

# A different approach to reach nonbelievers

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POINT MAGAZINE // MAY 2022

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Societies are drifting farther from the church and God with each passing generation. This secularizing shift from the traditional Christian worldview is evidenced by Pew Research, Gallup, and Barna Group survey findings. These consistently confirm that people have been leaving the church at alarming rates since the turn of the 21st century and most recently during the COVID pandemic. <sup>[i][ii][iii]</sup>

In one survey, Pew Research discovered that those identifying as religiously unaffiliated questioned the rationality of many religious teachings and the existence of God. They also disagreed with the position churches take on social and political issues. <sup>[i]</sup> Many today believe traditional Christian teachings and practices are incongruent with modern science and societal norms.

These findings reveal the chasm separating the religiously unaffiliated and the Christian community grows wider and deeper by the year. Regrettably, secular people are rapidly distancing themselves from the church as they continue to reject the Christian faith's fundamental doctrines and practices.

How can the church bridge this growing divide with people far from God? How can the church respond to the spiritual needs of the religiously unaffiliated?

One simple strategy is to invite people far from God into a community where they can openly discuss matters of the Christian faith. This involves moving toward people and meeting them at their point of need. It is about taking the initiative to know people and care about their concerns.

We can accomplish this best through discussion. Discussion enables people to share perspectives and learn from each other. Moreover, Bible-centered discussion allows people to interact with God's truth — perhaps for the first time — as they seek to understand the Christian worldview and come to terms with what they believe. <sup>[iv]</sup>

## **Bible Discussion Groups**

Bible discussion groups create a safe place for people to ask questions, find biblical answers, and learn from each other. Essentially, Bible discussion groups give people space to explore and discover God's truth at their own pace, in terms they can understand.

Bible discussion groups are characterized by the following distinctives and practices:

### **Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 1: Safe Place**

Safety is a hallmark of Bible discussion groups. Therefore, we want to create an environment where people feel welcomed and accepted regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey. This is accomplished by the following means.

**Voluntary participation:** Participants are invited to join the discussion or just listen. They are never put on the spot to respond, read, or pray. This is a pledge the leader makes to all participants.

**Mutual respect:** Participants are more apt to join the discussion once they have experienced the trust and respect of others. People are encouraged to *discuss* topics, not *debate* them. Doing so ensures that group discussion is both constructive and edifying.

**PRACTICE:** *At the beginning of each meeting, leaders explain the proper rules of engagement so that all participants are treated with the utmost respect and are free to engage at their own pace.*

**Location neutrality:** Another aim of Bible discussion groups is to select a meeting place where people feel comfortable interacting and are free from intimidation. In neutral locations people can be themselves and not feel out of place.

Homes, coffee houses, school campuses and youth/senior centers are good meeting places. They are places where people outside the church are accustomed to meeting socially and are devoid of Christian “symbols” that might otherwise dissuade people from sharing.

**PRACTICE:** *Consider starting a Bible discussion group within an established community such as a neighborhood, student, senior or grief support group. These are communities where people already know and respect each other and there is shared affinity.*

These safety measures are intended to eliminate any factors that would otherwise prevent someone from attending and participating. Our goal is to move people from being curious spectators to being active listeners and participants.

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## **Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 2: People-Centered**

At their core, Bible discussion groups are people-centered, not curriculum- or agenda-centered. They exist for the sole purpose of helping people overcome their concerns and misconceptions regarding the Christian faith. Therefore, people’s concerns and questions drive discussion topics.

People have questions, and we need to take their questions and objections seriously. God can meet them in their questions and make a clear pathway to speak to their heart. Behind every question is a questioner who matters to God.

Jesus' life and ministry epitomized this approach. During his encounters with Israel's elite and peasants, Jesus answered their deepest concerns in terms they could understand and act upon.

In response to Nicodemus' limited understanding of Jesus' nature and mission, Jesus revealed that his divine work as the Son of Man was to save the world from sin through his sacrificial death (Jn. 3:13-17). In response to the Samaritan woman's thirst for a life of dignity and purpose (John 4), Jesus offered her eternal life through the Spirit. In all cases, Jesus met people at their points of need.

**PRACTICE:** *Bible discussion group leaders compile a list of topics by asking group members about their concerns and questions.*

Because Bible discussion groups are people-centered, the specific curriculum is open-ended and topic-driven. Therefore, leaders need to be well resourced. [v]

Having a basic understanding of the *whats* and *whys* of the Christian faith enables leaders to respond confidently to Christianity's most pressing questions, such as:

- Is there such a thing as absolute truth?
- How do I respond to the social and moral issues of our time?
- How do I know God exists?
- How do I reconcile the theory of evolution with the creation account?
- How do I know the Bible is the trustworthy, inspired Word of God?
- How do I reconcile the sovereignty of God with the free will of humans?
- If God is all-powerful, why does he not put an end to evil and suffering?
- How do I know Jesus is divine and not just another prophet?
- How do I know Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead?
- Why aren't there multiple ways to God? Why is Jesus the only way?

Over time, leaders grow in proficiency as they study and articulate God's truth. But, most important, they grow in their ability to move people beyond their questions to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

While preparedness is important, the apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1:17 (NLT) that it is not eloquent speech or cleverness that wins the day, but the power of the gospel of Christ. Paul reinforces this divine principle in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 (NLT), where he writes:

*For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true.*

As God's ambassadors, our responsibility is to prepare and articulate God's truth as best we can. Ultimately, God the Holy Spirit applies his truth to the minds and hearts of those who hear the good news. We rest in this truth, knowing that God uses our best efforts to achieve his purposes.

**PRACTICE:** Consider launching your first Bible discussion group with a pastor as leader and one or two apprentices.

### **Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 3: Complements Traditional Ministries**

Because Bible discussion groups are discussion-based, they are distinctly different from Bible studies and Life Groups. They are complementary because they are a unique avenue the local church can use to introduce people to Jesus, especially those not yet ready to join a more formal group. Because the groups are designed to be informal, they fill a need Bible studies and Life Groups are not intended to meet.

People far from God typically have a *casual* interest in Christianity. They are primarily interested in gaining a basic understanding of Christian beliefs. Essentially, Bible discussion groups are designed to help these people *discover* God's truth and come to faith.

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Conversely, Bible studies and Life Groups are designed to help people *grow* in their faith. They are intended for those who are already committed to Christian fellowship and agree with the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

Likewise, worship services and sermons elevate God and his truth. Most are intended for those who already have an intimate relationship with God and a desire to worship him.

**PRACTICE:** Consider the formal role of an outreach pastor whose responsibilities include Bible discussion groups and, more broadly, local outreach and missions.

### **Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 4: Discussion-Oriented**

The academic community has long regarded group discussion as a superior approach to problem-solving, learning and therapy. As applied to biblical inquiry, discussion groups enable people to learn from the shared experiences and insights of others as they encounter and perhaps wrestle with God's truth.

Through discussion, people not only hear but also *interact* with God's truth. Here people come to terms with what they believe and why they believe it. They connect the spiritual dots and discover the cohesiveness of the Christian worldview and church doctrine.

People often are surprised to find they are not alone in their doubts and struggles. As they listen to each other, they gain new insights and realize others struggle with the same issues.

Inviting people to engage with others enables them to confront their pain, questions and doubts — in many cases, for the first time. Group discussion allows people to move from confusion to clarity and from complacency to action.

**PRACTICE:** *Leaders draw people into the discussion by asking engaging, thoughtful questions. Good questions also help leaders focus on the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith as they prepare each discussion topic.*

### **Bible Discussion Group Distinctive 5: By Personal Invitation**

People are more willing to attend a Bible discussion group if someone they know and trust — a friend, colleague or family member — personally invites them. This is especially true when the person making the invitation accompanies the person invited.

People making the invitation form a relational bridge. They forge a connection between the person invited and a community of people who share the same questions regarding the Christian faith. This is especially true when the person making the invitation has the same questions as the one invited. Bible discussion groups provide a common ground for people to explore God's truth together.

**PRACTICE:** *When announcing the formation of a new Bible discussion group, encourage church members with questions about the Christian faith to attend. And ask them also to invite friends outside the church to accompany them.*

### **Apostle Paul's Example**

This approach of meeting people at their point of need in terms they can understand is not the modern church's invention. Rather, it is characteristic of the approach taken by the New Testament apostles and early church fathers.

The most notable example is the apostle Paul's ability to adapt to those he was ministering to. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (NIV), Paul declares,

*I have become all things  
to all people  
so that by all possible means  
I might save some.  
(emphasis added)*

Paul's fruitful ministry as an apostolic evangelist and scholar was marked by his ability to find common ground with all those he encountered without exception. Paul elaborates in 1 Corinthians 9:

*I have made myself a slave to everyone. (v. 19)  
I became like a Jew. (v. 20)  
I became like one under the law. (v. 20)  
I became like one not having the law. (v. 21)  
I became weak. (v. 22)*

These categories of people illustrate the lengths to which Paul was willing to go to share the gospel of Christ. For Paul, it was about sharing the gospel clearly and effectively, no matter the inconvenience. It was about identifying with his audience's frame of reference. It was about speaking in terms his audience would understand and act upon. Finally, it was about allowing God the Holy Spirit to transform hearts and minds.

The Apostle Paul's ministry approach was to become all things to all people by all means for the sake of the gospel of Christ.

In verse 23, Paul concludes by underscoring his motivation for ministry: "I do all this for the sake of the gospel." Paul's highest goal was that by becoming "all things to all people by all means," many would be drawn to God in repentance and faith.

As the 21st-century church, this, too, must be our goal if we are to reach people far from God with the gospel of Christ.

[i] [Why America's 'nones' don't identify with a religion](#), Pew Research, August 8, 2018

[ii] [U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time](#), Gallup, March 29, 2021, by [Jeffrey M. Jones](#)

[iii] [About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated](#), Pew Research, December 14, 2021

[iv] [Bible in Mission: Lessons Learned from the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey](#), Pauline Hoggarth, Fergus Macdonald, Bill Mitchell, Knud Jørgensen, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series (Volume 18), 2008

[v] [The Mainstream Apologetics](#) website ([mainstreamapologetics.org](http://mainstreamapologetics.org)) is a good starting point. It provides 200+ articles and 350+ references to useful apologetics resources. It also provides resources for answering the big questions of the Christian faith.



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