

# gifted for leadership

## Equipping Women to Lead Small Groups

This download is chock full of practical information for anyone who would like to lead a small group.



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Introduction

# Essentials in Leading a Study

By JoHannah Reardon

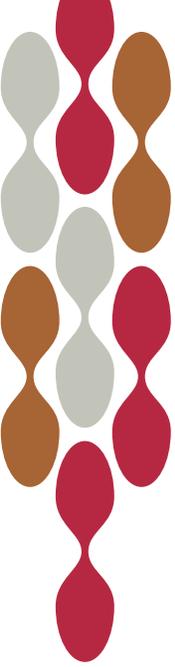


**T**his download is an easy way to help prepare others to lead a small group, whether it is their first time leading or if they have done it many times before. Just hand it to those in your women's ministry or use it in your congregation at large to equip them to lead more effectively.

The first time I led a Bible study, I had no clue what I was doing. My goal was to get through the information as fast as I could so that my duty was over. As a result, my first study was a complete flop.

In response, I looked everywhere for information that would help me do better the next time. I soon learned that it wasn't about just getting through the material, but rather it was about things such as creating a good discussion, establishing trust in the group, praying in a God-honoring way, and being authentic.

I found out that any good discussion is dependent upon the questions. A good study will include open-ended



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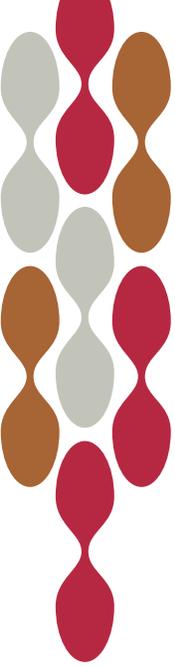
### Essentials in Leading a Study

questions that require more than a yes or no answer. However, you can have a great question that is perfect for garnering all sorts of discussion but kill it in an instant by providing the answer.

Sometimes we leaders prepare for a study with anticipation, looking up the answers ahead of time so that we feel qualified to teach, and that's great. But if you are so anxious to provide an answer that you don't allow discussion, you will kill the effectiveness of the question.

Another problem is when you assume you understand a Scripture passage better than you do. Suppose your text is Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins," and the question is, "What do you think this verse means?" Perhaps you've been taught that this verse means that you have to make sure you have nothing against anyone the moment you die, or you'll go to hell. But maybe someone in your group thinks it means more generally that we are not to knowingly hold grudges, or we won't know and experience Christ's forgiveness in this life. If you push your point of view without allowing the others to express their points of view, you will not win them to your side; you will simply discourage them from speaking what they think. Better an all-out discussion where everything is on the table, and you can support your point of view with other Scriptures, than to assume you know all the answers.

In fact, avoid giving your opinion until the end of the discussion. Be willing to let God's Word and Spirit be the ultimate teacher. Encourage the further study of God's Word and offer advice on where to find more information without



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### Essentials in Leading a Study

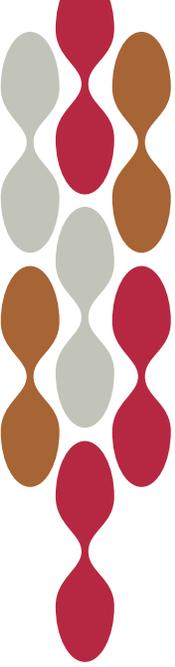
giving pat, simplistic answers.

Sometimes you may have a fantastic question that no one answers. Find another way to state it so that it penetrates. Maybe the question is, "What role does organized religion play in the development of a national moral consciousness?" Give your group members time to think about it. Pause for a while, and if you still don't get an answer, rephrase it. You might say, "Can the church as a whole influence what our nation thinks is moral? If so, how? If not, why not?"

Don't just skip a question no one is answering unless even rephrasing it doesn't get a response. Nothing is more frustrating than trying to think through a question when the group leader moves along too quickly. Most of us have to process questions a bit before we can answer—at least to answer wisely.

Your group members are not going to want to answer questions honestly if they are ridiculed or shot down for their answers. In fact, they may not even come back. Look for ways to show that you care about the person and not just a right answer.

If a group member answers a question with an obvious heresy, then you have to address it. If the person is not in the group to win recruits to his point of view, then you want him to stay in the group so he can learn the truth. To do that, you are going to need to learn how to correct while showing love. So instead of saying, "That's heresy," say, "Even in the early church they had this debate. Let's look at the Scriptures they used to come to the conclusion that Jesus is God." If you need time to look up those Scriptures, as most of us would, tell him you'll come with them next week. In fact, you may want to meet with him outside the group if the rest of the group doesn't have the same question. That way, you can move the group along but still show the person that you care about him and his ideas.



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### Essentials in Leading a Study

In the first study I led, I had no trouble keeping us on track. In fact, we didn't deviate an iota. When I learned to allow true discussion, I had trouble keeping us on the subject. The group leader has to learn that fine balance. You must allow discussion while making sure it stays on the subject. If it wanders, you need to gently bring it back.

Back to the question, "What role does organized religion play in the development of a national moral consciousness?" Suppose Nancy answers that the church could affect things at a grassroots level, such as Christian teachers in the public school system influencing their students. That's a good answer that fits the subject. But Joe says, "You know, I don't like that new teacher the school system hired." This is off the topic and can lead to a complete disintegration of the study. As a leader, you need to get it back to the subject at hand. An easy way to do that is to restate the question, "Can anyone else think of ways that organized religion can affect the moral consciousness?" That way Joe isn't allowed to take over the study, but it will continue in a direction that people can learn from.

Finally, bathe the whole thing in prayer. As you let God influence your preparation and discussion time, you will create an environment that allows the Holy Spirit to transform people's lives through God's Word.

And, most of all, trust that God can use you to help others as you lead. He will equip you and give you all the confidence and expertise you need.

Blessings,

*JoHannah Reardon*

Contributing Editor for [GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM](http://GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM)

## Leader's Guide

# How to use this download for a group study



**T**his download can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**

# What Makes a Good Bible Study?



It may not be what you think.

*By JoHannah Reardon*

**M**any women are afraid to lead a Bible study because of their fear that they don't know enough. But all the biblical knowledge in the world may not make someone a good Bible study leader. Everyone wants a Bible study to increase their knowledge, but they also want a lively group experience that's applicable. This download will help you think through exactly what makes a good study and good leader. As you lead others, make sure you address each of the following:

## **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 does not mean that it's impossible to understand, but it does mean that it should get us beyond



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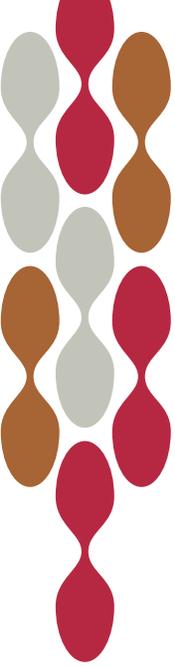
### What Makes a Good Bible Study?

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 and how they apply to our lives today. 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 the 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 the problem of making the text so complicated that we have no idea what it is saying. So 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, rather than the other way around. So if the study is talking about forgiveness, it should use a section of Scripture where forgiveness is the main idea being discussed, not a random verse where something 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.



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### What Makes a Good Bible Study?

#### Create a Lively Group Experience

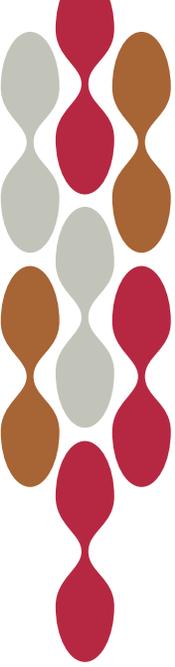
Most Bible studies are written for a group experience. And if it's going to be a good group experience, it should include great open-ended questions that require thoughtful answers. Avoid Bible studies that include only yes or no questions, or ones that simply parrot back the information in the text. 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?"

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?" Then 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, Bible studies should be as engaging to read as any article or book. Here are some examples of great writing in a Bible study. 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."



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### What Makes a Good Bible Study?

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 snippet from "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."

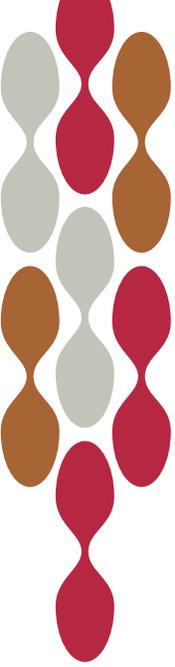
That makes me want to know everything I can about the Bible and to know this God who wants to have a relationship with me.

### **Make Sure It's Applicable**

Finally, make sure the study is practical. Remember that the point of all Bible study 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 presents the story of the rich, young man who 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 that means 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, that will be meaningless. We



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### What Makes a Good Bible Study?

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 is merely imparting information or moving you beyond that into wisdom.

Of course, the best Bible study in the world can still 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 a contributing writer and editor for GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM. She is also the author of numerous books, which can be found on her website, [www.johannahreardon.com](http://www.johannahreardon.com). This article is adapted from one that first appeared on SMALLGROUPS.COM.*

## Reflect

- *Have you fallen into the trap of feeling you don't know enough to lead a Bible study? If your knowledge isn't perfect, what other good qualities do you have that qualify you to lead a study?*
- *What are some ways you can create a lively group experience to keep your group interested?*
- *How can you make sure that what you are studying is applicable to people's lives?*

# What Do We Bring to the Bible?

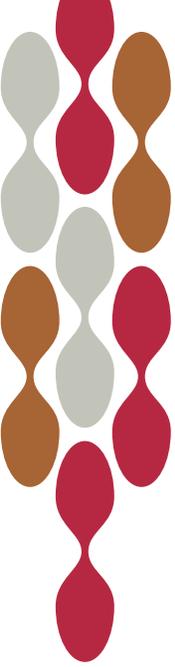
Uncover your presuppositions to unlock a new way of understanding

*By Brandon O'Brien*



Christians everywhere have a tendency to read themselves into the Bible. An obvious example of this can be seen in portraits of Jesus. In European and American art, Jesus is portrayed as a Caucasian with lots of long, beautiful hair; in African art, he is often tall, lean, and dark-skinned. In Asian art, he is Chinese, or Japanese, or Vietnamese. We all know, of course, that because Jesus was a Jew from Palestine, he didn't look just like us. But we have a tendency to impose our own personal and cultural expectations on our image of Jesus.

We do the same thing with the Bible. Sometimes the things we assume because we were raised in a particular church or country or home can—even unconsciously—affect the way we understand a passage in the Bible. There is hope, though. Being aware of these assumptions helps us read the Bible more faithfully. It can even make the "real" meaning of a



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### What Do We Bring to the Bible?

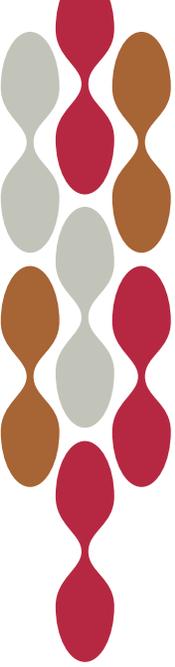
passage all the more powerful. We are not as likely to be moved by Scripture when it reinforces what we already thought. But when it confronts us with a new way of understanding things—that's a lesson we won't soon forget.

Below are a few exercises for uncovering your presuppositions. These can be helpful to do as a class and can make for exciting discussion.

#### **Write down what you consider the most important details.**

Especially in narrative passages, such as in the Old Testament or Gospels, the key to understanding a passage is often in the details. Unfortunately, sometimes our personal or cultural background can lead us to misidentify the most important details. One way to become aware of how your assumptions might be leading you away from the best interpretation of a passage is to write down what you consider the most important details in a story and think consciously about why you picked them.

Take the familiar story of the prodigal son, for example (**Luke 15:11-32**). What would you identify as the most important details in that story? American readers tend to identify the fact that the younger son squandered his inheritance foolishly as the most important. Interestingly, East Asian readers often say that the most important detail is that the son dishonored his father by asking for his inheritance. Russian readers regularly emphasize the fact that it was a famine that caused the son to return home. Each of these assumptions reveals something important about the cultural context of the reader. American Christians often value hard work, thrift, and savvy spending (traditional Puritan values), so they seize on the son's poor money management. East Asian Christians live in a culture where honor and shame are



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### What Do We Bring to the Bible?

important, so they perceive the son's actions in that light. Russian Christians, with their history of poverty, believe the famine in the story is most important. Who is right? Once you've identified what you think are the most important details, take a moment to reference a Bible commentary on your passage. A good commentary will tell you what the original audience would have identified as the most important details.

### **Determine who you identify with in the story and why.**

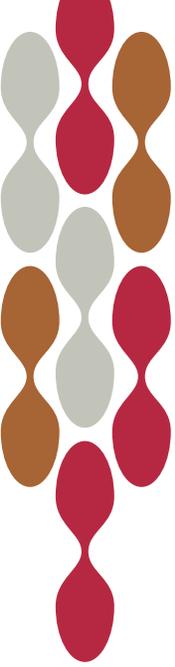
Another useful exercise is deciding which character(s) you identify with and why. This may help you recognize how your religious assumptions influence the way you read the Bible.

Consider the parable of the prodigal son again. With which character do you find yourself identifying: the younger son? The father? The elder son? Why do you feel like you are this person in the story?

In my experience, many Christians identify with the younger son, and for good reason. Like him, we recognize that we are sinners who have offended our heavenly Father and we depend on his gracious acceptance for salvation. Our application of the story, then, is to rejoice that no matter how far we stray, God always offers us the opportunity to repent and return home.

How does the story change, though, if we identify with the elder brother?

The elder brother's problem was that he was not willing to extend grace to his brother, even though his father was. If we identify with the elder brother, the application of the story is that we should be eager to extend forgiveness and grace to those who were once lost in sin. Interestingly, when Jesus told this story, his audience was made up of faithful religious people (the Pharisees). Is your Bible study group more like the lost sinner



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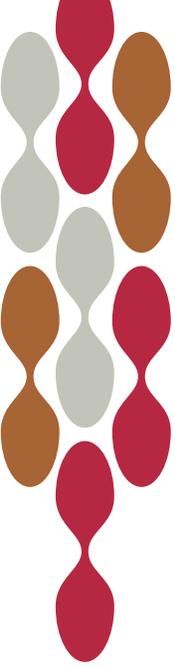
or the faithful Pharisee? Who do you think you *should* identify with?

#### Identify the key concepts in a passage and list your associations with that concept.

Sometimes our personal or cultural experiences freight certain words or concepts with considerable baggage. The associations we have with key concepts can influence the way we understand the Bible. For example, a friend of mine in college had grown up in the foster care system. His dad was a deadbeat and, as a result, my friend spent his childhood with limited contact with his siblings and grandparents and without a consistent place to call home. Consequently, he had a hard time accepting the Bible's teaching that God is our "father." To him, a father is someone who causes grief and pain, not someone who loves and protects his children. If you were studying a passage in which God is called "father" (**Matthew 6:32**, for example), it might be helpful to brainstorm your associations with that term. How does Jesus' teaching change your associations?

Our associations with key concepts can be more cultural than personal, though. In **I Samuel 8:1-21**, Israel asks Samuel to place a king over them. What are your associations with the concept of "king"? Since the American Revolution, the term "king" has been synonymous with "tyrant" in American culture. How might that influence how I understand this passage?

Another example can be found in **I Timothy 2:9**, where Paul instructs the young pastor that women should "dress modestly, with decency and propriety." It would be good to list your associations with each of those terms. For those of us in the West, the terms "modest" and "decent" might bring to mind



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issues related to sexual modesty and decency. That is, our first reaction might be that Paul is instructing women not to wear tight, low-cut, or revealing clothing in church. In other parts of the world, these terms might have economic associations. A reader from the global south might assume that Paul means women should not wear fancy or expensive clothing in church. If this is what Paul means, then our application would be very different. Perhaps the concept of "Sunday best" is cultural and not biblical.

The important thing in each of these exercises is to develop an awareness of what we bring to the Bible. Only when we know what we are bringing to the text can we truly hope to let it speak for itself.

*Brandon O'Brien is editor at large for LEADERSHIP JOURNAL and author of **The Strategically Small Church** (Bethany House, 2010). This article first appeared on BUILDINGCHURCHLEADERS.COM.*



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### What Do We Bring to the Bible?

## Reflect

- *While reading the examples, did you recognize any presuppositions you may have brought to the texts? What other passages or stories might these presuppositions influence as you strive to understand and teach them? How can you better communicate these truths in your teaching?*
- *As you study more passages, how can you make yourself aware of the presuppositions you may bring to it? How can you incorporate these practices into your regular study?*
- *Why is it important to identify what you bring to the Bible? Is this always a bad thing? How can it work for good? How can you balance the need to allow the Bible to speak for itself with the benefits of personal connection with a text?*

# The Art of Vulnerability

How to open up when the world tells you to retreat

*By Carol Kuykendall*



“**A**re you okay?” a woman in my new small group asked as I slid into a chair at the round table one recent morning. Everyone was talking, but the conversation suddenly stopped and all eyes were on me, and for good reason. My shirt did not cover up a bunch of wires connected to little suction cups attached to my skin and the bulky battery box at my waist.

I'd already had a long morning: driving a friend to the hospital for an outpatient procedure at six o'clock without telling her I was in A-fib, which is a racing, irregular heartbeat—an increasingly worrisome problem for me. Later on my way to Bible study, I stopped by my doctors' office and a nurse slapped a heart monitor on me, telling me to wear it for the next 48 hours.

By the time I got to Bible study, I felt embarrassed, worried, and on the edge of tears. Now I faced a choice: How much would I reveal to this group of women, some of



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### The Art of Vulnerability

whom I hardly knew? How vulnerable was I willing to be?

As I started to talk, my eyes got teary in spite of my determination not to cry.

"I'm okay," I responded, surprised at my wobbly voice and the tears that started spilling out, along with some descriptions about the heart monitor, my recent symptoms, and my fears.

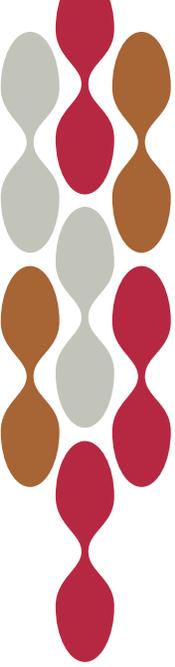
Somebody found a box of tissues and plopped it down near me, which escalated the drama and made me feel more self-conscious. "I hate crying in front of people," I admitted. Several women nodded their agreement, and one asked if she could pray for me, which she did.

Later, when I walked back out to my car, I reflected on my vulnerability. After taking care of someone that morning and keeping my A-fib a secret, I was done being brave. But had I said too much? Did I appear overly emotional and weak? I felt a little cringe but I also felt known and understood by this circle of women, my new small group.

### Barriers to vulnerability

That's the thing about vulnerability. It's about letting our true selves be seen, which can feel both risky and rewarding. Being vulnerable takes courage, but it also connects us to others. God has wired us for connection and given us a longing to be known and to know others. He wants us to live in a way that connects us to him and to one another. But we often thwart that connection with self-protective shields that become barriers to healthy relationships. Barriers that keep us from experiencing the intimacy that both we and God desire.

Maybe we're not even aware of what we're doing. When someone asks, "Is everything okay?" and everything is *not* okay, we often don't want to talk about it.



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### The Art of Vulnerability

We might assume the people asking don't really want to know. Or that we shouldn't bore them with our petty, little problems. Or we're afraid we might get all teary if we start talking about "everything." Who needs that?

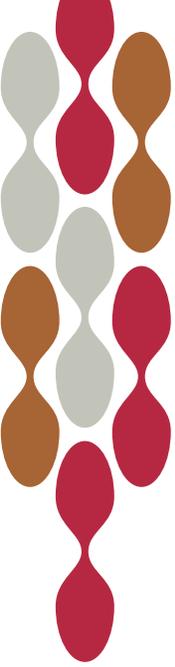
The biggest barrier for most of us is the fear that others will think less of us if they know more about us. What would they think if they knew we have anger issues or struggle with an addiction or we've never read the Bible all the way through?

Vulnerability takes courage because it opens us to the possibility of rejection. We feel ashamed of our flaws and try to hide them because we fear they make us unlovable. So they become our secrets.

### Released from bondage

My friend Karen grew up in a family who taught her not to "air our dirty laundry." So she didn't tell anyone when she got pregnant in college—not even the guy she'd been with that night. When she finally told her parents, they helped her get an abortion quickly, and never mentioned it again. Her family motto was "Don't tell," so Karen didn't tell the man she fell in love with and married. But one day she realized she couldn't keep her secret any longer, so she told him as he held her and assured her that he loved her. That moment became faith-shaping as Karen began to understand that his love was an extension of Jesus' love, freely given in spite of knowing the truth about her. Slowly she began to believe that Jesus loved her, and finally, she felt worthy and lovable because she had the courage to tell her secret.

"It is important to tell, at least from time to time, the secret of who we truly and fully are—even if we tell it only to ourselves—because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are, and little by little we come to accept instead the



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### The Art of Vulnerability

highly edited version that we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing," Frederick Buechner observes in his book *Telling Secrets*.

Vulnerability takes self-acceptance. The Bible tells us to know the truth, and the truth will set us free: the truth that the God who created us knows every messy and broken thing about us and still loves and forgives us. Our flaws don't keep us from him; they draw us to him because where we are weak, he is strong. He accepts us for who we are so that we can accept ourselves—so we can be honest about who we are and confront the fears we face. When we share those fears, we realize we don't have to face them alone.

### Practicing the art of vulnerability

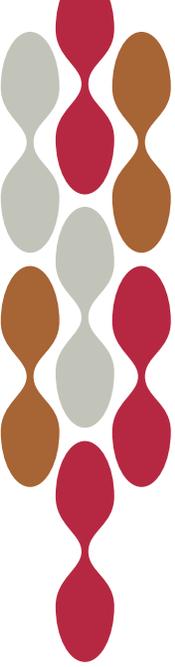
As I understand more about the power of vulnerability, I'm trying to practice living with more honesty, which means recognizing how often I edit my public appearance to fit the stereotype of a "good Christian"—someone who never lets the sun go down on her anger, never lets any unwholesome talk come out of her mouth, and certainly doesn't worry, because God tells her not to.

My practicing has created an annoying voice inside me that catches my dishonesty.

If I end a conversation with a nonchalant, "I'll keep you in my prayers," I hear the voice: *Seriously? You know you'll forget*. So I'm trying not to say it unless I mean it.

When I arrive late for a meeting, making excuses about the bad traffic, the voice says, *You're late because you didn't leave on time*. I can apologize for the real reason.

I push myself toward risking, especially in safe places like my Bible study that morning. I could have answered the



## Equipping Women to Lead Small Groups

### The Art of Vulnerability

"Everything okay?" question with information about the heart monitor, but that wouldn't reveal anything about my emotions. When I described feeling afraid and even ashamed that I don't have enough self-discipline to eat less and exercise more and avoid stress, like healthy people do, I revealed something deeper about who I am. But I stopped short of admitting I can down almost a whole pint of salted caramel gelato right out of the container because I don't seem to have a "stop button."

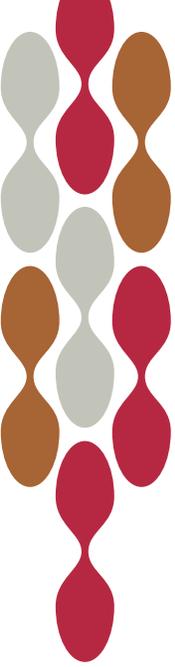
We always have a choice about how much we reveal. Are we with people who have earned our trust? Who know to hold our words in confidence when necessary? Who will be our advocates when we are not present? Do we share bits of ourselves to see if they can handle some of us before we hand over all of us?

### **Allowing our vulnerability to encourage others**

This I know for sure: Our vulnerability is contagious. Going first and talking about our true selves encourages others to go second. My friend Karen told her story about her abortion in the Stories ministry I co-lead in our church, describing how she told her husband about the abortion after years of feeling as though she was in bondage to her secret, and how his loving forgiveness set her free. Several women came up to her afterward and said, "You just told my story. I've never told anyone. Because you did, maybe I can."

In my Bible study, after I emotionally admitted my fears, some of the women acknowledged their own fears about their life circumstances. We got to know each other better that day.

Our vulnerability—admitting who we are with all our imperfections—makes us more compassionate and empathetic with others who are also messy and broken. I want to be a



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### The Art of Vulnerability

person who allows others to be vulnerable with me. To be a safe person. To listen well. To empathize.

Surely God wants us to share our lives and challenges with honesty and vulnerability because others find themselves in our stories—and they also find him.

I have this quote above my desk from Oswald Chambers, which shapes my passion for helping others share their stories: "If you are going to be used by God, he will take you through a multitude of experiences that are not meant for you at all. They are meant to make you useful in his hands."

We are useful in his hands when we share who we are with one another. Our vulnerability is a gift because it helps us recognize our need for community and deepens our connections in emotionally healthy relationships.

Who needs that? We all do.

*Carol Kuykendall helped launch and now leads a Stories ministry for women in Boulder, Colorado. She's authored and co-authored nine books, and writes for Guideposts and Daily Guideposts. This article is adapted from one that first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*



## Equipping Women to Lead Small Groups

### The Art of Vulnerability

## Reflect

- *If you are afraid to be honest about your flaws and weaknesses, why do you think that is?*
- *How can you begin practicing vulnerability in everyday life so that you will be more authentic with the group you are leading?*
- *How do you think your honesty in your struggles could help the people you are leading? Give practical examples.*

# Wrestling and Telling

Two very different approaches  
to discipleship

*By Amy Jackson*



**D**iscipleship is the heart of small-group ministry. Jim Putman in **DiscipleShift**, a book that specifically addresses small-group leaders, asks this telling question: Do we teach people to wrestle with their faith, or just tell them what to believe?

This question hits 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



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### Wrestling and Telling

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/curriculum/book faster, and we feel pretty accomplished, too. Our group members learn valuable Bible knowledge, but 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



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### Wrestling and Telling

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.

*Amy Jackson is the managing editor of SMALLGROUPS.COM. This article is adapted from one that first appeared on that site.*

## Reflect

- *Think back to your own spiritual journey. What most helped you become a disciple of Christ? Why?*
- *How can you allow your group to wrestle with the Scriptures and with the discipleship process instead of giving them pat answers?*
- *How can you let your group pursue tangents without derailing the study? What kind of balance is there and what parameters should you set?*

# Evaluating Group Discussions

How well do you practice these principles of great small-group discussion?

*By JoHannah Reardon*



**T**he first small-group discussion I led took approximately 15 minutes. No one had explained to me how to get a discussion going. Instead, I was handed a list of questions and several Scripture passages to look up. My goal was to get through it as quickly as possible so that we could have our snacks and go home.

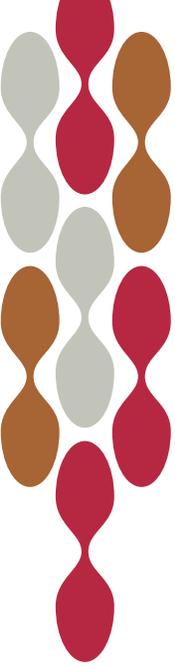
Since then I've learned a few principles about how to lead a good discussion, several of which are listed below. Use this assessment to get a sense of your strengths and weaknesses as a discussion leader.



# Equipping Women to Lead Small Groups

## Evaluating Group Discussions

Good Questions Trump Information	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I almost never answer my own question.				
I don't assume that my interpretation of a text is always the correct one.				
I usually wait until the end of a discussion to offer my opinion.				
<b>Restate a Question that Doesn't Work at First</b>				
When I ask a question, I allow enough time for the group to process their thoughts and give their answers.				
If a question isn't generating discussion, I restate it to help the group try again.				
<b>Communicate Love, Not Judgment</b>				
I never make light of or ridicule a group member's answer to a question.				
When a group member offers an opinion that is an obvious heresy, I don't avoid the issue.				
I feel confident in my ability to bring doctrinal discussions back to Scripture.				
When encountering a heretical or disruptive group member, I offer to continue the conversation later so that the group is not derailed.				
<b>Keep the Discussion on Track</b>				
I understand the fine line between allowing discussion to flow and degenerating into tangents or useless banter.				
When I identify a statement or opinion that is off the subject, I am able to steer the discussion back on track.				
I bathe our group's discussion times in prayer.				



## Equipping Women to Lead Small Groups

### Evaluating Group Discussions

*JoHannah Reardon is a contributing writer and editor for GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM. She is also the author of numerous books, which can be found on her website, [www.johannahreardon.com](http://www.johannahreardon.com). This article first appeared on CHRISTIANBIBLESTUDIES.COM.*

## Reflect

- *What did this exercise reveal about your natural tendencies in leading a group?*
- *What does it tell you about how you should lead a group?*
- *What can you put into action as a result of this exercise?*

# A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer



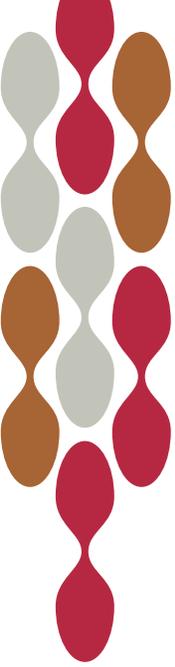
Some questions to answer and ideas to consider

*By Spence Shelton*

It's the end of your group's Bible study time. Almost with a cringe (because you've become conditioned to what's about to transpire for the next 30 seconds or 30 minutes), you say something like: "Okay, time to shift into our prayer time. Anybody got anything we need to be lifting up this week?"

What follows is either:

1. A colossally awkward silence where you are thinking: *Really? Nothing? Are your people dead inside?* And your group members are thinking: *Really? Share serious life stuff with everyone here? Are you stupid inside?*
2. A verbal cascade of prayer requests lasting 12 minutes each with tears, laughter, gossip, and maybe a



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### A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer

little anger all wound up into such a mess that you have no idea what the bombardier who started this raid actually wants you to pray for.

Finally, after the awkward silence or the monologues, you say something like, "Who will close us in prayer?" This leads to a single prayer, probably by the unfortunate soul who made eye contact with you when you asked that question, and it lasts about 30 seconds. "God thanks for letting us meet, be with all the stuff we just talked about for 30 minutes, keep us safe this week, amen. No wait—in Jesus' name, amen.

Or maybe you go so far to say, "Let's have a different person pray for each one of those." This leads to five of the same nondescript prayers tailored slightly to the assigned requests.

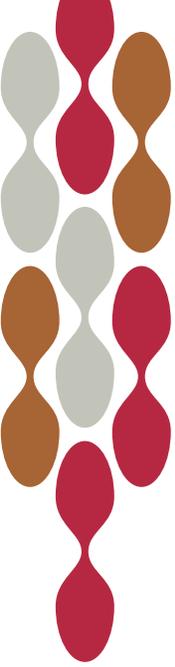
### Praying as a Small Group

Sound familiar? Hopefully that is a humorous picture that strikes one or two chords with your past experiences. What happened in that situation, and in a lot of small groups, is that prayer requests take far more time and energy than actual prayer. God calls us to be a people of prayer, not prayer requests. Seriously, if you aren't careful you can "prayer request" your group into spiritual demise.

So let's take your group prayer time through a boot camp of sorts. We'll start by asking a few questions, and then we will look at some ideas to help cultivate a rich, participative, belief-saturated prayer life among your group members.

For the sake of common language, this assessment will operate on the following definition of prayer:

**Definition:** Prayer is God's means for people to acknowledge their dependence on him for all things.



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### A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer

So when we praise him, when we confess to him, when we believe him for a brother's need, we put ourselves where God designed for us to be: dependent on his provision. A rich prayer life is one that regularly and unreservedly cries out "Abba, Father."

### Assessing Your Group's Prayer Life

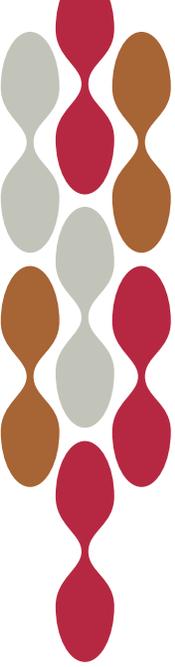
The easiest way to assess where you are is to simply interact with some questions designed to investigate your group's prayer life. This is not intended to beat you up. Like a workout routine, it should only hurt in the places that need the most work.

***Who is the main character of your group's prayer time?*** At first you may say: "God, of course." But who do most of your prayers really center around? God and his character? The nations? The orphans and widows? Or is it you and the people in your group?

Response: \_\_\_\_\_

Why this matters: You were created to be a part of something bigger than yourself. Most of the prayers in the psalms, for example, are filled with praises for God—with requests for his help coming only in the last verse or two. If we really are only here by God's grace, our prayer life should be fueled by a God-focused mind and heart.

***How is the Bible involved?*** It is not uncommon to find a big disconnect between a group's Bible study time and its prayer time. During Bible study, everyone has a Bible open and pages flipping. But when the leader transitions



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### A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer

into prayer, just about everyone shuts their Bibles and puts them away to begin explaining to one another what they need to see or hear from God. The irony is that God's Word contains all of his promises, and it is sitting right there—unused.

Response: \_\_\_\_\_

Bottom line: Is the Bible just a textbook for your group, or is it something more—as **2 Timothy 3:16-17** suggests it may be?

***Who is praying—and with whom?*** This is a straight-up group dynamics question. Are you praying in one large circle with everyone in the group? If so, chances are good the same people (if any) are volunteering over and again. You may have created an unnecessarily large barrier to a vibrant prayer life. Are guys praying with girls? Are new Christians praying only with other new Christians? What is the set up?

Response: \_\_\_\_\_

***How are you preparing for your group's prayer time?*** I know you feel obligated to say, "I could always be doing more." But it's important simply to look at what is happening so you can brainstorm a starting point. Are you putting enough effort into your group's prayer time?

Response: \_\_\_\_\_



## Equipping Women to Lead Small Groups

### A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer

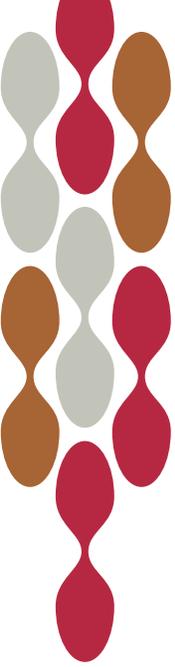
#### Ideas for Moving Forward

With your questions answered, here are some ideas for breaking free from prayer normalcy. These are simple concepts I've seen be a great help for moving groups into rich seasons of prayer.

***Index cards.*** Pass out an index card to each person at the start of each meeting. Ask everyone to write their prayer requests on the card at some point before prayer time. Here's the secret: people will write the "need to know" information on these cards without all of the side-track stories they would share if given the chance. When everyone is done writing, collect and redistribute the cards for prayer time and have each person in the group pray for the needs on the card they receive.

***Subgroups.*** Divide into groups of three. Sharing takes way less time here and usually will draw out the prayer needs of someone who wouldn't share with 10 to 15 people.

***Prepare.*** Come to the prayer time with an agenda for what you will be praying for. Check in with your leadership (pastor, elders, director) to see what the entire church or organization is praying for. Maybe even hand out a prayer guide that walks everyone through what the group will be praying for that night. This is a great way to keep things fresh in the group. You may even try devoting one entire meeting to prayer. (Bonus: collect individual prayer requests, written or by email, and send them to the group so they can pray throughout the week.)



## Equipping Women to Lead Small Groups

### A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer

***Pray through Scripture.*** Find a resource like **For the Love of God** by D.A. Carson or Oswald Chamber's **My Utmost for His Highest** to help your group think and pray through passages of Scripture. Consider memorizing a passage of Scripture together and pray the promises of God in those passages each time you pray.

***Delegate prayer time to another group member.*** As a group leader, part of your role is to raise up more disciple makers. The prayer element of your group is a great one to delegate to someone you are hoping to see take an increased leadership role or eventually serve as a group leader.

Small-group leader, this all starts with you. God designed prayer to be a holy, worship-filled communion between you and him. Do not settle for anything less!

*Spence Shelton is the Small Groups Pastor at Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina. This article is adapted from one that first appeared on [SMALLGROUPS.COM](http://SMALLGROUPS.COM).*



## Equipping Women to Lead Small Groups

### A Proper Understanding of Group Prayer

## Reflect

- *How can you prepare ahead of time for the prayer time in your group?*
- *Which of the suggestions did you find most helpful or potentially meaningful. Why?*
- *What can you do to make your group's prayer time a "holy, worship-filled communion" with God?*

# Additional Resources

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further



## Articles

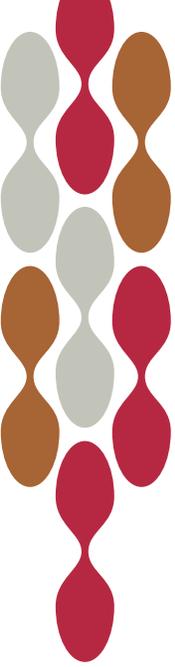
**Why Your Church Needs Group Mentoring**—How the group model grows stronger and more mature leaders. Available from [BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://BuildingChurchLeaders.com).

**Take the Next Step**—An overview of small-group service projects. Available from [BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://BuildingChurchLeaders.com).

**The Importance of God's Word**—Don't settle for less than the real thing. Available from [TodaysChristianWoman.com](http://TodaysChristianWoman.com).

## Books

**Just Lead!: A No Whining, No Complaining, No Nonsense Practical Guide for Women Leaders in the Church**, by Sherry Surratt, Jenny Catron (Jossey-Bass, 2013). The book shows us how to handle criticism, face indecision, and grapple with the loneliness that often comes with being in charge. It also offers sage advice on respecting gender differences, overcoming communication barriers, leading other women, and developing a balanced team. Written with



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### Additional Resources

style and wit *Just Lead!* is filled with illustrative examples, solid research, and practical advice for women who aspire to leadership roles within their churches and ministries. Sherry Surratt and Jenni Catron have "walked the leadership walk" and are wise companions in showing godly women how to lead well.

**Leading Lessons: Insights on Leadership from Women of the Bible**, by Jeanne Porter (Fortress Press, 2005). The women of the Bible beckon us to lead! In eight scripturally based studies, Dr. Jeanne Porter examines the lessons of leadership from key women of Scripture who inspire us to be all that God calls us to be. Each lesson includes a summary page of empowerment principles, plus a series of questions for personal reflection or group discussion.

## Online Resources

**One Year of Women's Bible Studies**—A year's worth of Bible studies for personal or group use (53 Session Bible Study). Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

**Balancing Work and Home**—Mothers can successfully parent and work (6 Session Bible Study). Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

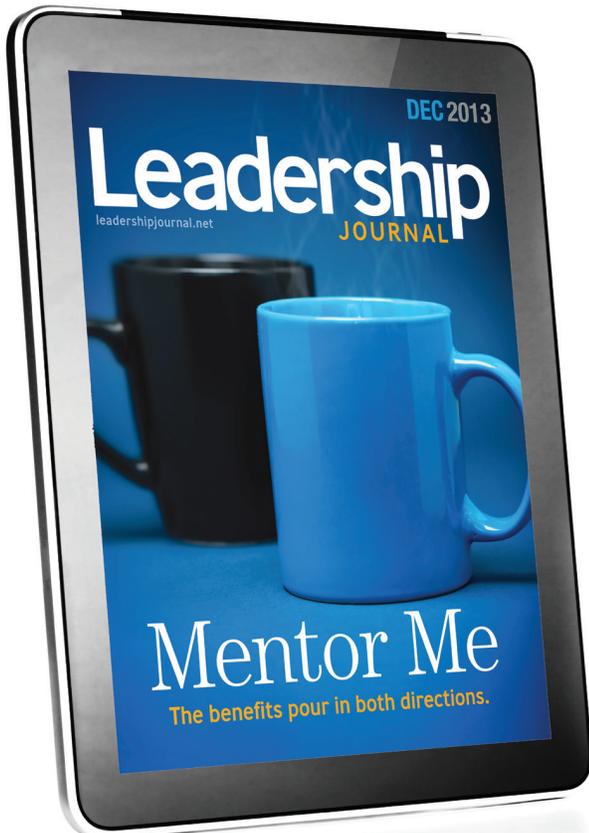
**Becoming a Balanced Woman**—Practical, biblical perspectives on self-worth, stress, confidence, and contentment (6 Session Bible Study). Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

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