

Essentials for Effective Bible Studies

A Bible study is effective when it furthers the work of the Holy Spirit in the participants' lives. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' formula to make this happen. However, there are essential factors to transformational Bible study experiences that need to be cultivated by the small group leader.

Pray for it:

You need to first work the ground before planting something. Similarly, prayer is the first step to effective Bible study. It is essential to the life and growth of Christian community. Ask the Lord to meet people where they're at and to draw them closer to Himself and one another. Pray for the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to His truth and apply it to your lives.

Preview it:

It is well worth taking 15-20 minutes before the study to...

- Read the passage in at least two different translations (www.biblegateway.com)
- Refer to cross-references, commentaries, introductions to biblical books, etc. (Not too much, but just enough so that you have a good feel for the content and its context.)
- Review the questions that are a part of the study that you're using and select the ones you sense your group will grab onto the best. In other words, which questions do you think will be most effective at sparking further questions and conversation? Your Bible study experience will be richer if you pay attention to your group's uniqueness.
- Reduce the volume of material given for a study session by 50%. Oftentimes leaders find they have twice the amount of material they can get through in one sitting so cut the content in half before the group even begins. This helps the time of Bible study feel more relaxed and more focused which increases overall participation in the discussion. It also makes space for ministry and prayer to be woven into your Bible study enriching the experience overall.
- Rephrase the questions you decide to use. Make sure the discussion material provided makes sense to you first. Don't make small group curriculum a sacred cow: If something seems vague, confusing, or off-center from the focus of your study then restate the points. This has the added benefit of preparing you to articulate questions differently than how they appear in the material everyone is using. Sometimes spinning questions another direction triggers responses from participants who tend to not be 'quick on the draw' in sharing.

Focus it:

Take a minute at the beginning of your study time to frame what you're studying (passage, theme, and context) and what you hope people will walk away with in terms of...

- Education – A deeper understanding and appreciation for the meaning of God's Word.
- Inspiration – New thoughts and new motivation for living out our faith in Christ.
- Application – Ways to see the Bible's relevance to current circumstances and relationships.

Facilitate it:

Don't get into 'teaching mode' or feel like you have to have all the answers. You want Bible study to be a group learning experience where every person's insight and personality plays into the discussion. Here are some questions that can liven up the dynamic of your discussion:

- What stands out to you in this passage? What impacted you during the reading?
- Was there something read that's new for you, reaffirming, confusing or challenging?
- How can we apply this to our lives today?
- How could this be shared with people who do not yet know Christ?

The nice thing about these questions is they elicit new responses in each Bible study you hold – they never get old. Also, be patient with moments of silence. It takes time for people to process and think about what they're going to say in a group dynamic. If nobody shares after a few seconds, you might just put the question in another way. Sometimes restating the same question in different ways helps people to formulate their thoughts. This is when your "preview" time pays off.

Here are a few other additional tips that will help to engage conversations:

1. Be ready to be the first to answer questions briefly and naturally (unless someone in the group is ready to share).
2. People think primarily in pictures so try to portray a topic visually by applying questions to hypothetical situations.
3. Provide 'guardrails' to guide the discussion versus 'railroad tracks' to govern the direction of the group. Your role as a facilitator is to create the time and space for God to do what He wants to do in the lives of the people in your group.

Affirm them – Make eye-contact with those who share and acknowledge their input with simple affirmations like, "Thanks for sharing" or "Good insight" then try to relate it back to the passage being studied or keep the momentum going by asking if there is anyone else who would like to share. When it comes to affirmation, lay it on thick! This builds the confidence of the person sharing and builds them up in front of others. It has the added benefit of building more energy into the whole discussion, which comes as a result of people feeling freer to share their thoughts.

Include them – When people feel included, they feel like they belong. When people feel like they belong, they want to engage. When people are engaged, they grow. When people are growing, they want to embrace others. The experience of bonding flourishes into the act of bringing others to God and His community when the root system of inclusion is nurtured by the small group leader. Time may not allow for every person to connect or participate in the way they would like, but you can help them feel more included by giving them...

- Jobs to fulfill in the group that harmonize with their interests and gifting – start them off with small tasks that have a single effort or shorter-term commitment. For example, if a question is raised during your Bible study that intrigues everyone but you have limited information on it – ask a person who enjoys research to bring back

a brief explanation to share at your next gathering. You can gradually transition from delegating tasks to empowering participants to take ownership over aspects of your group-life. This strengthens their ministry skills and helps others to see they can make a difference too.

- The opportunity to share in the discussion time e.g. come back around to people who haven't shared, but looked like they were on the verge of saying something.
- A moment of your time when you express your love for them, e.g. "I'm so glad you're a part of our group.", "It's great to see you. We missed you last week.", etc. Make it a goal to have at least one meaningful connection with each person during your group time. Simple acknowledgements go a very long way in boosting people's sense of belonging which makes for effective Small Groups the future.