

Introduction

How often have you struggled to find material to use in small groups or discussion Bible classes? A quick look in a Christian bookstore or catalogue quickly reveals that most studies fall into two categories.

The first category of material has people chattering away, but at the end of the study they have not actually learned anything *from God's Word* that will help them in the relationship with God or with each other. This kind of lesson material promotes discussion but may not provide genuinely Biblical learning. At best people feel good about the discussion and enjoy the visit but that is about all. At worst people go away frustrated because they have wasted their time.

The second category of material you are likely to find is a dry, lecture-oriented study. While it looks good on paper, this kind of material does not take into account the unique nature of group dynamics, nor does it promote personal interaction or application of the text. At best it is a lecture with a few questions thrown in, with the hope that if people get to talk every thirty minutes or so they will stay interested. At worst it is yet another lecture or sermon trying to disguise itself as a group discussion.

This material is *different*. As you browse through this manual you will see that there are discussion questions that will really interest people. There are background notes to help the discussion leader make the Scripture a living, active dialogue, not a one-way instruction manual. You will find other questions that force people to dig into the text in order to find real meaning, not simply rote answers that can be paraphrased, "It means what it says."

This material not only gives you everything your discussion leaders need to succeed but also makes it possible for them to *enjoy* leading the discussions. They will not have to spend long hours trying to adapt this material to their groups, nor will they come away from the discussions feeling that there should have been more “meat” in the study. It is designed to promote personal interaction and application of God’s Word through a self-discovery format. In addition, the approach is designed to be so non-threatening that even non-Christians or new believers can participate without being intimidated.

How to Use This Material

This material, along with a Bible, will give your group leaders *everything* they need to lead a year’s worth of exciting, rich discussions about issues that make a real difference in people’s lives.

Gone are the days of spending hours with a commentary, concordance, and cup of coffee trying to adapt a lesson for practical use in the real world of your discussion group. This material will give your leaders all they need on the front and back of *one* 8½ x 11 sheet of paper that can easily be folded and slipped into their personal Bible—no need for bulky books or pages and pages of study notes.


The material is designed so that you can easily photocopy a particular study for each of your discussion group leaders. Thus, whether you have three groups or 103 groups, this one manual is all you need!

After the group leaders receive their study guide they can read over the material and review each Scripture reference by themselves and be ready to lead a practical, deep discussion that people will enjoy.


If you plan to use this material with multiple groups, however, we recommend that you schedule a time when your group leaders can go over the material together. We have learned from experience that this review or “rehearsal” will make your group leaders even more comfortable with the material and their interaction will lead to an even richer discussion when they direct the conversation in their individual groups.

Conventions and Icons Used


Keeping things consistent makes them easier to understand. In this manual, those consistent elements are conventions. They are designed to help your discussion group leaders through visual clues and helpful material so that soon group members forget about the sheets and focus on the Savior. The mark of good material is that it produces great discussion without ever being noticed.

 ICE-BREAKER: A basic principle of group discussion is that if people don't talk during the first five minutes they are unlikely to talk at all. Therefore at the start of each discussion guide you will find a question that prompts people to introduce themselves and say *something*. These questions are designed so that there *cannot* be a right or wrong answer, nor do they ask the participants to divulge anything that might be embarrassing. On the contrary, the ice-breaker is a non-threatening, fun question that will relax group members and start them talking. This is the only question that *all* of the group's members are expected to answer. After the icebreaker question, all other questions are addressed to the whole group and may be answered by any—and as many—group members who wish to participate and who have something to share.

Don't underestimate the importance of this part of the discussion guide in your haste to get to the spiritually-oriented questions. Remember: the purpose of these questions is to “prime the pump” and get people talking. You will find that participation in the more serious questions later will be greatly enhanced if you will take the time to let people open up at this point.


 Discussion: This icon alerts your group leaders that this is a question meant for discussion. It will not have one specific “right” or “wrong” answer. The questions call on group members draw on their common sense, previous discussions, and their knowledge of the topic. The discussion leader’s goal is for each member to share their insights or understandings. When group leaders see this icon they will *not* be looking for the “right answer” they *will* be looking for honest sharing of feelings and ideas.

Every question on your discussion guide is designed to have several different possible answers. To reinforce the nature of this format *and* to encourage participants to speak up without being afraid of “missing” the answer, we encourage our group leaders to always thank individuals for their answer and *then* ask, “*What else* could we say about this? Did someone have another reaction or perspective?” Try hard to never settle for only one response, no matter how good you think it is, because if you do so you may reinforce people’s fear that there is only one right answer.

 QUESTION: This icon points out a question about the text. This is a *discussion* question, not an indication that the group leaders should lecture. The only difference in this type question and the one above is that group members are encouraged to look to the text to guide their thoughts.

These questions will *always* be followed by a section of possible answers. The possible answers are not the “correct” answers nor are they the only acceptable answers. The Possible Answers are listed to prepare discussion leaders for the thoughts that group members may share and also to give insights to suggest if discussion lags.

Possible Answers: The possible answer sections will be set in type that will look like this to **set them apart** and make it easy for discussion leaders to find on the page.

 **READ Psalm 63:1** This symbol indicates that the whole group should turn to the passage and a volunteer or the group leader should read the passage out loud. A good group leader will always make sure that a person is comfortable with reading aloud *before* asking them to read in front of others.

Each study ends with a SUMMARY STATEMENT: and a preview of NEXT WEEK’s lesson, so that group members can review the text ahead of time if they wish.

[Background Note:] When there is background information relating to the Bible text that the average group member might not be aware of, and when that information could help the group better understand the lesson, a background note is included. The group leader is encouraged to review the background notes before leading the discussion. The leader is free to decide when, and if, to share the background information with the whole group.

Where to Go from Here

Each study is designed to be photocopied on the front and back of one sheet. This way your group

leaders can fold the discussion guide and place it in their Bible without worrying about losing one of the sheets. As the purchaser you are allowed to photocopy the studies to give to discussion leaders in your congregation each week. Only the discussion leader needs the sheet. There is no need to make a copy for each group member.

This material will be fun for your discussion groups, it will help equip your leaders for success, but most of all it is our prayer that it will draw you closer together and closer to the Lord.

Leading Dynamic Discussions

The discussion guides in this kit represent a format that has been “field-tested” in a wide variety of settings in this country and overseas. While the lessons in *Growing Together, Verse by Verse* were originally written for use in an evangelistically oriented, home-based small group ministry, we have heard from congregations that report finding these guides useful for generating discussion in their Bible classes; from Christians stationed overseas that use them in their family worship; from evangelists who use them in community Bible classes and neighborhood studies; and even from youth ministers who use them in teen groups.

We are thankful that God has blessed this material in such a wide variety of settings, and believe it provides a unique approach to the study and application of the Scriptures. Every effort has been made to make the guides easy to use by leaders and to make discussion accessible to individuals who may not have an extensive Bible knowledge (including non-Christians) while at the same time keeping the content based on a verse-by-verse, life-related discussion of God’s Word. We have found this format to be non-threatening and capable of engaging even first-time participants in the interaction of the group’s discussion.

This social dimension to the study process can be a powerful means of increasing understanding and acceptance of the message of the scriptures. We often say that this approach allows individuals to read the Bible *for* themselves, but they don’t have to understand it *by* themselves! We are convinced that it will have a greater impact if people are allowed to work through the message of God’s word for themselves in a structured conversational format such as this.

Because of the uniquely conversational, interactive format of these discussion guides, the following guidelines are provided to help leaders make the tran-

sition from the more familiar lecture format to the exciting and effective approach of Leading Dynamic Discussions!

“Outreach Orientation”

Group-Building Discussion Guide

Because so many congregations are using this material in groups that are evangelistically oriented, *Growing Together, Verse by Verse* includes a special “Outreach Orientation” discussion guide. This lesson is designed to help leaders build their group by raising the awareness of group members toward those who are presently outside the group but who may be receptive to an invitation to visit a non-denominational Bible discussion.

If leaders decide to use the “Outreach Orientation” discussion guide, they should hold a special meeting of their care group members a week before the publicized series begins, so that they can freely discuss prospective members for their group.

Twelve Guidelines for Discussion Leaders

1. Smile!

This communicates the enjoyable social dimension of this format and it gives individuals “permission” to speak: that is, it makes it clear that you welcome their participation! Remember to *thank* participants for their remarks, and use their name whenever possible when doing so. (Never underestimate the need of people to be encouraged.) As much as possible, adopt a conversational tone. And as you relax, your group will relax.

2. Prime the Pump

You will note that each discussion guide begins with an “ice-breaker question,” usually followed by one or more related “warm up” questions. There are simply open-ended, non-technical questions with no one right or wrong answer. Instead, they ask participants to share some opinion or personal experience. Although the ice-breaker questions usually have some relevance to the passage by introducing a theme or line of thought that may be developed later in the lesson, they are *always* useful for “priming the pump”; that is, to get people talking. In any discussion format it is usually helpful to get people talking about a comfortable, non-threatening subject before moving on to explore deeper, more spiritual areas.

By asking people to state their name and to provide some sort of personal (but not embarrassing) response, the ice-breaker question allows participants to get to know others in the group in a non-threatening way; helps people relax; reinforces the mutuality of the format by encouraging everyone to introduce themselves without putting a “spotlight” on newcomers;

and encourages participants to open up and become comfortable with speaking in the group when the discussion turns to more serious spiritual issues. Additionally, we have found that one of the best ways that you, as the discussion leader, can encourage others to participate is to model for them by being the *first* to answer the icebreaker question. This also gives the others time to be thinking of their own answer.

We have also found by experience that the quality of the overall discussion will be diminished if leaders try to launch immediately into a deep spiritual discussion before the group has first gone through this exercise to “prime the pump.” People will simply not open up until they have had the time to become comfortable with the rest of the group. Just as an athlete must go through a period of warming up before he or she competes, so your group will need the opportunity to “stretch” and warm-up before becoming comfortable with a serious discussion of Biblical principles.

Please note that the initial “ice-breaker” question is the *only* question to which all participants will be directly asked to respond. All of the remaining questions, including any subsequent “warm up” questions, should be addressed to the group as a whole for the response of any participants who have something to share and wish to speak up.

3. Give Them Time to Think

Avoid answering your own questions. After you have shared a question with the group, give them time to think of their response. If you typically rush in to fill a short silence by answering the question yourself, eventually the group will get into the habit of waiting for you to speak, instead of being motivated to offer their own contributions. If the silence stretches beyond a comfortable level (usually 5 or 6 seconds), try reading the question again.

4. Remember These are Open-Ended Questions

All of us have been so indoctrinated by our educational experience to look for “the *one* right answer” that people may be reluctant to speak up when you ask a question, for fear they’ll “miss it”! So, when considering the implications of a passage, remember these discussion guides utilize open-ended questions. For example: in studying the story of the Prodigal Son, the discussion guide might have you ask: “It seems to me that this boy had a good home, and a loving father—what do you think might make a young person rebel in those circumstances?” That question could prompt a number of different answers, instead of the “one right answer,” and the resulting discussion will enable you to guide the class into a deeper, more meaningful *application* of Jesus’ parable.

5. Always Ask for More Than One Answer

Since you will be asking open-ended discussion questions, there will always be more than one possible answer. Often the first answer you receive will seem so good, or will be so close to the one that you had in mind, that you may be tempted to move on immediately to the next question. If you do, you may inadvertently give the impression that you’re looking for the “one right answer,” and the group’s members may think they have to read your mind, or may be afraid they will give the “wrong” answer. Remember to *always* ask: “Are there any other ways of looking at this? Does anyone else have a thought? What else could we say here?”

You might also want to emphasize this by stating, at the beginning of your discussion, something like “Please help me out by speaking up when you have something to share, and remember that I like to hear as many different viewpoints as possible!”

6. Affirm Every Person Who Answers

More often than we might realize, when an individual offers an answer, their ego is on the line. Nobody wants to give a “stupid” answer in front of others, and many people are deathly afraid they will somehow say the “wrong” thing. If someone suggests an answer to your question, and you move on to the next person without acknowledging their remark, they may well sit there thinking, “I didn’t give the right answer” or “I must not have given the answer he wanted.” Consequently they may soon resolve to keep quiet when you ask future questions.

Therefore you should make it a point to always acknowledge every answer. Such acknowledgment does not need to be elaborate; it can be non-verbal (a nod, a smile, eye-contact) and verbal (“Thank you, Joan,” “I appreciate that answer,” “Ok, good,” etc.) You can find something to comment on, and affirm, even in the most offbeat or unexpected answer.

For example, if a person’s answer seems off-the-wall, you may want to follow it up with a friendly smile and a question: “I’m not sure I understand what you mean by that. Tell me more,” and then honestly try to understand what they’re saying. Often their answer will make more sense once they have explained it. At other times, when you ask for more information, the other members of the group will join in and clear up any confusion.

An alternative way to deal with offbeat answers is to say, “I appreciate that response. I’m wondering if you’ve thought of this...” and then call attention to some other part of the passage. Or, “Well, I never thought of that. Thanks for sharing that with us” is a tactful, neutral response. Remember, you don’t have to *agree* with the answer the person has given in order to signal your *appreciation* for their participation.

7. Let the Group Be the “Expert”

That is, do not routinely reserve for yourself the last word with the “correct answer.” Seek to lead the group to “discover” the truths of the passage for *themselves*. It’s always better if you can allow them to point out a truth to you than for you to tell them the moral of the story! Allow the group’s members to “shine.” Let them be the experts.

For example, often during discussions someone in the group will turn to you, as the group leader, and ask for an authoritative explanation of some Biblical question that is on their mind. While you are certainly free to answer that question, consider instead “giving it back to the group.” That is, thank the person (by name!) for their question, and then turn to the rest of the participants and say, “Joe has raised a good question. What do *you* think? Does anyone here have a good answer for Joe?” By responding in this way you will avoid being set up as the “expert” while at the same time will reinforce the *mutuality* of your group’s discussion.

8. Dealing with Difficult Questions

In the course of discussing a passage someone in the group may come up with a question you can’t explain. You’re the leader- what should you do? Practice saying “I don’t know”! Everyone realizes that no one “knows it all,” but people will respect a teacher who honestly admits it. Ask the other group members if they can shed any light on the question- this communicates respect for their participation and reinforces the mutuality of the group’s discussion. If necessary, offer to address it the next week, make a note of it, and seek qualified help: this will emphasize to your group members that you take the need to understand the Bible, and their concerns, seriously.

On rare occasions someone with an “ax to grind” may take advantage of a discussion format to intro-

duce some controversy. Do not allow them to dominate the discussion or turn it into a debate. Kindly but firmly deal with the issue by steering the conversation back to an examination of the lessons of the passage. Explain that the purpose of this format is to allow all participants to grow spiritually by applying the principles of God's Word to our own life.

9. When Possible, Tie Different Answers Together

Two Examples:

"Henry, you just said that you think the reason people don't handle their money wisely is because they don't think ahead to their future needs. A minute ago Mike said that people buy too many things on impulse. Is that part of what you were thinking of?"

"Ethel, you think that the best way to demonstrate our faith is to do good deeds. That reminds me of a comment Mildred made a few moments ago, when she said that unless people know how much we care, they won't care how much we know."

10. The Eyes Have It

Pay attention to eye contact, because it is one way to direct conversation. You may find that one particularly outspoken individual continues to answer the majority of questions because you are instinctively looking to them, waiting for their response. One way to discourage an individual from dominating the discussion is to avoid looking at them after you have asked a question. Conversely, one way to encourage others to speak may be to look at them, or to avoid looking directly at anyone until someone chooses to speak.

11. Hang Loose

Keep in mind that in a discussion format such as this some digressions will occur, and should be ex-

pected and tolerated up to a point. In fact, sometimes the digressions may prove to be more meaningful than the comments the lesson originally called for! Just make sure not to allow one person to dominate the conversation, and don't allow the participants to take the discussion away from you! When appropriate, bring the group back to the point of the passage.

12. Keep Your Goal in Mind

When you review the discussion guide before your class or group meets, make a special note of two lines: the “Aim” at the top of the first page, and the “Summary Statement” at the end of the discussion guide on the second page. The “Aim” is for your benefit—it tells you the learning objective for the lesson. The “Summary Statement” is for you to share with the group at the end of the discussion.

The Summary Statement serves as a “wrap-up” for the lesson by giving you a way to tie together the points that have been discussed and to bring the conversation to a satisfying conclusion. You may allow the group to take its time getting there—but make sure that's where they arrive! How long should a discussion using this material last? That will depend on the number of participants in your group, the level of interest and interaction between its members, and the time constraints of your schedule: depending on those factors, your group's discussion might last anywhere from 35 minutes to more than an hour.