

Bible Discussion Groups

Launching and Leading Bible-Centered Discussions

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This is the final article in the series of three articles describing the WHYs, the WHATs, and HOWs of Bible discussion groups.

The first article (WHYs), “**Articulating God’s Truth in an Unbelieving Age,**” published in the January 2022 edition of Point Magazine, introduces the concept of Bible discussion groups and why engaging with people far from God is vital to the future of the Christian church.

The second article (WHATs), “**A Different Approach to Reach Nonbelievers,**” published in the May 2022 edition of Point Magazine, describes the Bible discussion group methodology and how it differs from traditional Bible Studies and approaches to evangelism.

And finally, this third article (HOWs), “**Launching and Leading Bible-Centered Discussions,**” serves as a leader’s manual for launching and leading Bible discussion groups.

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Introduction

As the name implies, Bible discussion groups are first and foremost, *Bible-centered*. They provide people the opportunity to engage with the transcendent and timeless truths of God's Word.

Second, Bible discussion groups are *discussion-oriented*. As such, people are encouraged to interact with each other as they interact with God's Word. Through discussion, people learn from the shared experiences and insights of others as they wrestle with the truth of God's Word.

And finally, Bible discussion groups are *group-oriented*. People are brought into community to support and encourage each other in their pursuit of faith and godly living.

Founding Principle

Bible discussion groups are founded on the principle that God's Word always bears fruit (Isaiah 55:11 NLT). Scripture informs us that God the Holy Spirit is the great revealer and applier of truth (1 Thessalonians 1:5 NLT).

Bible-centered discussions are a means by which God unleashes His transformative power. This process of transformation is characterized by the following phases of inquiry:

- **HEARING:** As God speaks from the pages of scripture, people *listen* openly to His revealed Word.
- **DISCOVERING:** As leaders direct the discussion using engaging, thought-provoking questions, people are challenged to *discover* God's revealed truth.
- **DECIDING:** As people discover God's truth, they are compelled to come to terms with what they believe and why they believe. They must *decide* whether to accept or reject God's Word.

This transformative process of hearing, discovering, and deciding is facilitated by the power of the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit does the hard work of convincing people of truth and convicting them of their sin and need of salvation.

Launching Bible Discussion Groups

Launching a Bible discussion group is easier than you might think. In most cases, it is organic. It grows out of people's need to understand God's Word as they respond to the challenges of life.

Group Composition

Bible discussion groups are intended for two groups of people.

First, Bible discussion groups are intended for people outside the church who have never heard God's Word clearly presented. These are people who are skeptical of church doctrine and practices. Many in this group believe they can do life without God.

Second, Bible discussion groups are intended for people inside the church who are new to the Christian faith. These are people who are often encumbered by questions about church doctrine and the Bible. These are people who need to be grounded in God's Word as they grow in their faith.

Believers joining the group are encouraged to invite friends, family members, neighbors, and colleagues from outside the church. Essentially, believers form a *relational bridge* between the church and the communities they represent.

The Bible discussion group methodology can also be *suitcased* into existing groups including:

- Affinity Groups: These are groups where people have shared affinity, e.g., grief support groups, men's/women's groups, and age-based groups.
- Interest Groups: These are groups where people have common interests, e.g., knitting groups, garden groups, and golfers.
- Neighborhood/Community Groups: These are groups where people do life together geographically and socially.
- Church Sponsored Groups: These are groups that are sponsored by churches such as life groups and serving groups.

These groups represent communities where people know each other and have established trusting relationships.

Meeting Place

Selecting a meeting place is determined by the type of group. In the case of neighborhood groups, the home of a couple or person known by the community is an ideal meeting place. In other cases, a neutral meeting place is ideal; somewhere people already meet. Examples include senior centers, college campuses, and coffee houses.

Churches may also serve as a meeting place. However, people far from God may be intimidated by a church setting. Consider meeting at a church only in off-hours when services are not held.

The overarching goal is to select a meeting place where everyone feels comfortable attending and participating.

Meeting Schedule

Bible discussion groups can meet on a variety of schedules depending on the type of group and whether the group already has an established meeting time.

In the case of affinity, interest, and community groups that already have an established meeting time, it is natural to suitcase the discussion into the group.

In the case of new groups, a weekly or every other week schedule works best. A weekly schedule may be too much of a time commitment for people. Every other week is ideal.

In either case, leaders inform people when the group will meet next via email. In the email, leaders include a brief description of the topic being discussed.

Leader Selection

Selecting leaders is crucial to the success of the Bible discussion group. A good leader is someone who can respond to the spiritual needs of the group and ultimately lead people to Christ. They accomplish this through a well-reasoned and clear exposition of God's Word.

To assist leaders, there is a wide range of training resources available. Books, podcasts, and videos authored by respected Christian theologians and scholars provide a foundational exegesis of God's truth. These are great companions to God's Word.

Pastors and elders are great resources. They can be engaged to answer questions and train leaders. Perhaps consider launching your first Bible discussion group with a pastor or an elder as its leader, while prospective leaders apprentice in the group.

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.

The person making the invitation must make it clear to the person being invited that Bible discussion groups are a safe place to explore spiritual questions.

Mantra: “*You can come and just listen. You will never be put on the spot to answer questions, read, pray, participate, or make a commitment. It is a safe place to explore the Bible.*”

Along with a neutral meeting place, this mantra should assuage any apprehensions one might have about joining a Bible discussion group.

Leading Bible Discussion Groups

One of the greatest joys of leading Bible discussion groups is to lead people into a vital relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Essentially, we lead people into the presence of God’s Word, and God the Holy Spirit convicts and brings about conversion and life change.

The primary goal of leaders is to help the group discover the truth of God’s Word through *guided discussion*.

Guided Discussion

The primary purpose of Bible discussion groups is to help people discover what God’s Word teaches on a given topic by means of *guided discussion*. Leaders guide the discussion by asking questions that direct group discussion toward biblical truths. Once biblical truths are discovered, leaders distill the discussion and summarize these biblical truths in terms people can understand.

Even though Bible discussion groups are question-driven, it is not just about answering people’s questions. Rather, it is about giving people space to answer questions for themselves as they interact and grapple with God’s Word in a group setting. Leaders simply facilitate this process as they get to know each person behind the questions.

At the start of each session, leaders introduce the main topic. In advance, leaders select biblical passages, and as necessary, extra-Biblical resources (see Appendix 1) to guide the discussion. For each biblical passage, leaders simply read the text without commentary.

Next, leaders open the floor for discussion. The discussion is henceforth guided by leaders’ thought-provoking questions, people’s observations, and promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Leaders begin with open-ended questions to draw people into the discussion, then follow with directed questions to help people focus personally on the topic. Leaders then allow each person to enter into the discussion and share their individual perspectives and experience. In so doing, leaders allow God the Holy Spirit to enlighten and draw people to the His Word. It is during group discussions that people *discover* the truth of His Word.

Finally, leaders clearly articulate God's revealed truth by distilling and summarizing each discussion. During this process, leaders acknowledge comments made by people during the discussion that align with revealed truth. This affirms people's participation in the discovery process.

This process of reading scripture, exploration, and summary repeats until all supporting passages are covered.

At the end of each session, leaders summarize the key biblical truths taught by scripture on the topic. During this time, leaders weave the Gospel message into the final summary. This will help people understand that Jesus is the focus of the New and Old Testament.

Meeting Activities

Most people like consistency and predictability when it comes to public settings. The lack thereof causes people to feel uncertain and even anxious. To assuage these concerns, Bible discussion groups adhere to a standardized format.

The Bible discussion group format is welcoming and inviting. People are acknowledged and invited to engage in the discussion at their own pace. The Rules of Engagement (see below) ensure that all members are treated with the utmost respect.

The Bible discussion group format is also structured. The meeting opens with an introduction that provides the context and focus of the meeting. This is followed by group discussion that is prompted by leaders to draw people into the discussion. Finally, the meeting closes with a summary presented by leaders that builds on the content of the discussion and the central truths taught by scripture.

The activities enumerated below serve as a checklist for leaders as they prepare for and lead each session.

Pre-Meeting Activities:

- Email people in the days leading up to the meeting to remind them of the date, time, and location of the meeting. Include a brief description of the topic or question being discussed.

Meeting Activities:

- Arrive early to the meeting.
 - Arrange the room. Place chairs around a circular or rectangular table so that people are facing each other. Provide additional chairs for newcomers.
 - Distribute handouts (see Appendix 2), pens and Bibles around the table.
 - Adjust lighting and thermostats as needed.
 - Optionally provide beverages and snacks.
- When people arrive and are seated, open the meeting.
 - Welcome people, especially newcomers.
 - Briefly reiterate the purpose of Bible discussion groups.
 - Briefly reiterate the rules of engagement. (see below)
 - Introduce the topic for the session.
- For each supporting scripture passage ...
 - Read the passage and extra-biblical materials.
 - Ask questions and lead the discussion.
 - After discussing each scripture passage, summarize the principles taught by the passage as it relates to the topic.
- At the end of the meeting ...

- Provide a final summary of the scriptural truths taught by God’s Word as it relates to the topic.
- Weave the Gospel message into the final summary.
- Encourage people to stay after the meeting to engage with each other.

Post-Meeting Activities:

- Pray for the people in the group. Pray specifically for each person’s needs.

When Bible discussion groups are first launched, the format of the first two sessions deviates from the standard format outlined above. During these first two sessions, leaders introduce people to the Bible while soliciting questions for topic selection.

Activities for these first two sessions include:

- Present the purpose of Bible discussion groups.
- Present the rules of engagement (see below).
- Present the format of a typical session.
- Solicit the group for questions.
- Present an overview of the Bible.

Group questions are solicited anonymously. Leaders distribute 3x5 cards for people to write their questions. After the second session, leaders compile a list of questions and distribute them to the group in the third session. This list serves in the selection of topics that the group will discuss in the following sessions.

Given that Bible discussion groups are Bible-centered, a brief overview of the Bible is necessary during the first two sessions. This overview provides people with a helpful background of the history, content, accuracy, and trustworthiness of the Bible. A two-part curriculum is provided [HERE](#).^[1]

Engaging Questions

We have all experienced the arresting power of a great question. Great questions catch us off-guard and compel us to think deeply. Ultimately, they evoke a thoughtful response.

In addition to being a master storyteller, Jesus was a master inquirer. His questions were socially and religiously jarring. They caused people of His day to wrestle with and come to terms with what they believed and how their beliefs align with God’s truth.

Jesus’ mastery of asking engaging questions is best illustrated in Luke 9:18b-21 (NLT).

*¹⁸ Only his disciples were with him, and he asked them, “**Who do people say I am?**”*

¹⁹ “Well,” they replied, “some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other ancient prophets risen from the dead.”

*²⁰ Then he asked them, “**But who do you say I am?**”*

Peter replied, “You are the Messiah sent from God!”

*²¹ Jesus warned his disciples not to tell anyone **who he was**.*

(Emphasis added)

¹ <https://mainstreamapologetics.org/profile/sitepad-data/uploads/2023/07/LESSON-1-The-BIBLE-7-10-2023-Published.pdf>

In verses 18-19 of this passage, Jesus began by asking the disciples an open-ended, leading question, “**Who do people say I am?**” By asking an impersonal, non-threatening question, Jesus wanted to make it easy for all the disciples to join the discussion. This question quickly evoked a response from each of the disciples. They simply reported what they heard from the crowds about Jesus’ identity.

Jesus delves deeper in verse 20 by asking the disciples a more direct question, “**Who do you say I am?**” By doing so, Jesus was trying to engage the disciples on a personal level. He was trying to challenge them. Peter, often impetuous, was the only disciple to respond. Emphatically and unreservedly, he acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God. Luke does not record the response of the other disciples.

Personal questions narrow the field. They force people to come to terms with what they believe, not what others believe. Going public with what a person believes has risks. It exposes people's doubts and insecurities.

Finally, Jesus’ inquiry culminates in verse 21 where He affirmed Peter’s observation by asking the disciples not to reveal His true identity. In effect, he was answering the question, “**Who do I claim to be?**” As the incarnation of God’s truth, Jesus was revealing His true identity, God’s appointed Messiah.

This strategy employed by Jesus of narrowing or honing the discussion illustrates the effectiveness of moving from impersonal questions to personal questions, and ultimately to God’s revealed truth. We want people to come to terms with what they believe in response to God’s Word, not what others believe.

How does this systematic method of inquiry apply to Bible discussion groups?

With Bible discussion groups, impersonal, open-ended questions are asked after the topic is introduced. This gives people the opportunity to quickly join the discussion without personal disclosure or embarrassment.

“How does our culture view this topic? Why?”

Then, scripture is presented to enable people to hear and interact with God’s Word. It is at this time that people discover the truths of God’s Word through the use of directed questions.

“What does scripture teach about this topic?”

Finally, people are challenged personally by “you” questions. These are asked at the end of the final summary and/or during the presentation of each scripture passage.

“Where do you stand on this topic given God’s Word and the cultural views we discussed earlier?”

Personal questions invite people to come to terms with what they believe and why. It also acknowledges that with many issues faced in our modern culture, there will be distinct differences between the ever-changing cultural views and the timeless truths of God’s Word. The challenge presented in “you” questions is that people are caught in the middle of these disparate views. This creates dissonance that pushes people toward resolution. People are faced with the questions: “Who is the ultimate authority in my life?” “Who gets to live in my head and my heart and influence my beliefs and actions?”

Appendix 3 provides practical suggestions on how to formulate engaging questions.

Rules of Engagement

One of the biggest challenges in our highly polarized society is to engender a sense of civility and respect for others. We want the discussion to ultimately converge on the truths of God's Word, not on popular or personal opinion. We want the discussion to be constructive and non-combative. Modeling civility and respect for others is the responsibility of leaders and participants alike.

The *Rules of Engagement* (a.k.a. codes of conduct, ground rules, discussion guidelines) help to set the tone of our interactions with group members. These rules serve as safeguards or guard rails for the discussion. They ensure all participants understand what is expected as they interact with one another. Ultimately, they ensure the discussion stays on-topic and focused on God's Word.

Rules of Engagement are articulated as often as necessary. They are articulated when a Bible discussion group is first launched. They are articulated when someone joins the discussion group. Finally, they are articulated whenever the Rules of Engagement are violated.

Suggested Rules of Engagement include:

- **Respect:** It is paramount that participants respect each other regardless of their differing views. Combative discussion and debate are not permitted.
- **Focus:** Keeping the discussion on topic is essential. Avoiding alternate topics, rabbit trails, and personal tangents is critical to the success of the discussion.
- **Voluntary:** Voluntary participation ensures that the discussion is a safe place, thereby allowing participants to engage at their own pace.
- **Brevity:** Providing an opportunity for everyone to participate is important to the life of the group. No single person should dominate the discussion.
- **Privacy:** Privacy is essential in establishing trust within the group. Asking personal questions of one another is discouraged.
- **No Counseling:** Bible discussion groups are not therapy sessions. Offering counsel or personal advice to one another is discouraged.

Rules of Engagement provide a safety net for all participants. Knowing the leader upholds his/her commitment to civility and respect creates an environment that leads to life change for all members.

Managing Distractors

Perhaps the biggest challenge for leaders is to keep the discussion focused. Failure to do so erodes people's confidence in the leader's ability to guide the discussion for the benefit of all members. Therefore, leaders must manage people who distract and take the discussion off-topic.

The following archetypes characterize group distractors:

- **Hijackers** are those people who take the discussion on a different track, e.g., unrelated topic, personal/spiritual struggle. They have an ulterior agenda regardless of the group's topic.
- **Rabbits** are those people who take the discussion on seemingly related tangents. They hop from one topic to a related topic to another related topic, creating a rabbit trail.
- **Hogs** are those people who dominate the discussion. They love to talk.

- **Debaters** are those people who challenge and argue with others. They want to prove a point. They want to be right.
- **Counselors** are those people who give personal advice to others. They are compelled to try and solve people's problems.
- **Meddlers** are those people who ask uncomfortable, personal questions of others. They are more focused on people's private issues than the topic being discussed.

Appendix 4 provides practical suggestions on how to manage distractors.

End Game

The ultimate goal of Bible discussion groups is to have people come to faith and assimilate into the life of the local church. To this end, leaders should encourage everyone in the group to consider their next steps as the Bible discussion group draws to a close.

During the life of the Bible discussion group, relationships are built, and trust is established among members. It is vital that group members stay connected and not "slip through the cracks."

Leaders may suggest one of the following next steps:

- Attend church services
- Join a life group or Bible study
- Join a serving group
- Join another Bible discussion group
- Enter into a friend/mentor relationship with someone in the group

These next steps provide a pathway for people to stay connected as they journey on their spiritual pathways.

Summary of Distinctives

This section provides a summary of Bible discussion group distinctives.

- **Speaks to All Ages and Worldviews**

Since the turn of the 21st century, religious affiliation has declined exponentially, especially among Millennials (1981-96).^{[2][3][4]} Due to the rise of Modernism and Postmodernism in the 20th century, a wide range of approaches must be taken to communicate the truths of God's Word to each generational cohort. Modern approaches such as lifestyle and friendship evangelism have augmented traditional approaches. These modern approaches involve building trusting relationships where the Gospel can be shared as opportunities arise. Whereas traditional approaches involve declaring God's Word from pulpits and street corners (e.g., Billy Graham

² Why America's 'nones' don't identify with a religion, Pew Research, August 8, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion>.

³ Millennials increasingly are driving growth of nones, Pew Research, May 12, 2015, By Michael Lipka, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones>.

⁴ Millennials' Religiosity Amidst the Rise of the Nones, Gallup, October 29, 2019, by Frank Newport, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/267920/millennials-religiosity-amidst-rise-nones.aspx>.

crusades). The former approach appeals to people who do not believe in a god (secularists) while the latter appeals to people who generally believe in God (traditionalists). This principle of reaching people at their specific point of need is articulated by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 where he was willing to identify with his audience's frame of reference and speak in terms his audience would understand and act upon.

- **Meets People Where They are on Their Spiritual Journey**

Secular people are rapidly distancing themselves from the church as they continue to reject the fundamental doctrines and practices of the Christian faith. Therefore, Jesus' imperative of *going* and *seeking* people (Matthew 28:19, Luke 19:10), impels the church to move toward people and meet them where they are, not expect them to come to church (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). Effectively, seculars are *gone*, and the church must *go to* them. This requires us to proactively build ministries outside the church, not just inside the church. This also requires us to build caring relationships with people outside the church.

- **Complements Traditional Church Ministries**

Bible discussion groups are intentionally designed to help people *come to* faith through a process of hearing, discovering, and deciding. Whereas traditional Bible studies and classes are design to help people *grow* in their faith. We need to be reminded that people far from God typically have a casual interest in Christianity and are interested in gaining a basic understanding of Christian beliefs. Bible discussion groups give people space to explore and discover God's Word at their own pace, on their own terms.

- **Addresses People's Concerns and Questions**

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 the selection of discussion topics for each session.

- **Encourages Relational Bridge Building**

People are more willing to attend a Bible discussion group if someone they know and trust personally invites and accompanies them such as believers. 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. They also forge a connection between the person invited and someone trained who can speak to their questions and concerns.

- **Creates an Inviting and Safe Environment for Discussion**

Bible discussion groups create an environment where people feel welcomed and accepted regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey. This is accomplished through voluntary participation, rules of engagement, and location neutrality. Voluntary participation is summarized by the mantra, "*You can come and just listen. You will never be put on the spot to answer questions, read, pray, participate, or make a commitment. It is a safe place to explore God's Word.*" Rules of Engagement ensure that all people are treated with the utmost respect. Finally, location neutrality provides an environment where people can be themselves and not feel out of place.

- **Meets in Neutral Locations**

Generally, Bible discussion groups meet in neutral locations, i.e., locations where people feel comfortable meeting and participating such as neighborhood homes, senior centers, college campuses, coffee houses, workplaces, etc. The overarching goal is to select locations where people are willing to come and be themselves.

- **Serves Both New Believers and People Far from God**

The ideal composition of Bible discussion groups is a mix of new believers and non-believers. Like non-believers, new believers have questions about God's Word. They too struggle with many of the same *sticking points* as non-believers regarding Christian doctrine and church practices. They too need to be grounded in God's Word. The composition of new believers and non-believers establishes a common ground for both groups to explore God's Word together.

- **Utilizes Questions to Guide Discussion**

The primary purpose of Bible discussion groups is to help people discover God's Word by means of *guided discussion*. It is through dialogue, not monologue, that people learn from the shared experiences and insights of others. Leaders guide the discussion by asking engaging, thought-provoking questions that direct group discussion toward biblical truths. As people hear the truths of God's Word, they are challenged to think critically and compelled to respond decisively.

- **Challenges People to Come to Terms with What They Believe and Why**

Through the use of open-ended questions about our culture and directed questions about scripture passages, leaders help people understand the dichotomy between secular worldviews and the biblical worldview of God's Word. This creates a dissonance as they are *caught in the middle* of these disparate worldviews. Finally, through the use of personal questions, leaders help people come to terms with what they believe and why.

- **Informs Pastoral Team and Elders**

Feedback from Bible discussion group leaders provides the pastoral team and elders with insights into the common needs and concerns of new believers in the church, and objections of people far from God. This feedback is useful in the selection of sermon series topics and oversight of church ministries to ensure that the church is effective at reaching all people groups with the truths of God's Word.

- **Models Orderliness and Respect**

Orderly, respectful discussion is essential to the success of Bible discussion groups. Orderliness is accomplished through managing *distractors* and establishing Rules of Engagement. Distractors are those people who take the discussion off-topic. These include Hijackers, Rabbits, Hogs, Debaters, Counselors, and Meddlers. Leaders manage distractors to ensure the discussion stays on-topic so everyone can participate. Likewise, leaders institute Rules of Engagement to ensure that everyone in the group is treated with respect. Rules of Engagement ensure civility, individual privacy, voluntary participation, brevity of response, and focus on God's Word.

- **Encourages People to Take Next Steps**

When Bible discussion groups draw to a close it is important for people to stay connected and not "slip through the cracks." Leaders encourage people to connect with a church ministry, serving group, small group, or with someone from the discussion group.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Guide for Selecting Extra-Biblical Resources

Reliable extra-biblical resources enrich discussion. Often, they provide the necessary background people need to understand biblical passages *in-context*. The primary sources of extra-biblical resources include (1) study bible notes, (2) historical information, (3) scientific findings, and (4) polling data.

Study Bible Notes

Study Bibles are the first stop for scholarly resources. They are available from Christian Bible publishers for a variety of translations such as NLT, NIV, and ESV.

Study Bible notes are authored by respected Christian theologians and scholars. They provide a foundational exegesis of God's truth and serve as a great companion to God's Word.

Historical Information

Historical information is perhaps the most important information when interpreting the Bible. The writers of the Old and New Testaments assumed the readers of their time understood the context in which they wrote. For readers in the 21st century, historical information is vital when interpreting scripture. They inform modern readers with what the original audiences understood within the context of religious and local laws, cultural norms, and language idioms. These extra-biblical resources help bridge the gaps between original and modern audiences. ^[5] ^[6] ^[7] ^[8]

Scientific Findings

Scientific findings are useful when discussing a topic that relates to the natural world. This approach is predicated on the belief that the Bible and science are in harmony and therefore describe the same reality. ^[9]

The use of scientific findings is a strategy known as *evidential apologetics* where rigorous, empirical methods provide evidence that validates Biblical truth. When engaging with Modernists, scientific evidence corroborates the truths of God's Word.

The Mainstream Apologetics website which employs *evidential apologetics* methods is a good starting point. The website provides 200+ articles and 350+ references to useful apologetics resources. ^[10]

⁵ "Poet & Peasant" and "Through Peasant Eyes," Kenneth E. Bailey, Eerdmans, ISBN 0-80281947-8.

⁶ "Jesus, The Middle Eastern Storyteller," Gary M. Burge, Zondervan, ISBN 978-0-310-28045-3.

⁷ "Finding the Lost Cultural Keys to Luke 15." Kenneth E. Bailey, Concordia, ISBN 0-570-04563-0.

⁸ "Manners and Customs of the Bible," James M. Freeman, Logos International, ISBN 0-88270-022-7.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas was one of the first Christian apologists in the 1200's that believed in the harmony of Science and Christian Theology. R. C. Sproul says of Thomas Aquinas in his book *Defending the Truth*, "The epitome of rationality, argued Aquinas, is recognizing that science drives us conclusively and compellingly toward the existence of God."

¹⁰ Mainstream Apologetics website (mainstreamapologetics.org).

Polling Data

Lastly, polling data provided by Pew Research, Gallup, the Barna Group, and other reliable pollsters are helpful when trying to understand cultural beliefs and trends. Pollsters offer a wide range of data on various topics. These data help people distinguish between fact and opinion.

Appendix 2: Handouts

Handouts are an essential communication tool for leaders. They serve as a written record of the content discussed, as well as a place for people to take notes.

A suggested outline for handouts is provided below.

<p>Topic Title: <i>Brief description of the topic</i></p> <p>Background Information: <i>Blank space for note-taking</i></p> <p>Passage 1: <i>Scripture text and reference</i> <i>Background information</i> <i>Blank space for note-taking</i></p> <p>Passage 2: <i>Repeat ...</i></p> <p>Topic Recap: <i>List of key takeaways</i> <i>Blank space for note-taking</i></p> <p>References: <i>List of references</i></p>

Scripture texts are provided in handouts to assist people new to the Bible who may have difficulty looking up scriptures.

Appendix 3: Art of Formulating Great Questions

Mastering the art of formulating great questions is essential for leaders. This is an art that leaders develop over time as they prepare for and lead groups.

Great questions help focus the discussion on the key truths revealed in God's Word. They also draw people into the discussion.

The primary function of asking questions is to guide group discussion toward biblical truths. As leaders prepare for each session, they begin by enumerating the biblical truths they want people to discover. Leaders then *work backwards* to formulate questions that will guide group discussion toward the desired biblical truths.

Types of Questions

Questions are essential for inquiry. They facilitate exploration and discovery. Most importantly, they compel people to think critically and respond decisively.

Questions are used in Bible discussion groups to discern what is true and false. Specifically, questions juxtapose biblical truths with worldly falsehoods, so people can identify disparities and ascertain truth.

Information Seeking Questions

Information seeking questions seek to uncover contextual information that is relevant to a topic.

Information seeking questions begin with the following words:

- What → objects
- Which → objects
- How → methods
- Where → places
- When → times
- Who → persons

Information seeking questions are asked in Bible discussion groups to explore the world and scripture. As applied to the world, the domain of answers is generally broad because of our world's vastness and range of diversity. As applied to scripture, the domain of answers is generally narrow because of the constraints of the scripture being explored.

Purpose Seeking Questions

Purpose seeking questions seek to uncover the motives or reasons that are relevant to the topic.

Purpose seeking questions begin with the word WHY.

- Why → motives, reasons

Purpose seeking questions require people to go deeper than information seeking questions. They reveal the purposes behind information seeking questions.

Yes/No Questions

Yes/No questions are fundamentally binary. They require either a yes or no answer. They require people to take a stand when answering with a definitive "yes" or "no." Yes/no questions are also useful when validating conclusions.

Anatomy of a Question

Based on research in the field of behavioral sciences^{[11][12]}, framing questions properly is essential. Proper questions are questions people want to answer. Whereas people are reluctant to answer questions that are framed improperly.

So, what distinguishes proper from improper questions?

When it comes to questions, *subjects* and *objects* play an important role. An example follows.

Who did you meet the other day?
I met Mark.

¹¹ "How to Ask Great Questions", Harvard Business Review, Leslie K. John, May 2018,

¹² "Object VS Subject Questions in English – What's the Difference", Jennifer Nascimento.

(Note: subjects are double underlined, objects are single underlined.)

In this example, ‘who’ is the object of the question, and ‘Mark’ is the object of the answer. And ‘you’ is the subject of the question, and ‘I’ is the subject of the answer.

When it comes to WHAT and WHY questions, making ‘you’ the subject of a WHY question can put people in an uncomfortable position.

Why do you believe ...?

Why do you think our culture ...?

Behavioral scientists have found that WHY/YOU questions put people on the defensive. This is because WHY questions put people on the spot to state the rationale for their underlying convictions or actions. In general, people are unwilling to share this information in a group setting. Whereas, making others or the Bible the subject of a WHY question is safe.

In the previous example, the question can be asked in a less intimidating manner.

What were the contributing factors that led each of you to believe ...?

Rephrasing the question in this manner allows people to identify the contributing factors that have shaped their beliefs, not the rationale for why they believe.

In most cases, asking people to share their motives or reasons is unnecessary. After discussing cultural worldviews and biblical truths, people are challenged to process these disparate views in the privacy of their minds. On occasion, people will voluntarily divulge publicly why they believe. This may pave the way for others to share as well.

To reiterate, God’s Word should be the primary subject of discussion. By way of contrast, culture is also the subject of discussion. This puts people “in the middle” to wrestle with these disparate worldviews. Ultimately, people will have to decide what they are willing to believe and why.

Safe Questions

Ice Breaker Questions

- If you could ask God three questions, what would they be?
- What three things in the Bible do you find hard to understand?

Open-Ended Questions:

- What does our culture (people, media) say about [topic]?
- Why does our culture (people, media) say ... about [topic]?
- What are the implications of ...?

Directed Questions:

- What does this passage/Jesus say about [topic]?
- How does this passage/Jesus describe [topic]?
- Why does this passage/Jesus say ... about [topic]?
- What principles/truths are revealed in this passage?

Personal Questions:

- How do you respond to these cultural and biblical views regarding [topic]?
- What are your takeaways from this passage?

- How does this passage help shape your views about [topic]?

Appendix 4: Managing Distractors

First and foremost, leaders should protect the interests and purpose of the group and not enable or cooperate with Hijackers, Rabbits, Hogs, Debaters, Counselors, or Meddlers. Discussion should always be focused on the session topic, not individuals in the group.

When confronting distractors, leaders should always acknowledge their contributions. Leaders should always be tactful and courteous, but firm in their commitment to follow the Rule of Engagement.

If a situation persists with a distractor, leaders should take the distractor aside after the group discussion and emphasize the Rules of Engagement. If the distractor does not agree with the rules, leaders should suggest that the distractor find another group or not participate depending of the severity of the violation.

The Hijacker

Hijacker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hijackers take the discussion on a different track, e.g., <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ unrelated topic, or ○ personal/spiritual struggle (with full back story).
Guideline Violation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This violates the Focus guideline. The discussion is taken off-topic.
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes, the questions asked by leaders are so open-ended that people don't know how to respond.
What's at Stake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If this situation is allowed to continue, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Other participants will lose focus of the main topic. ○ Prepared participants will feel cheated/abandoned and that their preparation was a waste of time.
Suggested Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform Hijackers that they raise some great points and suggest the alternate topic be discussed after the group discussion or as the topic of a future meeting. • “John, you mention some great points. However, they are a bit off-topic. I suggest we discuss them after the group discussion. I invite others who are interested to join us. “

The Rabbit

Rabbit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rabbits take the discussion on tangents. • Rabbits hop from one topic to a related topic to another related topic ... paving a rabbit trail. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Before leaders know it, the discussion is well off-topic. ○ Unlike the Hijacker, the drift off-topics is very subtle. ○ Leaders must be on their guard. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Theological rabbit trails or anomalies.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Unnecessarily deep discussions on a single topic.
Guideline Violation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This violates the Focus guideline. The discussion gradually veers toward an entirely different topic, (i.e., in small steps or hops that seem related to the previous topic).
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If this situation is allowed to continue, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Other participants will become distracted and lose track of the main topic. ○ In the case of theological or deep rabbit trails, participants may feel a lack of knowledge on the topic and feel they are out of their depth.
Suggested Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I appreciate everyone’s interest in these related topics, but time doesn’t permit us to discuss them in as much detail as we’d like. I suggest we discuss them after this group discussion or schedule them for a future meeting.” ● “John, I appreciate your depth of knowledge on this topic, but time doesn’t permit us to go into this much depth on this topic. If you’d like to continue this discussion, I suggest we get together after this group discussion. “

The Hog

Hog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hogs dominate the discussion. They love to talk. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hogs feel compelled to answer every question. ○ Hogs are uncomfortable with silence. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ want to fill the void presented by others ▪ don’t understand that people need time to think before they can respond ○ Hogs may be exceedingly needy people who feel their issues are more important. ○ Hogs may just want to demonstrate their knowledge.
Guideline Violation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This violates the Brevity guideline – keep it brief to allow time for everyone to share.
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If this situation is allowed to continue, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The discussion degenerates from a <i>many-to-many</i> discussion into a <i>monologue</i>. ○ Other participants will feel that their contributions are less valuable than the Hog’s. Or other participants will follow suit and feel entitled to give a monologue. ○ Other participants will become disengaged and feel left out. ● Leaders want to make sure that all participants feel that their contribution is equally valued.
Suggested Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “John, you certainly have a lot to share on this topic. Thanks for your contribution. However, we want to give others an opportunity to share.”“ ● “John, you certainly have many challenges in your life. We will pray for you are the end of our group discussion time.”
Note	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Alternatively, provide time at the end of the group discussion (5-10 min) for people to share their stories and prayer requests.

The Debater

Debater	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debaters challenge and argue with other participants to prove they are right. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Debaters may feel superior to the other participants (aka, Know-It-All). ○ Debaters may not be tactful and may not know how to politely disagree with other participants. ○ Debaters may disrespect other participants and intimidate others into keeping silent.
Guideline Violation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This violates the Respect guideline – other participants are at different places on their spiritual journey. Group discussion is not the place for confrontation or challenge.
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This situation can escalate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ from disagreement. ○ to debate (proving right/wrong). ○ to attack (total disrespect).
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is the most dangerous situation for a group. • If this situation is allowed to continue ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The safety of the group is jeopardized, and the Debater robs other participants of a safe place to share. ○ The other participants will feel belittled/offended. ○ Leaders will lose the respect of the group.
Suggested Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders want to confront the Debater immediately and reassure other participants that the group is a safe place to share. • "John, this is not a debate. This is a safe place for everyone to share." • Leaders must meet with Debaters after the group discussion to remind Debaters that other participants are at different places on their spiritual journey and that they may not be as knowledgeable. Tell Debaters that disrespect will not be tolerated.

The Counselor

Counselor	Counselors want to give personal advice to other participants in the group. They want to solve other people's problems.
Guideline Violation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This violates the No Counseling guideline – no one is in a position to give advice.
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counselors may feel that they have all the answers because they have had a similar experience, or feel that they are more mature, or see a problem that needs to be fixed. • Counselors generally ask questions of people that are highly personal and very inappropriate in group settings.
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's at stake is the personal privacy of participants. Especially newer Christians are vulnerable to this type of person because they want to get it "right." • If this situation is allowed to continue ...

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The participant being counseled will feel uncomfortable and embarrassed because they are singled out as having problems that need to be fixed.
Suggested Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Leaders want to make sure the personal privacy of participants is not violated. ● "Jenny, we appreciate your concerns for Mary, but this is not a place where we want to counsel people. We can certainly encourage Mary, but please, no counseling."

The Meddler

Meddler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meddlers are those people who ask uncomfortable, personal questions of others. They are more focused on the private lives of people than the topic being discussed.
Guideline Violation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This violates the Privacy guideline by asking personal questions of others.
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meddlers are compelled to inquire further when someone shares a personal story.
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What's at stake is the personal privacy of participants. ● If this situation is allowed to continue ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The participant being questioned will feel uncomfortable and embarrassed.
Suggested Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Leaders need to emphasize that privacy is essential and that personal questions are inappropriate in group settings. ● "Jenny, we appreciate your concerns for Mary, but this is not a place where we focus on personal issues but rather the topic of discussion."



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