

## *How to Lead a Bible Discussion Group Effectively*

by K. Y. Davis

Discussion-type Bible study groups are among the most effective ways to expose non-Christians to the teachings of the Bible in an informal, non-threatening way, and ultimately to lead them to Christ. *Regardless* of the attitudes of skepticism that many people have when they begin to study the Bible, God uses His Word to bring people to faith in Christ. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." (Rom. 10:17)

If you are beginning a Bible study for evangelistic purposes, it is important that any Christians who are involved with you are understanding and patient with non-Christians who are present. A critical, hostile attitude or one that belittles or expresses shock when false or heretical ideas are expressed by people in the group is a fast way to cause non-Christians to leave. Patience, a willingness to love the unlovely, and a desire to really listen to their questions and objections is mandatory for ministering to those outside the Christian faith.

Be aware that many people starting to study the Bible for the first time may not own a Bible. They may not even know how to look up references. When they see a reference like this: "2 Thes. 3:4" – they do not know what that means. Be prepared to deal with huge holes in the knowledge of those who have no Christian background.

Even if your Bible study involves only Christians, you will find that they are at different stages of growth. If you wish to minister effectively and help people to mature and grow, many of the same principles that you would use with non-Christians are mandatory to keep people from being discouraged and dropping out of the study.

### **AN INTRODUCTORY MEETING**

An introductory meeting in which refreshments are served and in which ground rules for the study are explained is a good idea. This study guide is designed to be used in class situations in which inductive questions are provided to the group and advance preparation is made by each student. These principles have been used and found to work with literally thousands of students in numerous studies--including studies just for women, studies just for men, teen-age studies, and couples' studies. I recommend the following basic rules:

- (1) Do not discuss your church or denomination or ask others what church they attend. This helps group members to accept others as individuals, not as members of "THAT church." We are here to discuss what the Bible teaches, not what different churches teach. If you discuss what YOUR church teaches, they will feel free to do the same.
- (2) Do not discuss politics.
- (3) Do not distribute literature to other class members in the groups. That way we all are on equal footing, with the Bible as our only authority. If you do so, others who may be from cults or churches whose teachings you would oppose will feel free to do the same.)

- (4) Do not use the Bible study as an opportunity to sell products or solicit business.
- (5) You may not contribute answers to the discussion group if you have not done your questions. You are always welcome, however, as a listener.

For very informal groups where just Christians are present who know and accept one another, you may wish to modify the above rules somewhat.

## CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT

**For a home or small group Bible study**, set up the room ahead of time and make sure that the lighting is adequate for all present to be able to read. Seating should be something like a circle, so that each person can see the others in the group. If you find that you have too many chairs for the expected number of people, move some chairs to the wall. No one likes to sit alone, with two vacant chairs on either side of them. The discussion group is inhibited by empty chairs. It is better to have to add chairs than to face several empty seats. It is best not to allow more than about 20 people in a group before you subdivide into another group. Quiet people tend to clam up when the group becomes excessively large.

**Name tags** (with LARGE, easily seen print) may be a good idea if the group is large enough so that several people present do not know others in the group. You might keep name tags in a basket by the door where people can pick them up as they come in.

**1. Put the group at ease.** If you are leading the discussion, remember that *your attitudes are as important as your actions!* You set the tone for the group. Be relaxed yourself. This is seldom natural and must be learned. Start now learning to forget yourself and your own interests and practice thinking of the others present. If you are cheerful and relaxed, you will find this contagious. Cultivate a sense of humor. Build a feeling of oneness by encouraging the group to pray for each other and help each other.

**2. Assume authority.** Only one person can be in charge of a group at a time, so from the beginning take the place of leadership. Don't be overbearing, but by your manner let those in the group know that you are in charge.

**3. Who should lead the study?** It is natural to have a woman lead a Bible study composed solely of women. In a mixed Bible study with adult men and women, however, it is best to have a man lead, later perhaps rotating the leadership so that other men also can lead. Many men are uncomfortable in a study led by women. Women, on the other hand, adapt readily to different styles of leadership. Even though the context of I Tim. 2:12 and I Cor. 14:34 is *church* and not home Bible studies (see I Tim. 3:15; I Cor. 14:23), many consider this a gray area, and the concept seems to carry over in the minds of many people.

**4. Be enthusiastic.** Be pleasant. Make each person feel genuinely welcome. Do not use the class excessively to air your own problems, but be honest in sharing your feelings with

others. Resist feelings of inadequacy which we all have at times, knowing that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:13)

**5. *Be alert in particular to newcomers.*** Pick out those ones who look alone or lonely and make a special effort to befriend them. Learn to read body language--that is, be aware by closely observing people's movements whether they are feeling upset, left out, hostile, etc.

**6. *Form the habit of really listening*** both to yourself and to others, rather than simply giving the impression you are listening while storing up in your mind what you are going to say next. Do you really understand what others are saying?

**7. *Speak up!*** When you speak, do you make yourself clear, or are their puzzled expressions and misunderstandings? Are you speaking loudly enough? Many older people complain or drop out because they are unable to hear remarks made in Bible studies because people do not speak up.

**8. *Build an atmosphere of mutual caring*** and interaction, so that group members will relate to one another, not just the leader.

## **STARTING THE CLASS**

Begin with prayer. You may ask for prayer requests at the beginning or end of the class period, at your option. In most situations (particularly with unbelievers present) DO NOT ask anyone to pray aloud in class, as some are embarrassed and upset by this. Hearing anyone called on to pray is *very* intimidating to some people, who are afraid that they will be called on next. If people seem eager to participate in praying, let it be strictly on a voluntary basis, not because they are called on. Let the group know that prayer requests are restricted to personal and family needs--not church activities, world politics, etc.

At your option, and depending on your time limits, you may want to have someone read the scripture portion you will be discussing that day. If you do so, *don't* go around the room and ask each person to read some verses. The reason for this is that some people don't read well. They are especially likely to be embarrassed if there are hard to pronounce words or names in the passage. If they stumble over words like *Melchizedek*, *propitiation*, *Asyncritus* or *Phlegon*, they may feel too embarrassed to return. So call on one or two people whom you know would not mind reading, or read it yourself.

A good beginning to the discussion period is important. Call on someone who is enthusiastic for the first answer. If the first person called on is listless, disinterested, or unprepared, it starts off everyone with a negative feeling. You might encourage people to put a star by their favorite question so that they will be ready and eager to share their most meaningful answers.

Call on a person **by name** to answer a question rather than asking for volunteers, as usually the same few people volunteer. Call their name before giving the number of the question so that they can find their place quickly and be prepared to answer.

If you sense that someone is especially excited about answering a question, give that person the first chance. **KEEP YOUR EYES OFF YOUR OWN PAPER AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE**, so that you can watch people's expressions and observe when someone may be objecting, confused, or wish to make another comment, etc. **In most cases, call on more than one for each question** and give volunteers a chance to add to what has been said. Before you move on to the next question, let your eyes quickly scan the room to make sure you are not moving on when someone wishes to speak.

Later, when the group has been together for some time and is comfortable with one another, you may ask for volunteers first, only calling on those who do not readily speak up and need encouragement. Letting people volunteer makes the group more natural and less like a school-room situation, *but it takes more skill on the part of the leader to control*. If one or two volunteers begin to dominate the class, return to the first method.

Read the question yourself when you call upon someone. It is not always necessary to read every word, but be sure in re-wording that you do not confuse or cause people to lose their place on the question sheet. Include the number of the question as you read it. Be prepared to re-word a question if it gets no response, or to supplement the question with other questions to encourage answers.

## **ENCOURAGING INTERACTION**

An important part of the leader's job is to see that the group relaxes and has fun. Laughter loosens people up and stimulates interaction. Give each one who answers a word of encouragement, especially those who are usually quiet or under-confident. You might say, "That's a very good thought," or "Thank you for all the work you put in on that question," or "That's an interesting idea!" **THIS IS EVEN TRUE WHEN YOU DO NOT AGREE WITH THE ANSWER OR FEEL THAT THE ANSWER IS WRONG!** People need encouragement simply for coming to the group, being brave enough to speak, and doing their best to understand something they may never have studied before. Many people feel personally rejected when their ideas are rejected.

Make each person feel that their opinion is worth hearing. No matter how "far-out" a response may be that you get to a question, never say by word or facial expression, "That's wrong." Instead, say something like: "I can see you really gave some thought to that question, Sue" or "I appreciate your sharing your views on that one," or, "I've never looked at it that way before," or just plain "thank you, John." When dead silence greets someone's answer, they are often fearful that they have said something embarrassingly stupid.

If you attack someone's ideas head-on, the chances are excellent that he or she will not return. Instead, allow the answers of others in the group to bring out a better answer.

(Often there are many ways of viewing a particular question, and it may have more than one correct answer.) Ask if someone else has a different answer. This is also a good place to use your back-up leader. Let the better answers that come out in the group help the first person see, in a gentle way, the possibility that his or her answer may have been wrong. Debate or disagreement should not be discouraged, as long as it is carried out in a courteous and gentle manner. No one should leave feeling personally humiliated.

Be aware of your gestures and facial expressions. Often people can tell who is not well accepted by the leader's expression. No word or gesture should make a person feel that he or she is not completely and warmly accepted in the class. If the leader has a problem with a particular person, the leader should speak to that one privately and never let on in the group that anything is wrong.

Be aware of quiet people in the class and make every effort to draw them out. Quiet people need an atmosphere of security and acceptance before they feel free to talk. It is up to the discussion leader to create this atmosphere. Use small talk, such as questions about hobbies, place of birth, or family to help them feel comfortable. (But avoid prying!) Often when such a person gets used to hearing their own voice and sees that they are accepted, they become more confident and speak more freely. However, there is a fine line between *drawing* out and *forcing* out. Don't keep hammering away at those who don't respond well to your attempts to draw them out. Respect the wishes of those who ask you not to call on them.

Try to see that each group member has an equal opportunity to talk. Don't cause anyone to go out frustrated because they have had to keep silent all through the discussion.

## MAINTAINING CONTROL

**A LEADER MUST CONTROL HIS OR HER OWN TALKING.** There is nothing more deadly to the life of a discussion group than an over-talkative leader. **Remember that you are there to LEAD, not teach.** The more you teach, the more people will not talk and the more they will not study. They will simply look to you to give them the "right" answers. If you always have the last word, group members will gradually let the "expert" do all their thinking and interpreting for them. Those who disagree with your viewpoints will also learn that it is safest not to express their views--and they will no longer be open with you. (A terrible loss!) Occasionally share something from your own experience, but mainly be a good listener, draw others out, keep the discussion on the subject, and do not allow any one person to dominate the group.

People learn best when they are made to participate in the learning process, so don't do the work for them--even when you could easily give them the answers! Don't show off all your knowledge. Proverbs 12:23 teaches, "A prudent man *conceals* knowledge." And Ecclesiastes 3:7 tells us that there is a time *to be silent*, as well as a time to speak! You might also recall the many times in the Gospels that Jesus asked questions--but didn't give His listeners the answers! The parent who always makes his child's bed will grow an adult who doesn't know how to make the bed. A discussion leader who **teaches** instead of **leads**

the discussion will grow lazy students who do not learn to handle the Word proficiently or do their own thinking.

Cut off nicely, by making a joke of it, if possible, anyone who talks too much. Or say, "Although this is interesting, we're running short of time and must go on." If some people tend to ramble on and on, when you call on them, ask them to READ the answer they have written down. If someone gives a very long answer, ask them to sum it up. ***Don't allow anyone to always have the last word or to constantly correct others.*** Cut off such a person nicely and quickly if necessary. Avoid eye-contact with people who tend to jump in on EVERY question and don't call on them. Never, never sacrifice the group for one person who talks constantly and offends others. It is your job to exercise control.

## OTHER POINTS TO REMEMBER

**WATCH YOUR VOCABULARY.** Encourage group members to answer IN THEIR OWN WORDS. Be sure that theological terms which may confuse some, or King James English is explained. Increasingly, people in our society are growing up in ignorance of the Bible. We add to the problem by using Christian jargon or evangelical clichés. ***One of the fastest ways to cause people to drop out of your study is by speaking Christian jargon that they do not understand!*** Be aware that many people *do not know* the meaning of words such as the ones listed below, or they may attach a very different meaning to a word than you do. Be alert and ready to explain or ask others to explain when such terminology is used.

agape love	Lamb of God	righteousness
antichrist	legalism	saint
apostle	mercy seat	sanctification
Calvinist	millennium	saved
Captivity, the	Pharisees	second coming of Christ
dispensational	predestination	tongues, speaking in
eternal security	rapture	Tribulation, the Great
grace	regeneration	witnessing
justification	remnant	Yahweh

**DOING THE QUESTIONS.** Although in a home Bible study you *may* wish to forego this rule at first, you will encourage good discussion by setting some ground rules. Make it known that only those who have seen the questions and ***written down*** their thoughts on them are welcome to talk! In the long run discussions degenerate into ignorant ramblings if group members have not prepared ahead of time. If you have a visitor in the group, you may invite them to read verses or participate in some small way, but tell them that participation in the discussion is ordinarily reserved for those who have studied and given thought to the subjects being discussed.

**EXTRA QUESTIONS THAT COME UP.** If someone in the group asks a question that pertains to the subject under discussion, turn to the others and say, "Would someone like to answer that?" If a good answer does not come out in the group and the leader does not

know the answer (the leader may give an answer here), say, "Let's look this up at home and talk about it next week." Then be sure to follow through, briefly, at the beginning of the next class. Avoid giving your answers to **controversial** questions **in class**, *even when you are asked for your opinion* since that has the effect of shutting up those who disagree with you. It is often better to handle a controversial question one-on-one outside of class with the person who asked the question.

**HANDLING PERSONAL PROBLEMS.** On occasion a question or comment from someone will reveal a personal problem that needs to be discussed. If it is of general interest and important spiritually or practically, you may get off on a temporary tangent. If it is strictly personal and not of interest to the group, take it up with the person privately. But watch rabbit trails! Remember your time and your goal of finishing all the questions in a reasonable length of time. If your studies drag on excessively you will lose people. If you do not cover the questions, the group will not continue to do their homework and will miss this valuable learning experience. Counseling and application should add to, but not replace, Bible study.

**AVOIDING UNNECESSARY CONTROVERSY.** Controversy in a group should not be stifled as long as it is handled graciously and without acrimony. But *unnecessary* controversy should be avoided. Never speak in a **CRITICAL** manner of any church or even of cults, and don't let the talk get off into such areas as political candidates or prominent figures such as the Pope, Benny Hinn, or Joel Osteen. You may deal with the **ideas** taught by such groups or individuals, but in a careful manner. It is not necessary to name names. Stick to the Bible. **Cut off instantly** anyone who **ATTACKS** such a group by name as nicely as possible, and preferably with humor, such as: "Aw-oh! You just broke one of our no-no rules!" Sad to say, the day someone makes a nasty crack about the Christian Scientists or Catholics--that day you will have someone from that church visiting in your group!--who may never return.

**RATING THE QUESTIONS.** Rating questions ahead of time when you are working on them at home can help you lead your group more effectively. Use the following code to help you do this, putting a letter next to each question as you study:

H = hard	A = average	E = easy
P = personal	D = diagnostic	

Personal questions ordinarily should be asked on a volunteer basis, since they call for a personal answer that someone may not be comfortable sharing in a group. Diagnostic questions are the sort of questions that will give you insight into the spiritual condition of those in the group. Easy questions are especially useful in giving confidence to newcomers to Bible study who are under-confident. That may help you to decide whom to call on for a particular question. Of course, **NO REFERENCE** should be made in the group to rating the questions. It is scarcely flattering to someone to know that you only call on them for the easy ones!

**A TIME OF FELLOWSHIP.** Getting to know people outside of class is important. Closing the group in time for visiting and refreshments is a good idea. This time not only lets you get to know people better, but lets them begin to build relationships with others in the

group. Keep things informal and fun. Eventually others may be encouraged to share by bringing refreshments. Out of these times, and on similar specific occasions, you may have opportunity to lead unbelievers in the class to Christ.

## **THE BACK-UP LEADER**

It is helpful to have a back-up leader in each discussion group. Not only can this person fill in for the leader when the leader is absent, but a back-up can also help the leader in various other ways. A back-up leader is a natural prayer partner for the discussion group. If both the leader and the back-up leader briefly review the questions ahead of time together, it will also help them to anticipate where problems may arise, enabling the back-up leader to step in with a few words, or some relevant portion of Scripture to help in the discussion.

<p><b>Here are some other ideas on how a back-up leader can help.</b></p>
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- (1) Get the name and address of newcomers in the group. Take responsibility for nametags.
- (2) Introduce yourself to newcomers. You may want to sit next to them, or in some other way help them to feel comfortable and at ease in the group.
- (3) Help the leader bring the class back to the question at hand when the talk strays into unprofitable areas.
- (4) Do not sit next to the leader, but sit where you can maintain eye contact.
- (5) Help the leader cut off anyone who tries to excessively monopolize the conversation by jumping in with a comment of your own and turning the discussion away from the one who tends to dominate.

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Please note that this manual is to help you in small, fairly informal home Bible studies, Sunday school classes where discussion questions are used, etc. There is a larger *Leaders Manual* available which is only suitable for larger, more highly structured Bible studies which are non-denominational, composed of numerous discussion groups followed by a lecture period, and which have a more tightly structured time schedule.