



Chapter 8: Walk with the Word as a Small Group Ministry

Overview of Small Groups

For most people that want to host a Bible study the most difficult issue to overcome is who will lead and guide the study.

First, don't think of a small group ministry as something that has to be organized like a congregation gathered to hear a sermon. You will see that the suggestions offered here look upon a small group more as an informal gathering of fellow believers focusing on how God's Word is changing each life.

Second, the Bible studies on this web site—and sent weekly directly to your inbox if you've subscribed to the newsletter—are designed to lead a small group discussion line by line through a passage of Scripture. In other words, formal preparation for the study has already been provided. These studies are mostly organized around reading a section of Scripture together and the leader asking questions about what was read. Although answers are provided as suggestions to move the conversation along so to speak, you will find that the group's answers really move things along in the direction of the Spirit's leading rather than your own. [Hint: It's "OK" if the group's answers and discussion digress from the written lesson—that's the point.]

If you haven't done so recently, you may want to review the *Overview of Walk with the Word* material to be reminded that the goal is not to become an encyclopedia of theology but to share how God is speaking to you through His Word. Small group Bible studies are really about sharing this with others who can then provide prayerful support and

accountability in our walk with Christ. All you really need is a place to meet, a Bible, and a study guide from this site.

For those desiring to develop deeper skills as a small group leader the basic information is provided on how to apply the studies you've personally developed.

The Basic Structure of a Small Group Bible Study

There are five key elements that should happen during any small group meeting. These elements are summed up in the acrostic TASTE:

Teaching
Application
Sharing
Touch
Extra

Take note through each of these points that the emphasis is facilitating discussion of what God is saying through His Word rather than attaining intellectual information. The word "seminary" is conspicuously absent from the entire Bible. From Genesis through Revelation God has repeatedly demonstrated that He speaks directly through His Word to those that seek Him. Leaders must always bear in mind Jesus' definition of "leader":

"Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

—Matthew 23:10-12

"And He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.'"

—Luke 22:25-26

The salient point is that we are to be facilitators, servants that point towards the Master, careful not to allow the focus to rest on us. It's far

more important to have the desire to *host* a small group than to desire being a *leader*. Christ's requirements for a leader are simply someone willing to serve others.

Teaching

The purpose of the teaching element is for the leader to guide the group through one main point the leader has learned from the selected portion of Scripture and to facilitate group discussion. This main point may be a practical spiritual lesson, a story line or even a theological concept.

When using Bible study guides developed by Walk with the Word this concept can be observed in action. Suggested questions are placed in parallel with each section of Scripture to facilitate group discussion while guiding everyone point-by-point towards a greater lesson.

The basic structure for these studies follows what is known as the "Inductive Bible Study System". In its simplest form, it's the process of studying Scripture by first observing (who, what, where, why and how), interpreting (what does it mean), and application (how does it apply to my life). The question and answer style of the studies facilitates group discussion to observe, interpret and, most importantly, actually apply biblical truth.

After the leader has focused the group with opening prayer, he or she:

- Provides context for the main point (lesson, theme)
- Introduces the main point
- Traces the main point through the Scripture portion
- Includes appropriate facts of information gained from personal study
- Supports the main point with cross references as appropriate

Walk with the Word Bible studies follow these points but also highly encourages you to develop your own studies as you delve deeper into God's Word.

Application

The purpose of application is to help group members identify personally with the main point. Without personal application, the study never goes beyond the dissemination of facts and information. Application should be taking place throughout the entire study!

The leader may facilitate application by:

- Encouraging group members to share how they might apply the main point to their lives personally. It's often just a simple manner of opening it up to the group by asking, "What does this say to you personally?"
- Sharing a personal testimony. If we are to become the type of leader Jesus has defined (a servant of others) we may need to inspire confidence in the group by personally relating how a particular lesson has changed/is changing our walk with Christ.
- Sharing a story or illustration. Often we'll come across testimony or situations that parallel the main point of the lesson being taught.

The commonality of all three points is an emphasis on faith rather than knowledge, of how Scripture is changing our heart more than our mind.

Sharing

The purpose of sharing is to allow other members in the group to share ideas, insights, knowledge, facts and themes they themselves learned by reading the selected portion of Scripture.

Always seek every opportunity to open up the meeting to any member of the group who wishes to share. As long as discussion continues to focus on personal application of Scripture, don't worry if things aren't moving point-by-point according to the study outline. Trust the leading of the Spirit in the sharing of the application of the Bible.

However, a key responsibility in leading the group is to ensure that no single member takes all the time or dominates the group. Such a member, however, may have a gift of teaching and may be a possible candidate for becoming a leader of a future small group. Discernment must be made between a member who is teaching and someone who is merely talking.

Touch

The purpose of this next element is to allow members to share how God "spoke" to them personally from the portion of Scripture. This is different from sharing a fact about the text, and it is different from making application (although it is close to the latter). ***This is one of the most critical elements of a small group, and is paramount to enabling a believer to get "connected" to God through His Word.*** This element must be taught by the leader.

The leader can simply open this element by asking, "Does anyone want to share how God spoke personally through His Word this week?" This is sometimes an intimate time of personal sharing and vulnerability. Not everyone in the group grasps the concept or is willing to share. Little comment needs to be made by the leader when someone shares how God spoke to them personally through His Word, but affirmation and encouragement should always be extended. Thank members for sharing and don't be afraid to pause for prayer whenever appropriate.

Extra

The purpose of "extras" is to allow the leader to share or bring to light other observations from the text that are interesting, fascinating or thought-provoking, but not necessarily relevant to the main point. These "extras" are usually the result of the leader's study and research and are a subtle way of encouraging the group to look deeper into Scripture in the course of their reading.

This can be a very fun and entertaining conclusion to the study—or even introduction—as the leader knows the answers to the "mystery" question and the members have to try to figure them out.

As an example referring to 1 Samuel 17:40, the leader might ask, "Why do you think David picked up FIVE smooth stones when he only needed ONE to defeat Goliath?" (Possibly to kill Goliath and all his brothers in anticipation that they might come to avenge Goliath's death.)

This is positive reinforcement to the group that the observation part of studying Scripture is often critical to making the right interpretation and personal application.

Summary

As you've figured out by now, a small group meeting regularly under these guidelines will build deeper and deeper skills in the observation, interpretation, and application of Scripture in their life. In other words, they'll begin to hear God speaking to them personally through His Word.

The basic mechanics of leading a small group are:

- Provide a reading schedule so each member has the opportunity to come to each meeting having read and considered the passage to be studied.
- Use or develop an outline of the passage to be studied that emphasizes a main point you've learned or want to convey.
- Help group members identify personally with the main point.
- Allow other members in the group to share ideas, insights, knowledge, facts and themes they themselves learned.
- Encourage members to share how God "spoke" to them personally from the portion of Scripture being studied.
- Make an extra effort to find ways to lovingly encourage members to go further in their study and application of God's

Word. Always remember Christ's instruction to be a servant to them.

It's not difficult at all to effectively accomplish all these things in a one-hour meeting. If you're blessed with a group that can allow more time, consider first expanding the areas of prayer and fellowship rather than adding additional Scripture study. Even in a small group setting you want to achieve a balance of the things that make meeting in His Name the most life-changing. Structure the time to include sharing of personal life events, prayer for individual needs, prayer for your church at large, and time to genuinely fellowship with each other.

If at all possible, set out at least one more chair than people attending the group at any given occasion and lead the group in asking God to send someone to fill that chair next time you meet.

Pray that you encounter the "worst" small group "problem" imaginable: The group becomes too large and must split to form more than one small group.