

Coffee Break



Leading Bible Discovery

A Guide for Small Group Bible Study Leaders



This manual is an updated and combined version of three earlier manuals written to help those involved in the Coffee Break Bible Study ministry. We thank Diane Averill and Betty Wieland for their contributions to this revision.

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Introduction

Maria (*not her real name*) called me on my cell phone as I was leaving to run errands. I recognized her number on my caller ID. She was a member of my Coffee Break small group but rarely called me. I heard the distress in her voice. She told me that her husband, Ken, had packed up and left. “I don’t know where he is,” she told me. “He left a note and a list of debts he can’t pay. He says he won’t be back.” I told her I would be right over.

As I drove to Maria’s house, I pondered the ten-plus years she had been in my small group. Ten-plus years of her angry protests about how unfair God was and how he was cold, hard, and impersonal. Ten-plus years of simply loving her, listening to her, and talking about the Bible around my kitchen table with three other friends. Sometimes she shut down in stony silence until the discussion was over. Sometimes I wanted to give up on her. But a nudging in my spirit kept me staying the course. God wasn’t letting me off the hook.

Maria met me at the door, teary-eyed but calm. “I’m not mad at God for this,” she told me. “God didn’t do this. Ken did.” I was astounded. Who was this new woman, and what had she done with Maria? What happened to all her anger about the unfairness of life? Where was her anger at God? Was this change real?

The short answer is yes; the change was real. Picking up the broken pieces of her life was hard, but Maria had a newfound strength, one that came from God’s stubborn love for her, a love that never let her go, a love that broke down the wall she had set up to keep him away. Her week-after-week exposure to the truths of the Bible and the power of God’s love, as we sat around my kitchen table and talked, had seeped into her soul. I was seeing the proof of God’s promise in Isaiah 55 that

his Word does not return to him empty but accomplishes his purposes.

Some months later, as she moved toward a place of healing, Maria told me she wanted to share her story. I’ll admit I was a little leery. “What do you want to tell them?” I asked her.

“I want to tell people about God,” she said, “and about how he—and you—never gave up on me.”

Maria’s story is true. It is the story of the power of love, of God’s Word, and of the Bible discovery method used in Coffee Break. We want to tell you more about it, hoping it may encourage you to reach the Marias in your life. And although this manual was originally written for leaders of Coffee Break, a small group program that has hundreds of Maria stories, it contains information that applies to many other small-group Bible discovery formats as well. We hope it can be a resource and encouragement to those who, like Coffee Break leaders, have a vision and calling to share the story of Jesus’ love through a Bible discovery group.

Coffee Break and Bible discovery

Maybe you have never heard of Coffee Break small groups and the Bible discovery method that is changing lives around the world. In 1970, members of a Christian Reformed church in a Chicago suburb started praying about how to reach out to their community. Since very few preschool options were available in their area, they believed God was leading them to fill that gap. They began a weekly program, Story Hour, for preschoolers. Through crafts, songs, and Bible stories, young children were introduced to Jesus and the story of the Bible. Soon leaders realized that the kids’ parents were also a captive audience. Again they felt God’s nudge in answer to their prayers. They responded by inviting the parents to learn about the same Bible their children were discovering.

And Coffee Break was born. The name was chosen in order to convey an informal, casual setting for discovering what the Bible was about. From the beginning, Coffee Break's goal was to reach people who had never studied the Bible before. *Discover Your Bible* materials were written specifically for that purpose. In a low-key, small-group setting, many women came to know the God of the Bible for the very first time. They were encouraged to ask questions about what they were reading and to share their observations and insights. With the gentle, loving guidance of a caring leader, they discovered for themselves the truths of God's Word. They not only *learned about* God's love; they *experienced* it through a community that cared for one another and prayed for each other as they shared their lives together. As they were encouraged in their first steps of faith, they began a journey that led them to a vibrant relationship with Christ. Some eventually became leaders and even directors of Coffee Break programs.

Eventually the enthusiasm for Coffee Break led to the development of a men's program and the accompanying *Discover Life* study series. Materials for preschool children (*Little Lambs*) were also developed. Then, more recently, when some Coffee Break participants said, "We want more information in our study guides," the *Infuse* study series was born. These Bible study materials are used by men and women in a variety of settings today: cafes and college dorms, libraries and living rooms, and of course churches, the setting in which this Bible discovery ministry began. Time frames vary, organizational details differ, and group sizes and numbers fluctuate, but the low-key, informal discovery process of learning about the Bible stays the same.

The method

The Bible discovery method has been the essential part of what makes Coffee Break successful in reaching people for Christ. It is a way

of asking questions about a Bible passage that acknowledges the different levels of spiritual maturity group members have and values the insights each person contributes to the discussion. The study guide questions give shape to the group conversation, like a "skeleton." Leaders "flesh out" that skeleton with follow-up questions of their own. They are not teachers but facilitators of the conversation. Leaders use questions to guide the group to discover what the Bible authors have in mind in their writing. They also use questions to discover what God is revealing to those in the group—not only about the Bible, but also about their own lives. Although the leader guides provide additional background information, they are not so much an "answer book" as an aid to navigating the flow of the discussion and the text.

Part of that effective navigation is setting a comfortable pace—not too fast or slow and not too deep or shallow. As in any comfortable conversation, the goal is not to exhaust every possibility of a Bible passage, but to capture the "aha" discoveries and the exhilaration of learning a new concept or gaining a new insight. Participants should gain a sense of "tasting" of God's Word and hungering for more. Individuals should feel so comfortable and accepted in the group that they are free to ask any questions without fearing judgment or feeling stupid. They should be free to disagree and still be respected and included, wherever they are on their spiritual journey. You will learn more about creating this environment in later chapters.

Prayer is foundational

Foundational to the Bible discovery process is a deep commitment to prayer. Connecting to the heart of God is essential for discerning his leading and experiencing the freedom of trusting him to guide the conversational setting of Bible discovery. Leaders need to *be*, and to be *supported by*, God-dependent pray-ers. Being

in communion with God is key to experiencing God's blessing. Prayers for group members, prayers for people who don't know Christ, prayers for the Holy Spirit's wisdom, prayers for ways to be more outreaching—the list is endless. Without prayer, we dare not proceed.

As prayer connects leaders with God's heart, leaders need to connect with those in their small groups. Coffee Break is all about relationships. It is not a support group, but it should be a supportive environment where people are accepted, loved, and prayed for. It is the place they experience the truth of the good news of God's love and grace.

Where God's Word is honored, he blesses. Coffee Break has expanded from one small group in one local church to a global mission movement. It includes over 100,000 Coffee Break groups in twenty countries, including Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya, Korea, and even China, where it is called Tea Break. And Coffee Break continues to expand and grow.

Discovery by means of questions

As you read this manual, we pray that you will be aided in the small group Bible study ministry

you are currently leading or hope to lead in the future. This book is arranged in terms of questions; each chapter begins with a question and ends with additional questions. You can read the entire booklet or only the chapters that will be helpful to you at a particular time. The chapters address the following questions:

- What is the Bible discovery method?
- What part does prayer play in a Bible discovery ministry?
- What are good discovery questions, and how are they asked?
- What do I need to know to become an effective Bible discovery leader?
- How can a Bible discussion be outreaching?
- What are the best materials to use?
- How can I create an environment for optimal growth?
- In what ways can leaders be developed?
- What's next for you?



What Is the Bible Discovery Method?

A definition

As Maria's story illustrated in the introduction, God is using the Bible discovery method to transform lives and to reach people with his love. This method provides a way of developing a conversation about the Bible by asking questions. In a small group setting, a Bible discovery leader uses a set of study guide questions as a "skeleton" to shape the discussion. Together the group explores the details of a passage and discovers its main ideas and basic truths by answering simple *who, what, when, where, why, and how* questions. In this way the Bible is taken in manageable sections, and each passage is discussed in its context.

This method acknowledges people's different levels of spiritual maturity and values the insights each person contributes to the discussion. Anybody anywhere in the world can use this method, whether they know a little or a lot about the Bible. Most answers can be found in the Bible passage itself. Even the most familiar Bible stories can be explored with fresh eyes and an open and inquiring mind. People who know the Bible well are challenged to set aside their preconceived ideas and wrestle with the Bible passage *before* checking any other resources. Newcomers to the Bible do the same.

Questions that shape the Bible discovery process

The study materials contain four types of questions. *Icebreaker* questions are casual conversation starters. Anyone can answer these questions because they are based on life experiences and personal preferences. Three additional kinds of questions are based on the Bible passage itself. *Fact* questions are basic, asking, "What does the text say?" They observe the culture and setting in which the Bible was written. *Interpretation* questions, also called "thinking questions," dig deeper to get at "What does it mean?" These questions too are

answered in the context of Bible times. *Application* questions can be personal to individuals as they ponder, "What does it mean to me?" They can also apply to the entire group (and the wider community of believers), challenging group members to ponder together, "How might God be calling us to live more faithfully?" These questions are answered in the light of experience, the surrounding culture, and what each person has internalized from the discovery process. (More about questions is in Chapter 3.)

The leader's role in Bible discovery

The leaders do not teach, chase tangents, or compare the merits of various opinions; they guide the conversation with questions. The Bible and the Holy Spirit are the true teachers. The Word of God is central to the Bible discovery process. Those in the small group not only read the Bible, but it also *reads them*, while the Holy Spirit teaches them what he wants them to know.

This method does more than collect information. It identifies recurring themes, notices relational complexities, listens to others' insights, and "hears" what God is revealing to each person. Discovery includes thinking, feeling, and experiencing the Bible—"putting on the shoes" of the people in the story.

The leaders' job is to "flesh out" the study guide questions with follow-up questions based on what they hear in the conversation, keeping one ear on the group members and one tuned to the Holy Spirit, praying diligently to hear his voice in guiding the group. People's backgrounds, life experiences, and levels of spiritual understanding are different, so their discoveries and questions will differ too. Attentive leaders tailor their questions to the needs of their group members by

- **clarifying the discussion**—"Does everyone know who we are talking about here?"

- **probing responses**—“What do you mean by that?”
- **drawing out insights**—“What else can you tell us about that?”
- **giving affirmation**—“That’s an excellent observation.”
- **“hearing” the desires of people’s hearts**—“It sounds like you’re drawn to know/trust/believe what Jesus is talking about.”
- **guiding them to discover the God who loves them**—“How is God reaching out to his people here?”

Leaders set a comfortable pace for the group and are sensitive to time constraints and the particular needs and interests of the group. Conversations can spill over into individual meetings or the following session—your time together cannot possibly exhaust all the wisdom and insight of the passage. Leaders go no faster than they can move on their knees in prayer. (More on prayer is in Chapter 2.) When you set a good pace, you leave room for participants to ask questions and engage the passage, learning from one another and the Word. (More on leadership is in Chapter 5.)

Benefits of the discovery method

The discovery process works well because, like good conversation, it involves an easy give-and-take, with people both contributing to the discussion and listening to what others have to say. This is a method for today’s skeptics. People own what they discover themselves, whether it is in a discovery group or on the Internet. They don’t want someone else to tell them what to believe. The more people get involved in asking questions and finding answers, the more they enjoy and benefit from the conversation.

Pitfalls and possibilities in the discovery process

For many seasoned Bible study participants, this approach will be new. Those who have been

taught the Bible by others will be tempted to learn the Scripture using others’ ideas. They may want their answers to be “right,” as if the study were a spiritual competition. But it is not. Yes, commentaries and study Bibles can be helpful and provide insight. Biblical scholars know the original languages and the customs of the Bible. However, when we depend on the discoveries of others, we miss the thrill of hearing God speak to us through his Word.

Sometimes we forget that the Bible was written for ordinary people with ordinary lives, *not* just Bible scholars. The Protestant Reformation affirmed that the Bible is for *everyone*. Not only clergy can understand and rightly interpret the Bible, but, by the power of the Holy Spirit, every believer can understand the main message of God’s Word.

The discovery method requires time and effort. Learning to ask questions about the text is a discipline that most people will not forget. It will change their understanding of the Bible. It enables group members to feed themselves with God’s Word for a lifetime.

The discovery method changes people’s lives

People long for authentic relationships and meaning in their lives. Bible discovery groups provide that. In a relaxed setting, with no pressure for a personal response, people talk about the Bible together. Often doubters are turned into Christ followers simply by coming into contact with the Word of God. It is life-changing.

As people dig into God’s Word together, they discover how relevant it is to their needs and problems. They meet people who care about them. They understand grace because they experience it and see it in the lives of others. They realize that even mature believers need God’s grace daily. *Everyone* in the group, including the leader, is called to live in humility and to “become an imitator of Christ” personally as they grow in their faith. (More on outreach is in Chapter 4.)

The inspired Word of God has power. Consistent, sustained contact with it changes those who discover its power. Learning together allows people to see things they might not see on their own. Those who struggle to answer hard questions are bound together as they learn from one another. They practice humility, and Bible discovery becomes more than just an intellectual exercise. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that “the Word of God is alive and active.” The discovery method confirms just how true that is.

Questions to ponder

- What are the unique aspects of the Bible discovery method?
- What aspects of this type of study appeal to you?
- How might this method open up the Scriptures to people who are new to the Bible?
- What behaviors need to be avoided in this type of study? What behaviors need to be nurtured?

What Part Does Prayer Play in Bible Discovery Ministry?



Prayer precedes everything

The Bible discovery method by itself is not enough. Prayer comes first. It came before the development of the Bible discovery method; it comes before we learn how to ask good questions and love even the unlovable. Before *everything*, we pray. It is essential for God's blessing. We highlight it in a separate chapter as a reminder to keep it central in our lives and leadership. But this chapter is short, because prayer is vital *while* we are pursuing those things as well. So we will integrate prayer into *every* chapter and *every* step.

Through prayer we connect with God's heart. Prayer isn't a ritual; it's a life-giving relationship with Jesus, who holds together everything in our lives, including the wonder of Bible discovery. We *must* nurture our relationship with Jesus through prayer *first*. It is how we get to know him and discern his leading so that our walk with him will reflect him and draw others to him too.

Prayer changes us. It strengthens our relationship to God. It increases our awareness of him. We grow in love, understanding, and godliness as Christ is formed in us. We become sensitive to the Holy Spirit's prompting as we pray. We hear God's voice and listen to him through prayer.

Perfection isn't required

A perfect prayer life is not required for being a Bible discovery leader. In fact, prayer shows us how imperfect we are. Anne Lamott says in *Help, Thanks, Wow* that she prays "out of weakness and inadequacy and desperation." When we ask for God's help, we acknowledge our dependence on his guidance and provision. When we see how much we need God's help, we make prayer a priority. Leaders pray for *themselves* and ask others to pray for them too. The challenges that come with an outreaching ministry are too important to try to meet with

our own strength. When we claim the power of God through prayer, we can be assured he will answer and use us. Jesus himself depended on time in prayer. How can we do less?

Prayer makes us God-dependent

God is behind everything, from the leadership gifts he gives us, to those who participate in each small group, to the discoveries we make together. So we put God and a strong, personal prayer posture first. Look for prayer pointers in the chapters that follow. Only in nurturing our relationship with God can we expect to know his heart and lead others to know him. He will answer above and beyond anything we ask or imagine. Count on it. Pray.

Questions to ponder

- What is most convicting to you about the importance of prayer?
- What do you find most challenging?
- What positive steps can you take to integrate prayer into your leadership?

What Are Good Discovery Questions, and How Are They Asked?



Questions are “digging tools”

Questions are the “digging tools” that distinguish *discovery* from *teaching*. In teaching, someone tells the group what the Bible passage says; it gives the leader control and ownership. In discovery, the group talks about a Bible passage, discovers answers together, and applies to their lives the truths they find. Discovery gives control and ownership to the group. *They* discover the truth in the Bible for themselves. Giving information is easy, but when we guide others to wrestle with a Bible passage, they become invested in the conversation they are a part of and remember it much longer. Wordy introductions and spoon-fed information can make people tune out, but asking questions involves them and sparks their interest.

The purpose of asking questions

Questions help unlock the meaning of a Bible passage and aid understanding of what the biblical writers said and meant and how it affects our lives. As the group probes the Word, the Holy Spirit probes the hearts of group members. What an incredible variety of insights results! The Bible is the inspired Word of God, written by human authors with differing backgrounds and personalities. God uses those differences, and he also uses the differences of those who read what they have written. We can read the Bible individually using this method, but discussing it in a group setting brings greater depth and variety of insight. The discovery method honors the Word and enriches those who read it.

Conversation building around the text

The purpose of the leader’s questions is to build a conversation that is focused on the text and enhances the group’s discovery about God, about life, and about themselves. Good discovery questions involve the mind and the soul and promote belief and spiritual growth. They lead into the passage and not to a tangent or side-

tracking issue. They use the language of the passage and get at basic truth, the “big ideas” rather than incidental details that may not help with interpretation or application.

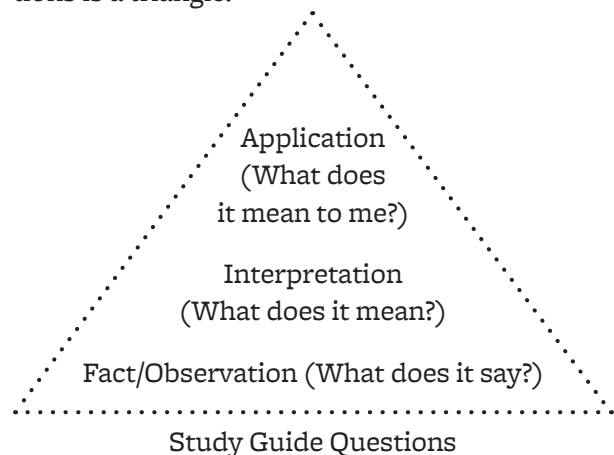
Questions in the study material “skeleton”

If you are using materials specifically written for a Bible discovery group (see Chapter 6), you already have a skeleton of questions to begin a group conversation. The leader material suggests additional questions to flesh out that skeleton. However, as you get to know your group, you will want to tailor extra questions to meet the interests, personality and spiritual maturity of your group. Learning to develop those extra questions is what this chapter is about.

Four kinds of study guide questions form the skeleton that shapes the group conversation.

- *Icebreakers* are warm-up questions asked before the Bible discussion begins.
- *Fact* questions identify basic information and answer, “What does it say?”
- *Interpretation* questions build on the facts and answer, “What does it *mean*?”
- *Application* questions personalize the information and answer, “What does it mean *to me*?”

One visual for this study guide skeleton of questions is a triangle.



A good quality Bible discovery study guide has an appropriate balance of three types of questions: fact, interpretation, and application. Typically, there are more fact questions than interpretation or application questions in a lesson, as illustrated by the triangle diagram. Study guide fact questions are always asked first and form a base for the group discussion. Interpretation questions build on the facts, and application questions contemporize and personalize the facts and interpretation. Introductory questions serve to start the conversation.

Ice breakers—getting to know you

Icebreakers help us make discoveries about each other and relax those in an outreach group who may not know each other well. For example, you might ask the group members whether they are morning people or night owls and how that affects their lives. Or you might ask what their favorite snack food is. What is one piece of clothing they can't live without, and why? What is their favorite way to relax? Icebreakers are answered in a word, phrase, or sentence rather than in a paragraph. The leader needs to share too, of course. In time, as the group gets to know one another, these questions are no longer needed.

Just the facts—laying a foundation

Christians who use the discovery method for the first time find they can tend to overlook significant details in very familiar stories. In an outreaching Bible discovery group, leaders use extra fact questions to prompt observations about important details in the text. Those facts are the basis for interpreting and applying.

Leaders should dig out basic biblical facts without assuming everyone is familiar with the Bible. Guide graciously with your questions. Point the group back to the passage itself with a redirecting question like “Are we all clear on who the person in verse 5 is?” If your group

seems confused and a simple answer will clarify things, give it so that you can move along to more important discoveries. Focus on facts that support the main point of the passage rather than extraneous details. Once the facts have been laid out, the group will see patterns and themes and be able to draw conclusions and identify general concepts.

What does it mean?—interpreting the text

Facts are important, but they affect only the mind. Interpretation questions aid in understanding the facts and engaging hearts and souls. The answers cannot always be found in the passage, but they are *based on* the passage. Examples of interpretation questions are *What does that mean? How is it significant? How are they alike or different? What is the cause or result? What is the connection? How would you describe him or her? Why would this be important?* The answers relate to Bible times, not today's culture, and foster the beginning of application as well.

Study Bibles and notes give us quick interpretations; someone else has done the digging. But even experts who know the original languages of the Bible sometimes disagree on interpretation. Wrestling with a difficult concept *before* checking other sources is a good discipline for us. Encourage your group to do that. If experts disagree, we can accept a variety of perspectives too, particularly when they are based on biblical evidence. In fact, agreeing to disagree can be a healthy thing. Leaders must safeguard those who are vulnerable in sharing an insight, ensuring they are not belittled or ignored. There isn't always one right answer. This doesn't mean that the truth in the Bible is relative or ambiguous; rather it can be multifaceted. It is a “living” Word. The Holy Spirit will guide us to the truth, which often meets us where we are here and now, especially as we move into application.

Application—personalizing makes it real

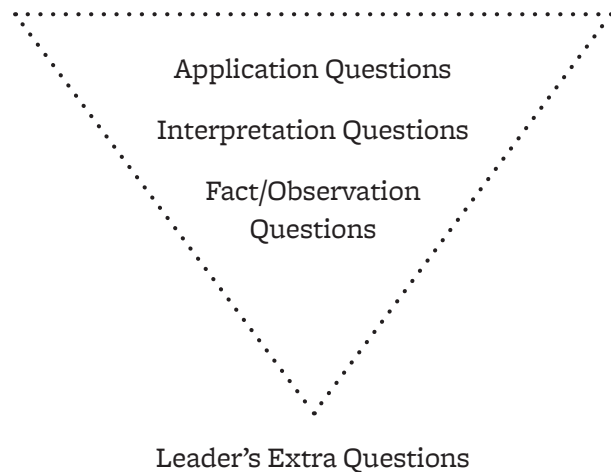
Application questions naturally follow interpretation. When we struggle to answer “What does this mean *to me*?” we acknowledge that the Bible, through the Holy Spirit, is doing something in us. We read about people who ignored what God said and went their own way, and these examples will remind us of ourselves. We too are imperfect people and need God’s grace.

Application connects with our everyday lives and is the ultimate goal of Bible discovery. Questions like “What timeless principles do you see?” or “What responses do you think people today would have?” are good general application questions. As you get to know your group, you may ask more personal application questions like, “How do you feel after studying this passage? What changes do you feel called to make? What will be the ‘cost’ of change?” No one should be put on the spot, but when the Holy Spirit is working in the group, these questions will naturally follow. We need to find the balance between respecting a person’s privacy and nudging them to respond to God’s leading. We do our group a disservice if we don’t challenge them with personal growth questions.

Study guides include application questions to wrap up or summarize each lesson, but leaders should ask extra application questions throughout the discussion as well so that application is interwoven throughout. A group usually is only willing to be as vulnerable as the leader is, so be sure share your personal convictions and failures, as appropriate, for the benefit of others. Leaders need God’s grace too; growing in our faith is a life-long journey. Without application, studying the Bible is just an interesting intellectual exercise. When leaders ask themselves questions like “What is God teaching *me* in this passage?” or “How do *I* need to change after learning this?” they are better equipped to help group members do the same.

Fleshing out the skeleton of questions

Again think of a triangle, only this time apply it to asking extra questions to facilitate the group conversation. Now the triangle is upside down. Most of the facts will be discovered via the study guide, so few extra fact questions should be needed. Use them only if something vital has been missed. More interpretation than fact questions will be asked. And application, how the discoveries are personally and communally affecting people, should be interwoven through the entire conversation, and therefore should be asked most. Application leads to life change.



The study “triangle” becomes personalized as leaders dig deep into the text and design questions tailored to their own small group. They put themselves in the place of their group members and “think in questions.” *What will the group be curious about? How might they experience the text? What questions will aid the group’s discovery without “leading the witnesses” to parrot the leader’s discoveries?* God may give different insights to different people, so good questions are open-ended in order to include all observations, not just the leader’s. Leaders who practice this method guide their group to ask questions too. Eventually they will spontaneously ask questions like “What is the author talking about here? Why is he saying this? To whom is he speaking? What does he

want them to know? Where is this taking place? How is this connected to my life?” The discipline of thinking in questions can also enrich personal devotions.

Hindrances to discovery

Not all contributions lead to discovery, however. Conversation “stoppers” include the following:

- Questions asked like a “test”
- Questions that have simple yes or no answers
- Judgmental, demeaning, or manipulative questions
- Confusing questions
- “Fill-in-the-blank” kinds of questions
- Long-winded explanations and additional leader information
- Commentary-laden references
- Summarizing everything

Good supplemental questions are faithful to the intent of the text and respectful of those in the group. Leader guide questions can be a helpful resource, but don’t be a slave to them. That will stymie group discovery. Aim for balance. Too many fact questions will make the conversation shallow. Too few application questions will minimize the life-changing power of the Word and miss the life-changing work of the Holy Spirit. The natural ebb and flow of conversation and a balance of all three kinds of questions give room for the Holy Spirit to work. As you gain experience as a leader, you will learn to develop your own questions, and the leader guide will become just that—a guide.

Encourage and affirm the group’s discoveries

The best way to affirm discovery is with positive feedback like “Oh, that’s so good!” or “I never

thought of it that way.” Make eye contact, smile, and nod your head in encouragement. Leaders can draw out discoveries with simple comments like “I wonder why...” or “Very interesting— tell me more about that,” or “I’m not sure I understand what you mean; can you clarify?” Admitting you don’t have all the answers builds unity and mutual responsibility for the group discoveries. As you and your group grow in discovery, you can encourage your group to ask their own questions of the text. What are their observation, interpretation, and application questions? Their contributions will enrich your discussion greatly.

Think in questions

Give yourself time to grow in the skill of asking questions. It doesn’t happen overnight. Pray constantly for God’s guidance. Practice. Write down your own questions in response to the passage you have read. Over time it will become natural. Occasionally, a discussion may veer off course, but that’s part of the learning process. You can avoid difficulties by anticipating questions and formulating possible answers, always keeping the focus on the text rather than on personal opinions or a particular church stance. As you learn to think in questions and depend on the Holy Spirit’s guidance, you will be able to discern the right question and the right time to ask it. The more you trust the Spirit rather than your own abilities, the more likely lives will be changed rather than minds informed.

The Holy Spirit guides the leader

God promises to guide what we say when we share our faith with others. He assures us that no exposure to his Word is ever wasted. God *does* accomplish his desires whenever his Word is read (Isa. 55:8-11). We claim those promises with a strong foundation in prayer. We ask God to show us how we need to change so that we can be effective in leading our group and are not a hindrance to the discovery process.

The Holy Spirit sharpens us as we pray for guidance. We become more compassionate toward those in our small group and develop a burden for them. We sense God's leading as we ask questions, and we become more effective leaders as we listen to his voice. Leaders of some Bible discovery programs meet weekly to pray together and also go over the lesson for the coming week, sharing their questions with one another as well as their personal discoveries. The more we pray, the more we discern what questions to ask to aid the group's discovery process. We can trust the God who guides us.

God will guide those in your small group too. When people who are unfamiliar with the Bible see for themselves what it says, they are often turned from doubters into believers in Jesus. Many others experience deep spiritual growth. Asking questions draws Coffee Break participants into the text. They discover that the Bible is God's love story, not a book of oppressive do's

and don'ts. They get to know a personal Savior who shows them how to live a fulfilling life. They learn how to feed themselves spiritually for a lifetime. God's Word changes lives.

Ask the Holy Spirit to make you sensitive to those who are studying the Bible for the first time. Encourage newcomers to Bible discovery by creating a climate in which people feel comfortable to ask questions and make mistakes. After all, we are all learners, no matter how much or how little we have studied the Word. So keep digging. Keep discovering.

Questions to ponder

- Why do you think asking questions has been so effective in leading a group?
- What are some of the biggest challenges in using the Bible discovery method?
- What will be the rewards?

How Can a Bible Study Be Outreaching?



Have you thought about how people come to faith in Christ? Can a Bible study really be outreaching? If so, what would make it different from other Bible studies? How can we communicate God's love to those who don't know him? How do we build trust? Finding answers to these and similar questions is the passion of those involved in Bible discovery ministries like Coffee Break. People too often assume that only Christians will be interested in studying the Bible. Because of this, most published Bible study materials are written for committed Christians and use terminology that only insiders would understand.

In Bible discovery, however, the focus is on how God works through his Word to draw all kinds of people to himself—active believers, those whose faith has become lukewarm, doubters, and even those who know nothing about the Bible and may be resistant to its message. The individual parts of the Bible discovery method—prayer, supportive relationships, and the Word of God—come together as God uses them to draw individuals into a relationship with him. We have touched on outreach Bible discovery already, but this chapter explores it further.

Prayer changes people

You have probably heard the expression “Prayer changes things.” But prayer also changes people, especially in outreach Bible discovery groups. This belief guides our actions and determines how we minister to people who are hearing the gospel for the first time. The beginning point in outreach is always prayer. We ask God to be present in our preparation, in our personalities, and in the lives of our group members.

We may say that we can't change anyone, believing that only prayer, the Word, and the power of the Holy Spirit can do that, but our actions and attitudes often don't match our talk. Sometimes we have preconceived ideas about how people should act in a Bible study.

We expect heart and life change much faster than God does. We forget that God is in control, and we begin to trust our abilities, not God's power. We begin to think it is our personality or sensitivity to others that draws people to faith, that our leadership skills and winsome words change people. God does use gifted leaders and winsome personalities, but it is always his Word and his Spirit that do the changing. We are simply the vehicles God chooses to use.

This is both humbling and freeing. It is humbling because we know even our best efforts will fail unless we trust in God, and it is freeing because we know we won't jeopardize a person's salvation because we said or did something wrong. God's grace covers a multitude of sins. We pray that God will make us the best leader we can be, and that with his help we will live out what we are saying, but it is never about us. In fact, sometimes it is in spite of us that people come to faith.

Many in today's culture do not understand the gospel. Some have had a bad experience in a church or believe a negative stereotype about Christians. What will they expect from us? A judgmental spirit? A holier-than-you attitude? Legalistic hypocrisy? We surprise them when we graciously and lovingly accept where they are on their spiritual journey, even if they test our hospitality. We create a safe place for newcomers to *belong* before they *believe* in Jesus. This fits the pattern that mission scholars have discovered. They have found that most often people belong to a Christian community and then begin behaving like others in the community before they believe. In a Coffee Break group, non-Christians may read and explore the Bible as literature, and they may participate in the discussion and life of the group before they accept the Bible as truth. So it is important to create a safe environment for our friends to explore who Jesus is. We want them to see how

much Jesus loves them and desires for them to love him too.

We depend on prayer because of people's misperceptions about Christianity and the Bible. Only God can give those who are new to the Bible the eyes to see grace in us and in his Word. Grace—receiving by faith the gift of God's love that we haven't earned and don't deserve—prompts us to reach out to others. In prayer, we ask God not only to change others but also to continue to change us too. From time to time, we all struggle with the enticing promises of our hedonistic culture, but our identity is shaped not by the culture around us but by God's Word and Power. We live as new creations saved by grace.

A gracious environment

So how do we provide an environment where the gospel is clear? What do people long for? Do they know something is missing in their lives? What voids need filling? We begin where they are and evaluate the messages our culture is giving them. We put ourselves in the mindset of those whom we invite to our Bible discovery groups. What would nudge them to come? What would make them feel welcome? People often live busy lives, so why would they spend time at a Bible study?

Hospitality and personal contact reach people readily. Ask yourself, "What do I communicate by how I act? Do I make eye contact and smile? Do I initiate an introduction? Do I offer to help? How would I like others to treat me if I were a stranger?" Our body language—smiling, making eye contact, introducing ourselves to newcomers—speaks volumes. Some individuals find it easy to come to a group on their own, particularly if it is meeting in a home, coffee shop or restaurant. But a larger church program can be intimidating for someone who hasn't been in a church before. If you invite someone in either

setting, offer to pick them up so that they do not have to walk alone into a strange place.

Church ministries show love when they provide clear signs, give explanations of where a group meets, and have parking lot attendants available to assist parents and their young children. Using nametags can make people feel welcome. Asking questions like "Where are you originally from?" shows we are interested in others. Even a refreshment table can attract people.

When we are welcoming, people relax. One woman finally got the courage to walk through the door of a church to attend a Coffee Break meeting after months of seeing a billboard invitation on the church lawn. She said that when she entered the room, she felt like she was in heaven. The women were so welcoming that she immediately felt she belonged.

A family affair

We can extend hospitality to families by offering Coffee Break in conjunction with children's activities, which allows busy parents to participate. A well-run children's ministry shows that we are concerned about family needs. Parents who read or watch the news know that some church leaders have abused young children, and they want to protect their little ones. When we provide background checks and do team ministry, we reassure them their children will be safe and cared for. Even home groups can provide a trusted babysitter so that mothers feel comfortable leaving their children in a room nearby while they focus on a small group Bible discussion.

Hospitality

Ask God continually to help you see through the eyes of someone new. An individual walking through the door for the first time may look confident and relaxed on the outside but may be anxious on the inside. These strategies contrib-

ute to an environment in which visitors feel at home:

- **Communicate expectations clearly.** Tell people up front that they don't need to read aloud or pray or even talk. Make sure you have Bibles available for anyone who may not have one. Give page numbers or show where a Bible passage is located to help someone who is not familiar with the Bible's contents. Never assume that newcomers have Bible knowledge. That doesn't mean they are unintelligent; they simply lack experience. Today's culture is increasingly biblically illiterate, so although someone might have heard of Noah, King David, or John the Baptist, that doesn't mean they know much about them or where their stories are found in the Bible. Provide information in a simple, direct way that doesn't insult or demean anyone.
- **Create an environment in which any questions and answers are accepted.** Many outreaching groups have had members who resisted coming to faith for years, but leaders who graciously and patiently waited have seen the Holy Spirit change lives. Be patient and trust God's timing; he is much more patient than we are.
- **Apologize when Christians offend.** Those who have experienced the love and warmth of a caring small group readily extend that love and warmth to others who are new. Sometimes, however, people are insensitive to newcomers, using language that excludes them and forming cliques. We soften the effects when we apologize for our own insensitivity or the insensitivities of others. In effect, we are asking those we offend to extend grace to us. Our humility and vulnerability can help to combat any stereotypes they may have about Christians.

If group members talk about church activities or sensitive topics, assuming that everyone is on the same page with their

thinking, they may drive newcomers away. We don't need to compromise our convictions, but we do need to provide a supportive environment where we accept people who do not believe as we do. We trust the Holy Spirit to change people's hearts in his time. Since we have been accepted by God, we, in turn, accept others. We don't need to "win" arguments. We can kindly accept someone's disagreement without feeling we have to argue them to belief. Erring on the side of grace is always a safer place to be. We can kindly say why we believe what we do and gently suggest that they investigate further. But if someone is insistent on a particular stance, we may simply need to smile and say, "I hear what you are saying," and let the matter drop, trusting the work of the Spirit and the Word. We don't need to defend God or his Word. He is perfectly capable of defending himself. If someone rejects Christianity, we do not want that to be because of the way we have communicated the gospel.

- **Respond to newcomers' offenses with grace.** Leaders and other Christians in a group should create an environment in which people are accepted where they are, not where we want them to be. Group members may be difficult, opinionated, or rude. They may express opinions with which we disagree. But we are called to treat them with love and respect, trusting and praying that the Word will breathe life into them and change their hearts as well as ours.
- **Make newcomers a priority while affirming established Christians.** This isn't easy. Tell people before you begin that the conversation will be focused on the Bible itself, not a lot of commentary digging and gathering of information. We want to close the eighteen inches that separates our heads from our hearts and discover what God has to say. If a program is large enough, newcomers can be

in a separate small group with a few sensitive Christians who see their role as modeling Jesus' love and building relationships with newcomers to the Bible. The needs of newcomers come first, because Christians have other small group Bible study options that newcomers may not.

- **Be a supportive group, but not a support group.** A Bible discovery small group is not a support group, but it is a supportive environment in which people are loved and accepted. A supportive environment is essential to an outreaching group. However, participants dealing with grief, divorce, addictions, or abuse may need more help than we are qualified to give. Being supportive occasionally means referring someone to a professional counselor or another kind of support group where more specialized help is available. The Bible discovery method affirms that the Word of God can transform the lives of people who may never have opened a Bible before. Support groups may help those dealing with trauma or difficult life changes, but transformation happens when we help people open the “living Word” and the Word changes them.

The Word changes lives

Many people today want to check things out for themselves, rather than to merely accept what others say. Bible discovery groups encourage that. Anyone can look at a passage and ask what it says, means, and how it can be applied today. Most people new to the Bible are surprised by how interesting and practical the Bible can be. When we help individuals realize that they can read the Bible themselves, we are giving them a wonderful gift. We then trust that God will make it come to life for them.

The discovery method is not a simple Bible study but a basic Bible study. It helps to make the Word accessible by asking questions at the

level of the members in the group. Some types of Bible studies target those who are the most knowledgeable, but the discovery method is for those who are newest to the Bible as well. Knowledgeable members have all kinds of resources and opportunities to learn more. People reading the Bible for the first time need to feel comfortable and supported in their understanding.

When we use Bible discovery for outreach, we assume no prior knowledge. We ask questions based on one primary passage rather than many. We treat people new to the group with dignity and respect. We create a safe place for asking any question. We provide an environment in which everyone learns and is challenged. Most importantly, we create an environment that is about “belief” first rather than “behavior.” That means we don’t expect Christian behaviors from unbelieving people.

We trust the power of the Word and share the gospel in ways that will help, not hinder. When people are nudged by the Holy Spirit, they will often ask us questions that show they are wondering about faith. Our prayers for them will sensitize us to these “God moments” and help us to see where they are in their faith. We ask him to show us opportunities for sharing the gospel message. Often just asking a question like “What do you think God is saying to you?” or “What have you learned about Jesus through our study?” will give us a clue as to where a person is spiritually. We may then have an opportunity to speak to that person about their faith.

Remember, people are often “reading the gospel” in our lives. If we give the impression that Christianity is about “grace” at that moment when we trust in Christ, but the rest of our lives is about being good by our own efforts, we miscommunicate the truth of the gospel. Our whole life is about grace; growing in our faith—sanctification—is also God’s grace working in us. When we understand grace, we stop com-

paring ourselves with other people and other churches. We don't talk about them in a negative way. The unique aspect of Christianity is that it is not our goodness that saves us. People of other faiths may be nice people, but only Christianity frees us from the tyranny of having to be perfect on our own strength. It is the difference between *do* and *done*—we are saved not by what we *do* but by what Christ has *done*. We can admit our imperfections and sins, because Jesus has accepted us and changed us. When we study the Word together with this in mind, we can admit that we don't know something in a Bible passage. We can suggest that everyone look for the answers. The convincing and convicting power of the Word trumps any clever or forceful arguments.

Ask your group members what mutual agreements they would like to use as guides for the Bible discovery discussion. Often they will express the same ground rules that you as the leader might suggest. We can learn from groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, in which acceptance and confidentiality are two important principles. Other principles might include not discussing other churches and making sure

that everyone has the opportunity to talk. (See Chapter 5 for more on ground rules.)

An outreach group is based on prayer and nurtured in a supportive environment where people who are new to the Bible can discover its truths. Leaders are not alone in guiding the discovery process. The Holy Spirit is working in the lives of everyone in the group. Other Christians in the group can be our allies in creating a gracious and accepting environment for Bible discovery conversations. Encourage them to pray and assist in creating this “safe” place for newcomers to learn. Ask others outside of your group to pray as well. Pray for each individual in your group by name as often as you can. Then enjoy the excitement of seeing others come to faith as you study together. It may be the most rewarding experience you will ever have.

Questions to ponder

- Why is prayer so foundational in an outreach Bible study?
- How is an outreach Bible study different from one for mature Christians?
- What have you as a leader been most challenged by in this chapter?

What Makes a Bible Discovery Leader Effective?



“Being” = who we are in Christ

Love makes a Bible discovery leader effective. Who we are—our character—is far more important than the abilities we have. Long after people remember their leader’s abilities, long after they remember who was in their group, they will remember they were loved. Jesus made clear that love is primary: we love God first, and we love others as ourselves. Love for God, lived in deep, *personal* gratitude for his gifts of forgiveness and grace, must be embedded deep in the leader’s soul and spill over into love for others. The Spirit’s work in us should produce a spirit of grace and humility.

We need not be Bible experts, but we must be a conduit of God’s love. Are we loving? Kind? Accepting? Caring? Forgiving? Encouraging? Do people see our love for them and for God’s Word? Is the group enjoying the conversation? Love compels us to guide others to discover the God who loves them.

Together, leaders and group members encounter God’s love in his Word. Leaders ask, “God, what do you want *me* to discover about this passage?” Even if our discoveries are not part of the *group* conversation, we are still fellow discoverers on a spiritual journey. We confess that we mess up from time to time, but our group should also see God’s presence in us.

Leadership is a commitment that begins on our knees. We pray for sensitivity, wisdom, and love, asking, “Lord, help me see this person through your eyes. Show me how to love as you love.” It takes time to invest in the lives of our group members, to pray for them, to “be there” when they need us, and to *be like Jesus* to them. It also takes time to prepare for leading the group.

The rewards are well worth the time and love we give. Guiding a group to become open to the claims of the gospel and seeing them accept Christ and mature in their faith is seeing God at

work. Yes, it takes time, but what God gives us in return is far greater!

“Doing” = putting love into action

Our *doing*, the details that put love into action and facilitate a good conversation, flows out of our *being*. We need to be sensitive to the cultural expectations and adapt to the norms of the group, whether it is part of a formal church program or an informal gathering in a home or coffee shop. Some groups are casual and wear jeans; others dress up. Some take their shoes off when they enter a home. Take note of differences and ask questions if you are unsure of expectations.

Organizational group dynamics

- **Seat everyone comfortably.** As much as possible, each person should be able to see and make eye contact with everyone else in the group.
- **Get started on time.** Complete your own preparation well in advance so that you can begin on time. Starting promptly shows respect for people’s time commitments. Cultural norms will vary, of course, and people may be dependent on bus schedules or other issues they cannot control. We still want them to come! Never shame someone for being late. Keep a chair empty to allow a latecomer to slip in without disrupting the group.
- **Take time to get to know one another.** Use nametags so that you do not embarrass visitors or people who struggle to remember names. Use “icebreakers” to learn about one another (see Chapter 3). Brief introductions with basic personal information—name, where they are from, hobbies or jobs, favorite pastime, etc.—rather than a litany of previous Bible study experiences puts everyone on equal footing. Be careful not to pry. Some may be going through a painful situation they

are not prepared to share. Respect the person who wants to remain in the background.

- **Establish group “ground rules.”** Have the group design a “group covenant” for ensuring the conversation goes well. How do they need to “be” together in order to have a good conversation? What expectations do they have for participation? How should they handle sharing personal and confidential information? When the group designs an agreement together, they own it and commit to keeping it. They also can hold each other accountable for positive responses when challenges threaten the harmony of the group. The leader too can use it to remind them when violations occur.
- **Encourage a response from everyone.** If people talk in the beginning, even if it’s just a word or phrase, they are more likely to share their discoveries.
- **Open the conversation with prayer**—not a wordy, flashy prayer that intimidates others, but a simple, sincere prayer that encourages those who are new to prayer to desire to pray too. Model the priority of prayer in your life. Prayer formats will vary, depending on spiritual maturity and closeness of the group, but all prayer requests should be kept confidential.
- **Let group members read the Bible passage aloud.** No one should feel pressured to read, but sometimes reading a passage can be a bridge to sharing an idea or thought. You can ask, “Who wants to read first?” or “Would someone like to read this next section?” Read your group’s body language too. Someone may hesitate to volunteer, but if he or she is making eye contact and leaning forward in anticipation, you might ask that person to read.

- **Stick to the assigned passage.** Occasionally you may need to refer to another passage to clarify a point. That’s okay. Newcomers learn that the Bible is an integrated, unified book that repeats important biblical truths in a variety of ways and settings. But do it sparingly, or it will set the leader apart as an expert and may inhibit discovery.
- **Wrap up the discussion at the end.** Ask the group, “What will you remember about this conversation? What big ideas did we uncover?” Wrapping things up will give closure to the time you have spent together, and remind the group of the significant takeaways of the passage.
- **Manage your time, and end promptly.** People may have commitments after you meet, so keep an eye on the clock so that you finish on time. Find a happy medium between belaboring a point and skimming the surface. Cover the main ideas in the passage, but don’t worry about covering every detail. You are giving participants a “taste” of the Word, but you may offer to linger afterward for those with questions or needs.

Relational group dynamics

The above-mentioned mechanics give structure to the group’s conversation. Leaders build on the structure to ensure the group’s enjoyment of Bible discovery by pondering, “What are the characteristics of a good conversation? How can I facilitate it?”

- **Keep the group atmosphere relaxed.** This is a *conversation* more than a *study* or *class*. Create a warm, accepting atmosphere to encourage engagement. Relax. Lean back in your chair rather than sitting on the edge of your seat. Smile. Use humor. Make eye contact to reassure the timid. Call people by name. Admit any nervousness you might have. Keep the emotional climate low-key. When you relax, the group relaxes. Ask for

God's help. He will honor your desire to create calm and warmth.

- **Manage the group dynamics.** Conversations are interactive; leaders can ensure that things go smoothly by affirming one person's opinions without diminishing an opposing view. This can be tricky. Lovingly but firmly acknowledge differences and redirect difficult situations. Trust God to guide your words.
- **Use language that is easily understood.** Christians sometimes lapse into a lingo that is confusing for people who are new to Bible study. Avoid Christian terminology, or define it. Words like *fellowship* or *sister* or *brother in Christ* or even *saved* or *lost* can isolate group members who are just beginning to investigate Christianity. Even the word *Christian* may need to be defined.
- **Balance the good of the group with care for each person.** The leader needs to be sensitive to the whole group. If someone needs extra care, you may need to meet with that person outside of the group.
- **Involve everyone.** Although some people are more reserved than others, try to involve everyone in some way. Give encouragement through smiles and eye contact. Ask God what to say. Enjoy responding to your group's needs as he leads you.
- **Read body language.** Your group often tells you more by how they *act* than by what they *say*, so maintain as much eye contact as you can. What do you see? Eagerness? Shyness? Discomfort? Curiosity? People communicate without saying a word. A bowed head and folded arms are requests for privacy and space. Someone who leans forward and makes eye contact is eager to contribute. Your body language communicates too. A nod, a smile, eye contact, and relaxed body posture tell your group that you enjoy being with them. Respect those who pull back from physical touch, but squeeze a hand or shoulder or give a quick hug to those who are open to it, if it seems appropriate.
- **Give people time to answer.** Do not expect people to jump in immediately after a question, especially in the beginning. People need time to think. Remember—read, reflect, respond—all of it takes time. Relax while you are waiting. Count to ten. Look down at your Bible so that others will speak first. The wait time will seem longer than it is. You may need to rephrase, explain, break the question into parts, or ask, “Is this question unclear?” Use humor—“Let's not all talk at once now!”—but do *not* answer the question for everyone else. Silence may be uncomfortable, but it creates space for people to respond.
- **Give positive feedback.** Affirm people's discoveries with a smile, a nod, and a simple “That's helpful.” Receive all contributions to the conversation. When we encourage people, we gain their trust and assure them that they will not be criticized in front of others.
- **Clarify, clarify, clarify.** Make sure unclear words, issues, and contributions are understood. Use the glossary as an aid. Ask, “Could you define that further for us?” or “Tell me more about that.” Draw out what you observe in others: “Mary, you look puzzled; does what I said make sense?” or, “John, it looks like you have an idea you want to share.” Correct obvious errors gently but firmly if they would mislead the group, always using the Bible as your source (for example, “There is a verse that clarifies that, David. Let's see what it says”). Not every misstatement needs correction, but do follow up after the discussion if someone looks troubled.
- **Pray for your group members.** The more you pray for your group, the more you will

love them as God does and become attuned to their needs. Some leaders keep a record of prayer concerns with accompanying dates. They keep prayer notes in a handbag, on their phone, or in another convenient place. When they have spare time or are waiting in line, they scroll through the notes and pray for each person. God loves to respond to our prayers.

Facing the challenges

The preceding relational dynamics help a conversation about the Bible to go well. God is pleased when we share his Word with others. But Satan is *not*. Don't be surprised if the devil meddles with your group and tries to discourage you. Leading a small group can be challenging and sometimes messy. We will sometimes deal with opinionated people, nitpicky people, and argumentative people, as well as people pleasers, "fixers," conflict-avoiders, and peace-makers. The leader's challenge will be to create a safe, positive environment so that the group members—yes, all such kinds of people, including *us*—feel safe to ask questions and grow spiritually. It's not an easy task!

But with God's guidance and a whole lot of grace, it can happen—because God wants it to happen, and he is in control of all things. He will take our efforts to serve him and work things together for our good and for his glory (Rom. 8:28). Don't let Satan dampen your enthusiasm! Remember that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). See the devil's interference as a challenge and a compliment. What you are doing bothers him. Good! Use these guidelines to deal with difficulties:

- **Pray for wisdom.** Ask God about it *first*. Then ask a trusted prayer partner.
- **Pick an appropriate time and place.** Most conflicts are handled privately, outside of the group setting. Use "time and place bracket-

ing" to decide *when* is the right time and *where* is the right place to address an issue—perhaps it needs to take place outside of the group time when everyone has had some space from the situation.

- **Assume the best.** Assume that an offender's intent was to help, not hurt—unless you have proof otherwise. For example, you might say, "I'm sure you didn't mean to be hurtful when you asked someone outside our group to pray about Ashley's marital problems, but it was hurtful to Ashley. Remember our commitment to keep confidences inside the group." Offer to reconcile the two parties if their relationship becomes strained.
- **Apologize when necessary.** You are the spokesperson for your group. If someone in the group offends another member, and the two are unable to resolve the issue, you are responsible for apologizing as a representative of the group.

These are some common difficulties in a Bible discovery conversation:

- **Chatty group members.** An overly talkative person can monopolize a conversation and shut out everyone else. You might need to say, "Let's hear from someone else. What do others observe?" Use humor. "Come on, everyone! Don't make Frank do all the talking!" If necessary, you may need to talk privately with someone who talks more than they should. Affirm the person's contributions and ask them to pace what they share so that others can contribute too. Ask the person to wait until another person responds before jumping in with an answer.
- **Negative and critical responses.** Some people are loud and opinionated; others are easily hurt and will shy away from conflict. Your role is to make sure no one belittles, embarrasses, or dominates. For example, if

someone seems intent on church bashing, simply acknowledge that there are imperfections in churches and people, and try to redirect the conversation in a way like this: “Churches aren’t perfect because people aren’t perfect. But we are here to study the Bible together. Let’s look at the passage and see what its focus is.” Don’t take the bait if someone is looking for an argument. If you refuse to argue, they will probably stop. In some cases, however, an offender may need to be confronted. Gently suggest that you will be glad to talk with them after the group study time so that everyone can focus on studying the Bible together. Then, when you can talk with them privately, offer some guidance along these lines: “I know you feel strongly about this, but others in the group do too. We need to respect everyone’s convictions and focus on the passage we are talking about and what unites us.”

- **Commentary compilations.** Occasionally people try to impress by giving lots of commentary input. Neutrally acknowledge it and restate your goal—to discover what the passage itself says. Ask, “How would you express that in your own words?” Use background information only as the group desires or needs in order to clarify the passage. Extra material will often confuse the conversation. Sometimes you may suggest additional reading that people can look up at home.
- **Chasing tangents.** Some people sidetrack on every issue, because they have a particular interest or because they are not prepared. To bring a group back on track, a leader must have a good grasp of the essential truths of the lesson. Gently but firmly bring the conversation back on track by reminding everyone that your goal is to investigate the main points of the passage.
- **Problematic answers.** Never convey that a comment is unappreciated or unnerving.

Lovingly manage difficult or challenging comments with a neutral “That’s interesting” or a simple “Thank you.” Follow up with “Can someone build on that?” or “Does anyone have another thought?” If the response is confusing, you may say, “I’m not following you—could you explain that?” or “I’m confused about where you found that answer.” Sometimes a person can misunderstand a question; sometimes we might misunderstand an answer.

- **Needy group members.** Some people need more personal attention than others. Be kind and affirming of the person’s needs, but use “time and place bracketing” to handle the situation—this is not the time or the place to talk about these needs. Try to steer the discussion back on track by saying, “I know this is hard for you. Would you like to talk about this afterwards?” If the person is obviously distressed, you might suggest that another trusted participant leave the group with the person to listen to and pray with them. Or, if a coleader or apprentice leader is present, you might ask them to lead while you leave to spend time with the hurting person.
- **Betrayed confidences.** If one of the group’s agreed-on ground rules is to keep personal sharing confidential, the group may become divided if one person betrays another’s confidences. Remind everyone of the ground rules they agreed to. Empathize with the offended person, apologize on behalf of the group, and pray for healing and restored trust. Confront the offender, but talk to God first. Ask a trusted prayer partner to support you in prayers for a humble heart and a gentle spirit as you express your concern to the person involved.

Positive praying

Always pray before you speak about or deal with a challenging issue. Seasoned leaders have found that when they prayed before trying to

solve a problem, they could sense God's direction because things often worked out more easily than they'd expected. In some cases, the situation changed without a confrontation or a solution arose before the leader could deal with it. Qualified and experienced leaders are available to talk if you want to speak with someone about a specific concern. Call or contact someone at info@CoffeeBreakMinistries.org.

In conclusion

Engaging in a lively conversation with people we love is deeply satisfying. The passage we talk about is the pool into which we dive, not the springboard from which we jump. When different interpretations arise, resolve them on the basis of the passage. When different opinions arise, let it happen. Agree to disagree.

Imagine a large, open Bible lying in the middle of the table. All our conversation is about that Book and how it connects to our lives. Then imagine the conversation like the ball in a game of catch. The leader throws out the ball (representing a question or answer), and a group member catches it. The object is not to throw it back to the leader, but to freely throw the ball around the group. Think of the ball as a hot potato. You don't want to hang on to it, so you toss

it to someone else. In a free-flowing discussion, the communication is among all group members, including the leader. That is conversation at its best.

If this feels a little overwhelming, that's okay. Like the apostle Paul, we ask, "Who is equal to the task?" None of us! Not without God working in and through us. *He* is equal to the task, and we partner with him. God does not call where he does not equip. Effective leadership is a process. Trust God to lead you; be patient with yourself. Prepare and pray continually. When you do, you can trust the results to God. He *will* use you.

Questions to ponder

- What have you learned about being an effective leader?
- What do you think is most important for maintaining an emotionally and spiritually healthy environment in a discovery group?
- What challenges mentioned in this chapter concern you the most?
- What "tips" have you found to be most helpful?

What Materials Best Support the Discovery Process?



Begin with the end in mind

Choosing the best materials will need care and prayer. What kind of help do you need? Ideas for starting a conversation? Help in asking questions? Do you wonder if you even need a written study or leader guide? Hopefully you will find some answers in this chapter.

Bible discovery starts where people are in their spiritual lives. They don't need any experience to have a conversation about the Bible. All that is required is an open and inquiring mind. Together the group *discovers* what the text says and means; they are not *taught* by someone else. There is no agenda except discovery. Leaders guide the discussion, ask questions, and listen for what God is revealing. The Bible is the focus.

Not all materials work well with this method. Some teach too much, presume too much background knowledge, or press for a specific outcome—all of which can inhibit discovery. A Bible-centered study is a launch pad for conversation about God's Word and how God calls us to live in his world. Three series that we recommend have been developed specifically for Bible discovery—the *Discover Your Bible* series, the *Discover Life* series, and the *Infuse* series—all of which are available through www.FaithAliveResources.org.

The Discover Your Bible series

The *Discover Your Bible* series is the mainstay of the Bible discovery method. The lessons supply a series of questions based on specific Bible passages. That's it. No lengthy readings or outside materials to research, nothing to memorize, no "test" to see if you got it right. Just the joy of discovery. This series covers entire Old and New Testament books or major portions of them, and it focuses on some topics as well, like prayer, the fruit of the Spirit, and Easter. Each lesson focuses on chunks of Scripture so that discovery happens within the context of how

the passage fits in the story of God's relationship with his people. Each study in the series has both a study guide and a leader guide.

Study guide content

The study guide lessons contain a set of discovery questions and some space to write answers. Questions focus on specific verses to guide the reader's search. Sometimes brief explanations are given to clarify context or the meaning of words, but most lessons are a balance of fact, interpretation, and application questions. The study guide also includes a glossary of terms and an introduction to the book or topic being studied. Sometimes maps are included to help portray the setting for biblical events.

Leader guide content

A leader guide accompanies each *Discover Your Bible* study as an aid for facilitating the conversation, but this is not an "answer book." It contains historical background information and some interpretive guidance and extra questions to help the leader flesh out the discussion. Both the extra questions and information are intended for use *only as needed* by the group. Sometimes the leader guide alerts the leader to difficult passages or gives suggestions on how to deal with sensitive topics. The glossary of terms is in both the leader and study guides.

This series encourages the group to prepare prior to a discussion in order to enrich the conversation, but preparation is not mandatory. Knowing that God works by his timing, not ours, leaders welcome input from group members whether they have prepared in advance or share off-the-cuff insights. Over time, participants discover that when they read and reflect before meeting with the group, they enjoy the discussion more.

Leaders prepare by becoming familiar with the passage in order to facilitate a conversation, especially thinking of questions that would draw

out the group's discoveries. They do *not* teach, and this may call for exerting self-discipline to hold back their own discoveries while directing questions to the group such as "What do you think? What do these verses tell us?" In that way, the group invests in the process and owns what they discover.

The *Discover Your Bible* series can be used in a variety of settings, sometimes in combination with *Discover Life* and *Infuse*.

The Discover Life series

The *Discover Life* series is more topical in nature than *Discover Your Bible*. It is well suited for men and women who deal with time constraints. The lessons tend to be brief but use Bible passages in their context to protect the integrity of the discovery process. The Bible passages are printed in the materials. This series also uses questions to guide a discussion about the Bible text, but it uses fewer questions than *Discover Your Bible*. The study guide does not include space for writing answers, anticipating that people with busy lives will not have much time to prepare. The entire lesson is printed on a two-sided 8.5 x 11-inch sheet. The back side of the sheet includes brief articles and anecdotes that reinforce the main truths of the lesson.

The *Discover Life* leader guide material is less in-depth than in the *Discover Your Bible* series. It is primarily a resource for extra questions that a leader can use to flesh out the conversation and stimulate the group's thinking. Some group leaders choose to use the simpler approach of *Discover Life* with newcomers to Bible study, and as the group becomes more adept at the discovery process, they move on to the *Discover Your Bible* series. Both series encourage a low-key approach in which the leader facilitates the discovery process and the group sets the pace for the discussion.

The Infuse series

In response to requests from the Coffee Break audience, the *Infuse* series maintains the discovery method while including more background and interpretive information in the study guide as well as suggestions for follow-up and application of the lesson truths. Along with Bible discovery questions and space for writing, each lesson suggests ideas "to think about while you discuss" and encourages reflection and application in sections titled "What does this mean to me?" and "More to Think About." An Explore! section suggests follow-up learning and ministry activities, and five devotional readings accompany each lesson to encourage participants to read and reflect on the Bible regularly. Because the background information and application ideas supply much of what would be included in a leader guide, this series does not include a full leader guide but instead provides free downloadable leader's notes to accompany each study.

Any of the studies in these three series will work well with the Bible discovery method. Using a mix of the materials can provide a refreshing variety for small groups. You might start with a *Discover Life* study, follow that with a *Discover Your Bible* discussion, and then engage with *Infuse*. Use a combination that seems right for your group. For more info and a list of titles in these series, see www.FaithAliveResources.org.w

Other materials can also be used, of course. In fact, you can even write your own lessons. The following criteria will help you evaluate whether other materials or the lessons you write are suited for Bible discovery:

- Is the Bible itself, or someone else's opinion about the Bible, the main focus of the lessons? Bible discovery works directly with a Bible passage.
- Do the lessons presume Bible knowledge and Christian maturity that a newcomer to the

Bible might not have? Bible discovery material should include spiritual seekers as well as mature believers.

- Are Bible passages used *in* their context or taken *out of* context? True discovery happens within the context it was written.
- Do the materials merely *teach*, or do they emphasize *discovery*? Teaching may undermine discovery.
- Do the materials get at basic truth, or do they lead to a predetermined conclusion?

Whatever materials you choose, be assured that the Holy Spirit will bless your efforts to lead others to know God through his Word. Be patient. Listen a lot. Love and respect the people

with whom you are sharing God's Word. You will be blessed as you bless others. God's Word never returns to him empty. Count on it!

Questions to ponder

- Why is choosing the right material to use in a discovery Bible group so important?
- What are the pitfalls inherent in choosing the wrong materials?
- What are the strengths of each series presented in this chapter?
- Which series has the most appeal to you, and why?

How Do We Get Started and Develop Leaders?



So what's next for you after reading all of this? Some of you are highly creative and already know what you want to do next. Just reading this manual has gotten you pumped about the possibilities of using the Bible discovery method. Great! Go for it! This manual will help you get started.

Some of you are more methodical. You want more how-to's, structure, and organization. Here are some ideas on how to begin.

- **Pray.** The first step in beginning a Bible discovery group is prayerful creativity. Ask God to show you a place to meet and people to join you.
- **Compile a list of potential participants.** Think of family, friends, coworkers, fellow students, and neighbors with whom you want to share the Word of God. Remember that sometimes people you never thought would be interested may be prompted by the Holy Spirit to join you. People who initially were indifferent—or even hostile—may be willing to join a relational Bible study. In many cases such individuals come to faith after reading the Bible. If someone seems hesitant when you invite him or her to a Bible discovery group, suggest that they try it once or twice; if it isn't for them, they don't need to continue. Often one experience will encourage them to want more.
- **Decide on a time and place to meet.** Once you have used prayerful creativity about whom to invite, turn your creativity to the time and place. The main criteria should be a convenient time and a place where conversation can easily take place. Groups can meet at all times of the day. An early morning breakfast group can meet in a restaurant or home. Church-based programs often meet in the morning or afternoon. Many churches include child care and a children's ministry called Little Lambs or Story Hour. For more

information, contact info@CoffeeBreakMinistries.org. Some churches piggyback a Bible discovery group with an exercise class, parenting class, or evening children's ministry.

- **Learn from others' experiences.** One church group reached working mothers at 3:30 in the afternoon, when they arrived home for their school-age children. This 3:30-5:00 p.m. Coffee Break took advantage of a children's music ministry that the church sponsored in that time slot. While older children participated in the music program, toddlers and infants were watched by available high school students.

Another church provided a Bible discovery ministry in the evening. Many single moms attended this group. Dinner was also provided, and volunteers from the church supervised homework and tutored children while their moms discussed the Bible. An urban program in an inner-city neighborhood offered Bible discovery groups in both English and Spanish. Many young moms attended, and a lunch was provided by church volunteers three weeks out of each month; the women attending made lunch on the remaining weeks. Baby clothes and equipment were also donated.

Another Bible discovery group met right after an early morning Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. This group was for anyone from AA who was interested in studying the Bible. Some ministries have a Bible discussion following some type of sporting activity. A Saturday morning venue reached men and women who were unavailable during weekdays.

A program does not need to be as large or structured as some of the ones previously mentioned. Some people find it easier to meet with just a few others at a coffee shop. These smaller groups can also become ef-

fective accountability groups. These are just some ideas from other groups; you may have others. God will lead you to the people and the places where his Word can be explored. Invite a friend or two to pray for and assist you in your outreach adventure.

- **Start with a special event.** Some church programs offer a special activity as an entry point. A neutral event with a speaker or demonstration gives a person the chance to meet those who will attend the Bible discovery. They will also get a preview and be invited to come to the next meeting.
- **Promote.** If you invite your community as a whole, make sure your promotion is clear and appeals to someone who is new to Bible study. State that no prior knowledge of the Bible is needed and that this is a basic study that will look at the contents of the Bible and explore Christianity. Be clear about the location and length of the study. Place any advertising—flyers, newspaper ads, etc.—where people you are trying to reach will see them. Laundromats, children’s consignment shops, grocery stores, and libraries often allow you to post flyers. Include a phone number so that people can call for information. However, word of mouth works best. The most effective way to invite someone is by asking them personally.
- **Ask for help.** Support is available if you are interested in knowing more about the Bible discovery method or the ministry of Coffee Break. This manual is written as a resource to help you get started. If you would like further coaching or training, contact us at info@CoffeeBreakMinistries.org, and someone will connect with you personally to answer your questions.

Starting new groups from an existing group

Perhaps you already have a Bible discovery group. Maybe it has attracted so many people

that not everyone can participate well. Are you dreaming of starting another group? Have you thought of a different location? Do others want to get involved? Great! What a wonderful challenge.

Be sure to include your group in the process of starting a new group. Groups who grow together spiritually sometimes resist change. Prepare them weeks in advance about the possibility of starting a new group. Ask for their input. Don’t force the division, but paint a picture of blessing others by including more people. *Isn’t this too good to keep to ourselves? Who might want to come?* If the group decides to divide in half, ease the transition by meeting together occasionally. If a coleader and a couple of others venture out and start a new group, bless them and pray for them. Multiplying is part of God’s plan. He will affirm our obedience with his blessing.

Developing leaders

Developing new leaders is necessary for Bible discovery groups to grow. Be proactive in determining who should lead a group. What kind of person should you look for? Someone with the “gift of gab”? Extroverts who find it easy to make conversation? Yes, some good leaders are extroverts and make conversation easily, but if we only consider those traits, we will miss some excellent leaders.

Author and small group leadership trainer Dave Stark points out the value of different personalities and temperaments. Introverts can be good listeners who really hear what others say and naturally encourage them to participate. Is education and teaching ability helpful? Possibly, but it may also impede discovery because teaching is so innate to the leader. The most important qualifications for a Bible discovery leader are a loving heart, a humble spirit, and a commitment to prayer. So if you or someone you know is a little on the shy side but loves and cares about others, you may be the person God is calling to

leadership. (See Chapter 5 for more on being an effective leader.)

Where do you find these few good men and women?

- **Another group member.** Consider whether someone in your group might make a good leader. That person already has had the benefit of learning about leadership from the group leader.
- **A qualified new believer.** Another possible choice would be a person who came to faith through Bible discovery in recent years. Care should be taken in putting a new Christian in a position of leadership, but often these individuals remember how they felt when they first joined a discovery group and will be very sensitive to newcomers.
- **Leaders from other churches.** If your church leadership allows this, leaders from other churches who fit the criteria we have outlined, especially if they have had experience in a discovery group, are an excellent choice.

Identifying new leaders

Start by asking God. When he brings people to mind, approach them, tell them what you see in them, and ask them to pray about whether they also feel God calling them to lead a group. Give them several days to pray, and then check back. If current circumstances lead them to say “no,” ask if you may approach them again in six months or a year.

If a potential leader is interested but intimidated, extra training can move them toward readiness. Let people practice via apprenticing. People often learn through experience, so invite a potential leader to lead a lesson. This will give the person an opportunity to lead while you are there to lend support. Apprenticing in this way is helpful. Again, it will be important to remem-

ber the qualities of a leader expressed in Chapter 5. Continue to give support in prayer and with regular contact. Be available if questions or issues arise.

Preparation and prayer

Once you identify new leaders, equip them for leadership. Have them read this manual. Encourage them to prepare carefully and prayerfully for each conversation about the Bible. Instill a dependency on prayer. When we develop a praying posture, we crave it and hunger to pray with other leaders. Many do so weekly or monthly, either on a separate day or prior to or after their discussion. They share answered prayers to encourage one another. God uses prayer to change people’s lives.

When we put prayer first, we need to face our fears of praying aloud. Don’t worry if your heart pounds, your voice quavers, words come out wrong, or you break out in a sweat. Just do it! Remember, you have an audience of One. Picture yourself as a small child crawling onto Jesus’ lap. He will receive you gladly. Share your concerns about praying. Some have felt exactly as you do. They will be your cheerleaders. But God, who longs to commune with you in community with others, will give the biggest “amen.” Use one or more of these ideas:

- **Pray with a partner.** You may be leading alone at home or in a coffee shop or other setting, but make certain you are *not* alone in prayer. Walk with a friend in the neighborhood in which you are meeting, praying for those in each house you pass. Pray together by phone if you cannot pray face to face. But pray with a partner. It is a must.
- **Pray in community.** Ask people who are devoted to prayer if they will pray for you and your group members. Though some of them might not be able to attend a group, their intercession will reap results.

- **Pray specifically.** God honors our prayers and brings people to our groups who need his love. We hear their stories. When people have specifically and persistently asked God to bring the spiritually hungry and those who are new to the Bible, they have come. When they asked God to give them twenty new people, believing he would answer, over time twenty new people came. As people prayed specifically, they saw countless individuals come to faith in Christ and become disciplined. As those new believers grew spiritually, many became leaders. Prayer makes a dramatic difference.
- **Pray for specific events.** Extra outreaching events and seasons need concentrated prayer. Pray at the beginning of a season or an outreach event or when a new person joins. Sometimes results are not immediately visible, but God answers in his time and in his way.
- **Pray to prevent Satan's attacks.** The devil wants to discourage this ministry. Don't let him. Pray! The more you pray, the less influence he will have.
- **Pray with other leaders.** Leaders who pray together can share what would be inappropriate to share in their group: personal needs, leadership issues, and the needs of their group members insofar as that is possible without betraying confidences. Write out a list of prayer requests prior to meeting together so that the group can spend time praying rather than sharing.
- **Pray for your group.** Be creative about when and where to pray. You may wish to keep notes on prayer requests, as suggested in chapter 5. One leader prayed for her group every day as she commuted to work. Another person prayed in the shower. A jogger prayed

on his morning run. Specific places and times prompt a pattern of prayer. Develop a habit that fits you. There is no one right way, but praying is non-negotiable.

- **Pray in your group.** Group members will learn from you and will value your prayer support. Use simple words and short phrases as you pray with group members. You want people to see that prayer is a relationship, not a ritual. That will make it easier for them to dare to pray too. Another way to encourage your group to pray is to "pray the text back to God" after your conversation is finished. Choose phrases from the Bible passage they talked about and repeat them back to God in prayer. That is easy for even the most timid pray-er.

A Bible discovery ministry requires commitment. Seeing people come to faith in Christ through Bible discovery is joy personified. We have begun and concluded this manual with prayer. We have laced each chapter with suggestions about prayer. Remember that all of this prayer is for Bible discovery, which is what leaders will spend most of their small group discussion time doing. Manage this process well so that God has the time to work through his Word. And expect to be blessed! Like Paul, we can continually ask that whenever we speak, we will "fearlessly make known the ministry of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19).

Questions to ponder

- What qualities will you look for in a potential leader? List some possibilities.
- What ideas for groups are most exciting to you?
- Where, when, and how will you start? Whom will you invite?