

The Essentials for Effective Bible Studies

A Bible study is effective when it furthers the work of the Holy Spirit in participants' lives. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' formula to make this happen. However, there are essential factors to transformational Bible study experiences that must be cultivated by the life group host. You will undoubtedly be a crackerjack community-builder when you tend to this dozen:

1. **Pray for it** – You need to first till the ground before planting something. Similarly, prayer is the first step to effective Bible study. It is essential to the life and growth of Christian community. Ask the Lord to meet people where they are at and to draw them closer to Himself and one another. Pray for the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to His truth and apply it to your lives.
2. **Preview it** – It is well worth taking 15-20 minutes before the study to...
 - **Read** the passage in at least two different translations (www.biblegateway.com)
 - **Refer** to cross-references, commentaries, introductions to biblical books, etc. (Not too much, but just enough so that you have a good feel for the content and its context.)
 - **Review** the questions that are a part of the study that you are using and select the ones you sense your group will grab onto the best. In other words, which questions do you think will be most effective at sparking further questions and conversation? Your Bible study experience will be richer if you pay attention to your group's uniqueness.
 - **Reduce** the volume of material given for a study session by 50%. Oftentimes hosts find they have twice the amount of material they can get through in one sitting so cut the content in half before the group even begins. This helps the time of Bible study feel more relaxed and more focused which increases overall participation in the discussion. It also makes space for ministry and prayer to be woven into your Bible study enriching the experience overall.
 - **Rephrase** the questions you decide to use. Make sure the discussion material provided makes sense to you first. Do not make life group curriculum a sacred cow: If something seems vague, confusing, or off-center from the focus of your study then restate the points. This has the added benefit of preparing you to articulate questions differently than how they appear in the material everyone is using. Sometimes spinning questions another direction triggers responses from participants who tend to not be 'quick on the draw' in sharing.
3. **Focus it** – Take a minute at the beginning of your study time to frame what you are studying (passage, theme, and context) and what you hope people will walk away with in terms of...
 - Education – A deeper understanding and appreciation for the meaning of God's Word.
 - Inspiration – New thoughts and new motivation for living out our faith in Christ.
 - Application – Ways to bring scripture to life's circumstances and relationships right now.
4. **Facilitate it** – Do not get into 'teaching mode' or feel like you have to have all the answers. You want Bible study to be a group learning experience where every person's insight and personality plays into the discussion. Here are some questions that can enliven the dynamic of your discussion:
 - What stands out to you in this passage? What impacted you during the reading?
 - Was there something read that is new for you, reaffirming, confusing or challenging?
 - How can we apply this to our lives today?
 - How could this be shared with people who do not yet know Christ?

The nice thing about these questions is they elicit new responses in each Bible study you hold – they never get old. Also, be patient with moments of silence. It takes time for people to process and think about what they are going to say in a group dynamic. If nobody shares after a few seconds, you might just put the question in another way. Sometimes restating the same

question in different ways helps people to formulate their thoughts. This is when your “preview” time pays off. Here are a few other facilitation tips that will help to accelerate spiritual conversations: 1) Be ready to be the first to answer questions briefly and naturally 2) People think primarily in pictures so try to portray a topic visually by applying questions to hypothetical situations 3) Provide guardrails to guide the discussion versus railroad tracks to govern the direction of the group. Your role as a facilitator is to create the time and space for God to do what He wants to do in the lives of the people in your group.

5. **Affirm them** – Make eye-contact with those who share and acknowledge their input with simple affirmations like, “Thanks for sharing” or “Good insight” then try to relate it back to the passage being studied or keep the momentum going by asking if there is anyone else who would like to share. When it comes to affirmation, lay it on thick! This builds the confidence of the person sharing and builds them up in front of others. It has the added benefit of building more energy into the whole discussion, which comes as a result of people feeling freer to share their thoughts.
6. **Include them** – When people feel included, they feel like they belong. When people feel like they belong, they want to engage. When people are engaged, they grow. When people are growing, they want to embrace others. The experience of bonding flourishes into the act of bringing others to God and His community when the root system of inclusion is nurtured by the life group host. Time may not allow for every person to connect or participate in the way they would like, but you can help them feel more included by giving them...
 - Purposes to fulfill in the group that harmonize with their interests and gifting – start them off with life tasks that have a single effort or shorter-term commitment. For example, if a question is raised during your Bible study that intrigues everyone but you have limited information on it – ask a person who enjoys research to bring back a brief explanation to share at your next gathering. You can gradually phase from delegating tasks to empowering participants to take ownership over aspects of your group-life. This strengthens their ministry skills and helps others to see they can make a difference too.
 - The opportunity to share in the Bible study, e.g. come back around to people who have not shared, but looked like they were on the verge of saying something.
 - A moment of your time when you express your love for them, e.g. “I’m so glad you’re a part of our group!” or “It’s great to see you...we missed you last week!” Make it a goal to have at least one meaningful connection with each person during your group time. Simple acknowledgements go a very long way in boosting people’s sense of belonging which makes for effective Bible studies in the future.
7. **Open up** – Not enough can be said about the importance of authenticity. This is essential to healthy leadership and healthy Bible studies. Be ready to be the first to share on the discussion questions and err on the side of risk in sharing your personal response to God’s Word. The more open you are, the more open others will be. You help to make the group feel safe to people when you are real. It also makes the group more appealing...people want to go to a place where they can be themselves.
8. **Listen up** – One of the best ways you can *love* on the people in your group is to *listen* to them. This will probably mean you lay aside your own interests, agenda, or things you would like to say. Give people your full attention and reflect back to them that you understand by nodding or putting what they said into your own words to make sure you heard them correctly. When people see that others are being heard, they will feel more secure about opening up and sharing things on their heart with the group. If somebody is sharing something tough they are going through...be careful not to offer quick fixes. When we attempt to offer good advice to solve problems, it can come across as minimizing a person’s struggle. You might even pause

the discussion and take time to pray for a person, especially if they are emotional while sharing.

9. **Lighten up** – People tend to be more reserved when there is a serious edge to the study. A light-hearted atmosphere actually encourages more involvement. It is not realistic for things to always have this tone, but it can be the dominant one. Sometimes hosts need to “lighten up” on what they expect or hope to ‘accomplish’ in a Bible study. A life group needs to run on some kind of track so the group can go somewhere together and grow together spiritually. What helps group hosts to keep things on track in a light-hearted way is to lay track before the group gathers. A track needs to be in place before something can travel down it. Group hosts are primarily responsible for laying the track by previewing the material that will be used for the upcoming discussion; they just need to make sure they are laying optical fiber and instead of railroad tracks. The difference is one is rigid in terms of where it goes and what can go down it. Whereas optical fiber is flexible and versatile in terms of the direction it goes and what you can send down it, e.g. video, music, text, transactions, and so forth. Just remember that if you have fun with it all, others will too.
10. **Wrap-up** – Factor in a “cushion component” to your group format. Typically, group format involves various elements like Bible study, prayer, worship, etc. The “cushion component” is equivalent to a shock-absorber set between two elements. It smoothes out the flow of the group and helps you to keep time better, which tends to be a challenging thing to do in most life groups. This also helps to dissipate the negative energy that can come with trying to honor your group’s start and end time. It is okay to wrap things up and offer for people to take a little extra time *after your group*. This frees up people who need to go in order to take care of their other responsibilities. It is important to stick to your group’s start and end time as closely as possible so avoid being too rigid or driven on how much you want to cover in a given period of time.
11. **Follow-up** – If somebody asks a question or shares a personal prayer need during the Bible study, be sure to follow-up with them. Take follow-up to another level by continuing your study discussion beyond your regular gathering times. For example, you or somebody in your group can create an online forum where the group can continue their conversation. This builds momentum and can serve as an effective means of outreach too. Additionally, be sure to contact people who said they were going to be at your Bible study, but were not. Tell them you just wanted to let them know they were missed and to see if there is anything they need. This kind of care goes a long way in showing appreciation for that person’s place in the community and making them feel loved, especially for those who are newer to the group.
12. **Offer up** – Let your group be used by the Lord to reach others for Christ and to be a place where group participants can include their unreached friends. Encourage them to engage in “+1 thinking”. That is, if they are going to invite a friend – tell them they should welcome that person to invite *their* friend too. This increases the probability of them coming to the group and connecting with others who have yet to begin a relationship with Jesus Christ. Community is not something that needs to be protected. It is something that is meant to be shared so more people who are spiritually-unconvinced can be exposed to the power of the Gospel (Acts 2:47; Rom 1:16, 10:14-15). God always makes room for the lost so expand your group circle as much as possible (Luke 15). He will provide the time and space for additional members if our hearts are seeking to extend His grace to those who have yet to come home.
 - **Turn** your group’s attention to lost people during your time of discussion and prayer.
 - **Tell** them that you would LOVE for them to invite the people they are reaching out to.
 - **Think** together about how your group can share God’s grace with spiritually empty people.

- **Travel** to locations beyond the home where you meet, e.g. hold your study in a public space or go on a mission trip together.
- **Transition** your group into new seasons of study by including others in responsibilities you carried out toward the beginning of the group's life together. This will help you to identify and develop a group member who can partner with you in sharing the responsibility for facilitating the group. This is the #1 prerequisite to birthing a new group out of your existing one so more people can be reached with the life-changing message of Jesus Christ.

The way a group stays healthy in the long-run and goes deeper in their Bible study is by letting the grace of God flow outward.

How do you know when a Bible study has been effective?

- **People love God more** – They experience more of God's presence, peace, and power in their lives and there is a greater desire to draw near to Him.
- **People love one another more** – They are more 'other-focused', naturally serve one another, and build each other up in love. This results in developing people's sense of belonging, gifting, and evangelistic impact.
- **People love the lost more** – Their compassion and concern for the lost is intensified and they become more Kingdom-minded in their daily affairs.
- **People love God's Word more** – They take more initiative in seeking to know the Lord through His Word, they understand His grace more, and they are compelled to share biblical truth with others.

What is the common thread in these outcomes of effective Bible study? People **love** more – they are empowered to fulfill *The Great Commandment* so they can effectively engage in *The Great Commission*.

Life group hosts can create an environment that gives birth to this life-giving, Acts 2 dynamic by completing the twelve essential practices above. However, it is important to remember that you can plant and water, but God is the One who makes it grow (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). Just know that the faithfulness the Lord honors is showing up, making time for the group each week and being obedient to what He is leading you to do.