lives.

Question: What do you believe?

Principle: Teach sound doctrine (Titus 2:1).

As you choose curriculum, be sure it leads you to study God's Word, not just someone's opinions—even opinions that relate to Scripture. Satan is sneaky. He can, without a group even realizing it, knock you off track through innocent-sounding questions. Be careful! A writer can easily move a group to consider his opinions about a doctrinal stance by asking a series of questions that lead the conversation in a certain direction.

Be sure to examine a potential Bible study closely before using it in your group. If you don't feel confident or competent to examine a curriculum for doctrinal purity, ask a church leader to do so first. Some churches have an approved list of studies that have already been screened. Know what your church teaches on certain gray

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areas of doctrinal issues. Teach only what is in accordance with what your church leadership has established and, of course, what is taught in Scripture.

Question: What are your group's capabilities and limitations?

Principle: A group agreement can help establish some basic ground rules for Bible study selection.

Here are some things to keep in mind as you think about what your group is capable of, and what it needs:

Depth of studies. Are the studies too deep? Not deep enough? Just right for your group?

Homework. Has your group agreed to do homework between studies? Doing some work between studies can be a good approach for deep discipleship, but it also can tend to close a group, since no one wants to come to a group and be the only one not to have the assignment done. If you do choose to use studies that include some homework, how much is appropriate? Be sure the homework expectations are clear before looking for a study.

Length of study. How many weeks will the study take? Know the attention span of your group! Most groups get antsy with more than a six- or seven-week study. Shorter always seems better, but discuss this with your group first.

Length of time in each study. How much time will you spend in Bible study during each session? Are there too many questions for the time allotted by the group? Will projects take too long to complete?

Good questions. Will the questions in the study lead to discussion and lively interaction, or do the questions sound like a pop quiz looking for one-sentence answers? Also consider how many questions are enough for a good discussion. Some Bible studies include 15 or more questions. That may be way too many for most groups, unless all you are getting is one person answering each question. But that is not a discussion! Sometimes 2 or 3 good application-oriented questions are enough for a stimulating, interactive, life-changing discussion around God's Word.

Open or closed. A long study or series may inadvertently close your group, since new people feel awkward jumping into the middle of a study—they feel behind even before they start! Do the sessions of a potential Bible study build upon each other, or are they somewhat independent so that new people can easily join at anytime?

Cost. This may be the biggie! Discuss with your group members how much they want to shell out for a study. The price of some curriculum choices may be prohibitive for some participants' budgets. Be sensitive to this. Be a good steward of the resources God has provided.

Question: What are your own capabilities and limitations?

Principle: Know yourself. Don't get in over your head.

Here are a few things to think about when it comes to evaluating your own limits as a leader.

Functionality. How easy is the study to use? Does it include everything you need? Does it come with a leader's guide and other leader helps? Is it organized so that it is easy to follow? Does it include suggested times for sections and activities? Does it provide options so you can make choices based on your leadership style and your group's personality and interests?

Prep time. How long will it take to prepare for meetings? Do you have to spend an inordinate amount of time finding materials for the study, or is everything self-contained? Will you have to spend a lot of time trimming the study to fit your group's schedule? Will you have to do a lot of work making the study fit your group?

Cost. How much is this going to set you back personally? Will you have to purchase a separate, and more expensive, leader's guide?

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Passion. Do you like the study? Can you get excited about it each week? If you're not interested in the subject or the style of the study yourself, your group will quickly catch your lack of enthusiasm, dooming the study. The answer to this one may depend on the answers to numbers one and two above. If you know the study will help the sheep grow spiritually, then you, as the group leader, should have no problem getting excited about leading the study.

Answer all five of these questions and follow these principles, and you'll navigate the sea of curriculum choices successfully.

—MICHAEL MACK is the author of [Small Group Vital Signs](#) and is a SmallGroups.com Editorial Advisor; copyright 2003 Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How well do you know where your group members are at spiritually? If you need to know more, how can you find out?
2. What are your group's capabilities and limitations? With these in mind, what kinds of topics or studies will be most helpful for your group?
3. Consider your own capabilities and limitations. What are you comfortable with? How much time are you able to spend on preparing for meetings?

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What Should My Group Study?

Three phases as you decide

By Spence Shelton

I think one of the most dangerous questions you can ask your small group is "What do you want to study next?" Somehow, the book of Revelation almost always wins out. At least, that's my experience. The reason it's a bad question is because the group usually isn't prepared to answer thoughtfully, and the leader isn't considering the group members' needs.

The result is something that plagues American churches: groups of people bouncing from one curriculum to the next like a Bible buffet where they pick up nuggets of insight, and then put it on the shelf to gather dust. What you study as a group should be catalytic to the spiritual growth of your group, your church, and, dare I say, your city.

As a group leader you have a very serious responsibility. What you study will define a good portion of your group's discipleship experience. Let me share the three phases you'll need to work through in order to choose curriculum that is right for your group, leaving your group members with a positive discipleship experience.

Phase 1: Evaluate Your Situation

Here are some diagnostic questions that will help you evaluate your situation—church wide and in your own group.

What Is Happening Church-Wide?

If most of the people in your group attend weekend services, you would be wise to capitalize on that. Most leaders don't go against the grain of the weekend teaching, but they do go in a different direction. If you take your group in one direction and the weekend services take them in another, it may be overwhelming. On the other hand, if you study something in line with the weekend messages, your group members may have more "aha" moments. Consider the following:

- What is the pastor teaching? Is he or she in a series or covering a particular book or subject?
- Are there any major initiatives being emphasized such as evangelistic weekends, expansion projects, or service opportunities?

What Is Happening in Your Small-Group Ministry?

Ideally the small-group ministry will be emphasizing the church-wide vision. Whether or not that's the case, there may be some nuances or other things that the small-group director is pushing to help you make disciples. Consider:

- Is there small-group material your small-group director is offering or encouraging you to use?
- Think back to any leadership gatherings you've had this year. Were there any specific values or materials stressed?

What Is Happening in Your Small Group?

I'm aware of a church that expects group leaders to know each member of the group well enough to articulate a vision for his or her spiritual growth. You have to know your group members. Consider these questions:

- Spiritually, where are the people in your group? Are they new Christians, non-Christians, or mature Christians?
- What life stage are your group members in?
- How long has your group been meeting?
- Is there a situation one (or more) of your group members is in or has been through that requires more attention?

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

Phase 2: Pick a Direction

Is there something big going on church-wide? Choose small-group materials that tap into that. Is your small-group ministry emphasizing something? Use appropriate materials to help your group members catch the vision. Is there an issue that needs addressing in your group? Seek material that will help you cover it. In other words, use your answers from phase one to determine your direction.

Additionally, there are a few other things to consider when choosing your direction:

Remember the Calendar

What happens when your church is doing a campaign, your small-group ministry is emphasizing tithing, and your group members are expressing a desire for a marriage study? You simply can't do it all at the same time. Get the dates of major church campaigns from your pastor. Schedule around those dates and be prepared to get on board so your group members are connected to what is happening. Then you'll be a momentum catalyst for your church instead of a momentum killer.

Consult Your Coach or Pastor

Even if you are not doing something church-wide, you must reject the feeling that you are on an island. Seek the counsel of those in your support line. Most group leaders have busy lives and don't have time to look into the endless sea of materials. However, your small-group director does have time. Ask him or her for suggestions after explaining a bit about your group.

Phase 3: Know Your Limits

Great small-group leaders don't need doctoral degrees in systematic theology. Instead, great small-group leaders need to care for the people in their group and understand their limits. Consider how much time you can dedicate to group preparation, how much small-group experience you have, how strong you are at teaching, and how well you're able to balance group dynamics. Be realistic. Most leaders don't have eight hours a week to create their own studies. And new leaders shouldn't feel obligated to take on more than they can chew. Understanding your limitations will help you set healthy boundaries, but you need to acknowledge them. The bad group leader is one who can't see his or her limits and chooses a study that doesn't fit. Not sure what your limits are? Ask for some honest feedback from someone you trust.

Take the time to think strategically about what your small group will study. Don't rush into a decision. Realize that the discipleship of your group members is at risk.

—SPENCE SHELTON is the Small Group Pastor at Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. What is happening in your church and small-group ministry? What topics and values are being stressed? How can you stress those in your small group?
2. How well do you know where your group members are at spiritually? How can you learn more?
3. Who can you ask for suggestions for materials? Who can help you think through this process?

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

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Choose the Right Study for Your Group

You need to know your group and your leading style.

By Bill Search

Math has never been my strength. I'm good with people, words, and a host of other things. But numbers? I invert, convert, and confuse easily! So when I sat in an aerospace engineering class with my sister more than two decades ago, I was lost. The professor who lectured Kim's class that Friday wasn't even using numbers to explain the equation. I wasn't confused—my mind was blown. So I quit trying to figure out what the professor was teaching and checked out.

My story is not all that unique. If you get overwhelmed, confused, bored, or can't keep up, you will check out, quit, or cease participating. I'm convinced the reason many small groups struggle is that they tackle curriculum that simply overwhelms or bores the participants. It may be too heady, too involved, or have too much homework. Other times, group members are just disinterested in the topic. In both situations group members begin to drop off and drop out.

The Story of Two Runners

I'm a runner. Actually, I am more a "lumberer." I lumber, plod, and shuffle slowly down the road. I don't care that I'm slow; I'm just trying to stay in decent physical condition. I was a gold medal couch potato for my formative years right into college. But during my third year of college I met two athletes: Rick and Mark.

Rick was a long distance runner. He regularly ran five to seven miles around the busy streets of Chicago. He chided me for my lethargic ways and told me I should run with him. He was not inspiring. Because I could barely jog 100 feet, the thought of running for long distances sounded impossible.

Mark was different. He asked if I would go to the gym with him, and then somehow got me to the running track. We walked; then we jogged. At first we jogged one lap. Then he convinced me I could jog two. I don't remember how many laps I jogged that day. But Mark developed a lifelong joy of running in me.

Two guys tried to get me to do the same thing but only one was successful. The truth is that I wanted to change. I wanted to become healthier. But I needed help. Similarly, our small groups are filled with people who need help. The question is how do we provide it?

Bible studies, curricula, and books are all designed to help people. So how do you pick the right tool for the right group? Here are five considerations for choosing curriculum that will help your group members grow.

Know Your People

This might sound rather obvious, but I see time and time again that churches or leaders choose material that demonstrates they don't know their people. Here are key questions to ask:

- What is the spiritual background of my people? Are they mature "lifers" in church? New believers?
- Do they like to talk and discuss, or do they like to be more passive and listen?
- Are they open to doing extra reading or homework?
- Do the same people come every group meeting or is there spotty attendance?
- Do they share openly and transparently, or are they closed and guarded?

These questions will help you sort out what type of material is going to be most helpful. Mature believers will likely gravitate toward a group discussion that involves reading from the Bible, cross referencing, and discussing Scripture. That same setting might blow away new believers.

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

In more than 15 years of leading different types of groups I've learned that no two groups are exactly alike. Some are discussion-oriented and others are very quiet. Each group has its own dynamic, and forcing a very quiet group to engage in long discussions won't be productive. Likewise, forcing a discussion-friendly group to watch a 40-minute video will drive them crazy.

Very few groups handle homework well. I have yet to lead a group through a book discussion where everyone read the book. There is nothing quite as frustrating as coming prepared to discuss a chapter that only one other person has read!

If you know your group well, you'll be able to choose an appropriate format (video, printed study, book) and level of difficulty for your next study.

Know Your Style

Every leader has a style. I think that the three most typical small-group leader profiles are teacher-leader, discussion leader, and question-asker. Here are questions to help you determine yours:

- Do you love to learn and pass on what you learn to others? When you teach, do people respond and want to hear more from you? (In other words, do they keep coming back for more?)
- Do you love to involve others? Do you have a natural ability to draw others out and help them discover truths for themselves?
- Do you read the print, ask the questions, and not much more? Do you feel like a fish out of water when you try to do more than that?

I know that for years we have told group leaders not to teach but to facilitate. But if your style is a teacher-leader, you'll inevitably end up teaching your group. So why not use curriculum that fits your teacher-leader style? Some curriculum companies have begun to offer teacher-friendly small-group curriculum.

Discussion leaders have a natural gift for drawing people out. They can pull out the quietest person in the group while quieting the most talkative. Discussions are lively and move like a backyard volleyball game. Everyone gets a chance at the ball and no one is left out. Facilitating is a gift. If you are a facilitator, make sure your study has lots of questions to choose from. And remember, studies that require a lecture or a video will only chew up valuable discussion time.

Question-askers are different from the discussion leaders. Their focus is on working through the checklist of questions rather than on drawing people out. Many great leaders started out checking boxes on a question sheet. Most "plug and play" DVD curricula are designed for the question-asker. If you know you're not a teacher or you're new to leading, grab a DVD and let it do the teaching and read the questions attached to the video. As you become more comfortable, begin to use the questions to draw out group members.

Know What You Know (and What You Don't)

One of the keys to choosing the right curriculum is to know what you know and what you don't. Think through these questions:

- What's your spiritual background?
- What are your competencies?
- Where are you unsure and less formed?

More than 10 years ago, my group wanted to study a Christian perspective on finances. Other than tithing, budgetary matters were a mystery to me. I am a teacher-leader, but I couldn't teach this material with any credibility. So we found a great resource that our group journeyed through together.

On the other hand, when my men's group decided to study characteristics of a godly man, I felt more than comfortable walking us through the life of David. We discussed and digested life lessons from one of the most colorful figures in the Bible. I was able to do this because I'm knowledgeable about David's life.

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

If you're leading in an area deep outside your comfort zone, choose curriculum that teaches the material for you. Or bring in a guest leader for a season to help your group through the material.

Know Your Environment

If you're meeting in a public place, there are study formats you shouldn't use. Showing a video in an environment where others are reading or meeting is inconsiderate (and in some places not allowed). Video curriculum should be reserved for a private setting. Also, some topics are less appropriate in public. A good rule of thumb is the more private the subject the more private the space. For instance, you should discuss sex and money in a private space.

Know Your Goal

Finally, you need to choose curriculum based on your overall goal. Here are a few starting questions to determine your goals:

- Has your church established goals for the small groups?
- Has your group articulated a goal or goals?
- What is your goal for the group?

If your church defines a goal for small groups you need to choose curriculum that lines up with the goal. For instance, some churches have all groups journey through evangelism training once a year.

Your group should also discuss goals. If strengthening marriages or parenting skills is a stated goal, look for curriculum that helps accomplish that. The topics you explore as a group should flow from your goals. If not, you will meander through group material and lose an opportunity to thoughtfully develop your group.

We are in an unprecedented resource era. You have access to more and better material than Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Wesley ever had. But with all these resources, it's more important than ever to develop the skill of finding the right curriculum for you and your group. Make the choice to tackle the right study.

—BILL SEARCH is Senior Pastor of Rolling Hills Christian Church; copyright 2012 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Based on this article, what study format(s) do you feel best fits your small group? Why?
2. What is your leading style? What kinds of studies might you consider based on your leading style?
3. How well do you understand your limitations? What studies do you feel comfortable leading?

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Some Questions Before Deciding

Things to consider before choosing a Bible study with your group.

By Keith Wright

With hundreds of Bible study resources on the market, selecting a study can be a daunting task. Once you've found one that looks interesting, answer these questions to determine if it's right for your group:

- Is this study biblically based? Is it consistent with the teachings of our church? Will the study lead us into better understanding of what Scripture says, or are we likely to be "sharing our ignorance"?
- Will this study build good Bible study habits that will make us better students of God's Word?
- Is the depth appropriate for our group?
- Am I willing and able to commit the preparation time required to lead this study? How much advance preparation is required from group members, and is it realistic?
- Is the subject engaging? Is it relevant to our lives?
- Can the chapters be completed in a reasonable amount of time so that we can still pray and mingle?
- How many lessons are there? What is the group's attention span—will we grow tired of the study before we complete it? What kind of cycle are we on—will we complete the study before our summer break?
- Will we be encouraged to apply what we learn?

Arrive at a group consensus before choosing a study. Seek a study that leaves you with a sense of anticipation for the wonderful things God will teach your group as you gather around his Word.

—KEITH WRIGHT; copyright 1996 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. How have you decided on a study in the past? What was helpful or unhelpful about that process?
2. When will you allow group members to consider potential new studies, using these questions to guide their decisions?
3. How will you handle disagreements when discussing potential studies?

FIND THE RIGHT STUDY FOR YOUR GROUP

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Further Exploration

Websites and books to help you lead effective small-group studies

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

- [Choosing and Evaluating Bible Studies](#) (Assessment Pack)
- [Leading 101](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Leading a Great Small-Group Bible Study](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Leading a Life-Changing Bible Study](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Sermon-Based Small Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [Teaching in Smaller Groups](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)
- [The First Meeting](#) (Practical Ministry Skills)

Did you know that SmallGroups.com offers over 250 Bible studies to use with your group? Buy once and make all the copies you need for your group. Or purchase a subscription and download all your studies for the year at one low price. Here are a few suggestions for you:

- [1 Peter: Walk the Talk](#) (7 session study)
- [Christians and Social Justice](#) (3 session study)
- [Finding Joy in the Difficulty of Marriage](#) (6 session study)
- [Francis Chan: Sold Out to Jesus](#) (3 session study)
- [What the Bible Says About Today's Headlines](#) (8 session study)

[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.

[TodaysChristianWoman.com](#). A website ministering to Christian women.

[Growing People Through Small Groups](#) by David Stark and Betty Veldman Wieland. Learn how people grow and how transformation can take place through your small group (Bethany House Publishers, 2004; ISBN 978-1441205643).

[Leading Life-Changing Small Groups](#) by Bill Donahue. Use this go-to guide to learn about leadership responsibilities, group formation, meeting preparation, discipleship, support systems, common struggles, and more (Zondervan, 2012; ISBN 978-0310331254).

[The Bible Questions: Shedding Light on the Most Important Book](#) by Hal Seed. Seed offers an accessible survey of the history and content of the world's most influential book, and offers a study guide for individuals and small groups (InterVarsity Press, 2012; ISBN 978-0830856121).