

How to Lead a Bible Discussion¹ (Discussion-Centered Learning)

Introduction: Teaching plays a critical role in the health of both home and church:

ESV **Deuteronomy 6:6-7** ... these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children ...

ESV **Matthew 28:19-20a** ... make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

How can we best cause others to learn and grow in the Lord, whether as parents teaching children or as teachers in the body of Christ? (Rhetorical). The most effective teaching method for your family, small groups, and small churches is arguably found in more of a discussion format. It might be called a one-another teaching style:

ESV **Colossians 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another ...

Example: When Jesus was with small groups, He was constantly asking questions to the people around Him (and it wasn't because Jesus didn't know the answer). There are over 100 recorded questions asked by Jesus in the Gospels. Questions made up the core of Jesus' teaching method. It has been said that Jesus "came not to answer questions, but to ask them; not to settle men's souls, but to provoke them."²

Example: Paul spoke all night to the church at Troas (Acts 20:1-11). This might appear to be the mother of all sermons, but it wasn't. The text states that Paul "talked with" them (ESV, Acts 20:7), not "at" them, and that he "conversed with" them (ESV, Acts 20:11). This was not an eight-hour monolog. Paul did not preach; he conversed.

ESV **Acts 20:7** On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.

- **"talked with" (20:7):** From *dielegeto*, the lexical form of *dialegomai* (transliterated dialog). According to the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, the primary meaning of *dialegomai* is "to conduct a discussion." In other places, *dialegomai* is rendered as "reasoned" and "reasoning."³

¹ You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.com/NTRF titled, "How to Lead a Bible Discussion."

² HH Horne, *Jesus the Master Teacher*, 51.

³ Acts 18:4 and 19:8

- **“speech” (20:7):** From *logos*; although it can mean speech, it also simply refers to talking. Paul was certainly the teacher/authority, and had something definite to say. However, it appears that he didn’t use the monolog method to deliver his message, because a few verses later, the ESV states that Paul “conversed” with them:

ESV Acts 20:11 ... Paul ... conversed with them a long while, until daybreak ...

- **“conversed” (20:11):** As can readily be seen, converse is related to conversation. The underlying Greek is *homileo*, “to speak with someone.” *Homileo* is a virtual synonym with *dialegomai*. What happened that night was clearly more of a discussion led by Paul, not a monolog.

Paul undoubtedly did most of the speaking that night; however, it was not an uninterrupted sermon as if broadcast on the radio. Thus, even a time set aside for teaching by an apostle was to some degree discussion oriented.

What advantages of one another, discussion-centered learning can you think of?

1. Leads people to discover truth for themselves.
2. Equips people to think for themselves as they analyze the text, figure out what it means and apply it to their own lives. In short, it develops critical-thinking skills.
3. Holds the participant’s interest and attention. By way of contrast, monologues can be very boring & the listener’s minds often wander far away ...
4. Helps participants better remember what they learn since they discovered the truth for themselves in the biblical text.
5. Exposes the learners to the ideas & insights of other group members. It also allows the Holy Spirit more freedom to dynamically speak through the contributions of all present.
6. Gives the teacher feedback, allowing him to evaluate what people are really thinking, revealing their misunderstandings, their needs and their maturity levels.
7. Allows people to challenge the teacher’s presentation, giving the teacher a chance to correct wrong thinking. Truth is then discovered corporately rather than in a vacuum of isolation. It is good for believers to study the Bible together.
8. Frees the teacher from having to package his research into a polished preaching performance. This saves a tremendous amount of time.

D.A. Blight: “... if students are to learn to think, they must be placed in situations where they have to do so. The situations in which they are obliged to think are those in which they have to answer questions because questions demand an active response ...”⁴

Insight: The discussion method takes longer than the lecture method to cover the same material, but learning is greatly increased.

⁴ David Norrington, *To Preach or not to Preach?* (Omaha: Ekklesia Press, 1996), 124. Blight is an expert on teaching methods.

I. Three Types of Discussion Questions

There are three different types/categories of questions. The leader of an effective Bible discussion will want to be sure to use all three types. **The three questions below, based on Romans 1:16, illustrate the three different types (kinds) of questions. Analyze them to see if you can discern the three types of questions.**

ESV **Romans 1:16** I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

1. What can we learn about the gospel from this verse? — *This type of question deals with what the text actually says (“Just the facts, Ma’am”). The answer to this type of question is obvious from the verse itself. Type: **OBSERVATION**.*
2. Why is salvation first for the Jew? — *This category of question deals with what the text means. Questions that begin with “why” tend to clarify. Anytime one has to go outside of the verse under study to answer a question, that question is interpretive. Type: **INTERPRETATION**.*
3. Following Paul’s example, how should we feel about the gospel? — *This type of question deals with what the text means for us today. The first two types of questions (above) constitute the “what.” They are content oriented. The third type of question constitutes the “so what.” It was to do with life change. Type: **APPLICATION**.*

Test: How would you categorize each of the questions below (based on Romans 1:16)?

1. Of what was Paul “not ashamed”? *observation*
2. What does the word “gospel” mean? *interpretation*
3. What is the gospel message? *interpretation*
4. Why was Paul not ashamed of the gospel? *observation*
5. From what does the gospel bring “salvation”? *interpretation*
6. What did Paul mean by “everyone”? *observation*
7. Why is salvation first to the Jew? *interpretation*
8. What is a “Greek”? *interpretation*
9. What would it mean for us to be “ashamed” of the gospel today? *application*
10. In what should our hope of salvation be grounded? *Application*

II. Asking Good Questions

1. Why is it important for the teacher be prepared by first studying the text before leading a discussion?*

- If the teacher does not have the correct answers, the Bible study will likely degenerate into a session of pooled ignorance.
- Teaching via the discussion method is not a way to avoid personal preparation. The teacher must be prepared to answer all his own questions.
- The teacher is the expert on the text being studied by virtue of the fact that he has spent hours studying it.

*Observe what the text says, do word studies, interpret it, read commentaries, and apply it to his own life. How to do this is another study all by itself.

Note: Teaching via the discussion method is not pooled ignorance. It is imperative that the teacher know his stuff. However, rather than merely spouting information, the teacher seeks to give people the joy of discovering truth for themselves.

2. How is the motto “never tell when you can ask” consistent with the discussion teaching method? The teacher’s job is to help people discover truth for themselves, and to help them to draw their own conclusions by asking the right questions. The general idea is to give the answer only after you’ve asked a question the group cannot answer correctly or fully, even after you tried to guide them to discover the answer.

3. Why is it a good discipline to write out all discussion questions in advance?

- To not write out all your questions in advance of the meeting is to come to the meeting unprepared. The weakest ink is stronger than the strongest memory.
- Think creatively. Be inquisitive. Ask your own questions of the text. Don’t assume anything. Write out every possible question and then thin it down to be best and most relevant ones. This is an important step in studying the text beforehand.
- It is impossible to dream up quality discussion questions on the fly, as you are teaching.

4. Why is it helpful to imagine how people will respond to a question, and then revise the question if necessary?

- This is where knowing people well will pay off. You should almost be able to hear how they will answer your questions as you are writing them out. If you don’t like the answer you imagine, re-write the question!
- When actually teaching your lesson, it is good to try to incorporate someone’s answer to a previous question into your next follow-up question. Simply mentally alter your written-out question to instead use the respondent’s own words. If you have correctly anticipated an answer, your next written question should logically follow that answer, and be easily modified to use his own wording. People appreciate hearing their own thoughts being used.

5. Why is it critical to arrange your questions in a logical sequence? It brings order and discipline to the discussion. You are not randomly asking questions merely for the sake of asking questions. Your objective is to cause other believers to interact with the Scriptures, guide them to think about what God's Word really means, and then to apply it to their own lives.

- Arrange your questions in a way that directs people's thinking. There should be a progression of thought that takes the group from the initial observation of the text all the way through to a thorough understanding and a correct application of its truth.
- The best way to logically arrange your questions is to simply follow the word order & progression of ideas found in the sentences of the text under study. Don't jump all over the passage. Systematically work through the verses, dealing with words & concepts as they occur in the text. Follow the Holy Spirit's outline and you won't have to create your own. In dealing with God's people, most of us are not smart enough to teach anything but the Bible, but we should be smart enough to know not to teach anything else.

- **Logic Example:** Review the test questions (1-10) above for Romans 1:16. They are laid out logically, following the word order of the verse itself.

6. Although your questions will be written out in advance, why should you know them well enough to ask them in a conversational tone, using your natural voice inflection & everyday vocabulary? Otherwise, you will either bumble and fumble or worse yet, sound like a robot as you mechanically read them. Also be aware that questions written out with proper English grammar often do not sound natural when verbalized. Few people speak the way they write. Make your questions real, not stuffy.

7. Launch the discussion of each new paragraph of Scripture* with an observation question (asked just *prior* to having someone read the text).

Example: *Please read Romans 1:16 and tell me, why was Paul not ashamed of the gospel? What purpose is served by asking an observation question first?*

- Doing this will rivet their attention on the text and give them something concrete to look for. It takes their minds out of neutral and puts them in gear.
- Related to the above, always ask someone to read the text aloud for you. This gets others more involved and gives you time to think about what you are going to ask next.
- Since the answer to an observation question is right in the text, such questions are usually "safe" questions with little risk of a person losing face.

*Teach from a version that lays the text out in paragraphs.

8. Once you have asked a quality question, be confident, look at the group, smile, and wait for an answer. Don't be afraid of silence. What is the purpose of quietly and patiently waiting for a response?

- After years of conditioning as pew potatoes, people have to unlearn “sit down and shut up” passive learning. If the group is not used to participation, there will be a hesitancy to speak up. In such cases, the silence itself will put pressure on the group and someone will eventually speak out. If for no other reason, an answer will be given to break the silence.
- Don't be nervous over silence. People need time to think and reflect. Ask the question, smile, and wait patiently for a response. Don't let silence intimidate you.

9. What function do the following type of questions serve: *What else do you see in this verse? Would anyone like to add anything to that? Would you explain your answer more fully? Why do you say that?* Such questions help further the discussion once an answer is given. They are to a discussion like oil is to machinery; they keep everything from grinding to a halt.

- As you do this, keep in mind that you are not asking questions merely for the sake of asking questions. You should have an objective for the lesson clearly in mind and then drive toward it.

10. Why is it helpful to periodically summarize the group's discussion & ideas (reviewing what has been said)? Giving the big picture is like coming up for air.

- It helps keep the discussion on track.
- This also gives the church positive reinforcement as they realize that you truly are listening to their ideas. It will become “their” Bible study instead of just something you prepared.
- Repetition is the key to learning, plus it lets those who are behind (or distracted) catch up.

11. Why is it important to give careful attention to application questions?

- Our goal is to teach people to obey all that Jesus commanded (Mt 28).
- If the “what” (content) does not lead to the “so what” (application), then you have not taught the “what” correctly.
- These are often the hardest questions to formulate, but they are the most important.
- Design your lesson to evoke life change, not just content input. Teaching is not to be a sterile, academic exercise.
- The goal of any teaching in the church must be life-change (transformation).
- Application can often be made by a personal illustration of how you experienced this in action.

- 12. Why should you beware of calling on a specific person to answer interpretive and application questions? Examples:** *Bill, are you saved? Jane, what does the word 'gospel' mean?*
- Difficult questions could easily embarrass or offend someone.
 - Instead, ask such questions to the group as a whole; those who do know the answer will respond.
 - Ask specific person a question only when the answer is blatantly obvious in the text. Observation questions usually fit into this category. **Example:** *Bill, according to Romans 1:16, who is salvation for?*
- 13. Why is it necessary for the teacher to spend time cultivating the ability to ask the right questions?** Teaching really is an art. It is a gift that must be developed. Practice helps.
- The goal of your teaching should be to lead believers in discovering Biblical truth for themselves, and not simply to tell what you (the teacher) have discovered.
 - Once you have prepared and then led a Bible discussion, go back and review how it went. Examine your notes. Make an after-action report. What would you change if you had it to do all over again?

III. Pitfalls to Avoid

ESV **Romans 1:16** I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

1. What pitfall is there to avoid in each of the following deficient questions (based on Romans 1:16)?

a. Was Paul ashamed of the gospel? Such a question is a discussion killer. It is a dead end. You should avoid questions that evoke a "yes/no" response. Instead, ask open-ended questions.

How could the above question be better phrased? Why was Paul not ashamed of the gospel?

b. What are the six great truths that are evident in Romans 1:16? It is unclear as to what you are asking. You are not conducting a mind-reading contest. People will not know what you are looking for.

How could the above question be rephrased? What are some truths that you see in Romans 1:16?

c. *Who got salvation first, who is salvation for, and what is salvation from?* It is too complex because it combines several questions into one.

- Key: Avoid using “and” or “but” in your questions. These two words (and, but) usually introduce another idea.
- KISS = Keep It Simple Somehow. Keep your questions clear.

d. *What aspects of the atonement are evident in Romans 1:16 that are consistent with the Reformers’ concept of soteriology?* Your goal is to communicate, not to impress people with your vocabulary. You should avoid questions that use big words, since you will lose many in your audience.

- Bust twenty-five cent words up into five cent words. Craft questions that are easy to understand.
- Generally, if you use words that come from Anglo-Saxon roots you will be understood by all. Words derived from Latin roots tend to be not readily understood.

e. *According to Romans 1:16, salvation is for everyone who believes. What relationship is there between salvation and speaking in tongues?* This question introduces unnecessary/irrelevant issues. An unnecessary issue will only serve to distract from the real point of the text. Although the study of tongues is good and proper in the right place, it has nothing to do with Paul’s point in Romans 1:16. Stay on target.

2. *What will likely happen if the teacher gets bogged down in minute details of the text, majoring on the minors?* A teacher lacking in judgment who cannot see the forest for the trees can demoralize the group.

- Stick to the text and pace yourself so as to cover the main point of the text and its application.
- Wear a watch. Keep the discussion moving at a reasonable pace.
- When teaching Scripture, try to cover at least one paragraph of the text per lesson. To cover only word per lesson or even just one verse per lesson is to get bogged down into minutia. Perspective will be lost; eisegesis is almost unavoidable.

3. *Why should the teacher show enthusiasm, and avoid being a dullard?*

- There is nothing spiritual about being boring.
- If the class seems lethargic it is probably because you are failing to show your excitement.
- If you are not excited about your lesson, there is almost no way that anyone else will care anything about it.
- Your expectations about the study and the participants will invariably impact the discussion itself, either positively or negatively.
- Some people are just not gifted communicators. If people consistently comment that your teaching is dull, boring or incomprehensible, you may have the wrong ministry. However, do allow time for improvement before you decide never to teach again.

IV. Common Problems

Leading a dynamic Bible discussion is like sailing a ship through changing winds, crashing waves, and strong currents—it takes active piloting. An effective teacher is not merely a facilitator/moderator. He is actively teaching truth through a guided discussion. Common problems to navigate:

1. Chatty Cathy—This refers to a participant who is over responsive, who answers every question before anyone else, or who monopolizes the discussion. Cathy’s close cousin is Mister Know-It-All. How might a teacher handle someone who talks too much? Such a person is high IQ, low EQ. Do not let him take over the session. Ask for a response from a different part of the room, or from a person who hasn’t answered yet.

Speak privately with the “talker.” Sincerely thank him for his enthusiasm and interest, and then enlist his help. Ask him to hold back on his answers to “see if we can get the quieter people to participate.”

2. Sidetrack Sid —This refers to someone who raises topics that are unrelated to the point of the text being studied. Some people’s main “ministry” seems to be trying to get Bible studies off track and onto a side issue. They love nothing more than a good argument, and are good at throwing down the gauntlet. Perhaps they grow bored of the topic at hand, and selfishly introduce a tangent for purposes of personal entertainment. Falling into their trap can be discouraging to everyone else. Don’t chase theological rabbits. How should a teacher respond to an invitation to run down a rabbit trail? Have enough presence of mind to recognize this when it happens. Respond by saying, “That’s an interesting question/issue/point. However, we’ve left our topic. Let’s get back to ...” or “Let’s put that topic on hold for now and discuss it after the study.”

3. Wrong Answers—How can wrong answers be tactfully handled? When someone gives an answer that is just dead wrong, try hard not to embarrass him or put him down. If possible, give some type of positive reinforcement. Appreciate the effort. Rarely will you need to just flat-out tell someone that he is incorrect. Instead, try saying, “I see what you mean ...” or “That’s an interesting point ...” or “What does someone else think about this?” or “I’m not sure I can agree with you” or “I have a hard time agreeing with everything you are saying.” Be sure to talk with the person in private afterwards to help him in his thinking.

Even if some of the answers are wrong, at least you are getting people to think—an accomplishment in and of itself! You don’t necessarily even need to publicly disagree with a wrong answer. Most group members will be discerning enough to know a wrong answer when they hear one. Also, the person who gave the wrong answer will often abandon his position after hearing the view point of the others present.

Steak Example: If you try to pry a bone out of a dog's mouth, he will bite you. But, if you lay a steak down in front of that same dog, he will gladly drop the bone and go after the steak. Truth often has the same effect on people.

4. Hard Questions from the Group—What should you do if someone asks a question that you don't know the answer to? It is not hard to win a game of “stump the dummy.” Don't pretend to be a know-it-all. There is nothing wrong with saying, “I don't know” or “That's such a profound question that any answer I might give would be shallow” or “Let me research that and see what I can find out about it.”

5. Untrained Minds—Thanks to our public educational system, many people don't know how to reason clearly or even read competently. How does teaching by asking questions help students overcome a lack of critical thinking skills? Don't be surprised if people at first respond with totally off the wall (unbiblical/illogical) answers to your questions. Part of your purpose in teaching is to train people to reason well and to think biblically, having the mind of Christ. One of the greatest things you can do as a teacher is to help God's people develop saved thinking.

6. Contentious Carl— Misery loves company. The world is full of miserable people who are quick to throw some of it your way. Hurting people hurt others. What words of wisdom does 2 Timothy 2:23-26 offer about responding to contentious people?

ESV **2 Timothy 2:23-26** Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

V. Philosophy of Teaching

1. You, as teacher, must take responsibility to make sure LEARNING takes place.

- Simply presenting information is not really teaching.
- Teaching has not taken place unless learning has occurred.
- Do whatever it takes to cause people to learn. Review, be animated, use a white board, illustrate with examples, etc.
- One of the best ways to cause learning to take place is by employing the question & answer teaching method (discussion-centered learning).

2. Teach to meet NEEDS in people's lives. Remember, your LESSON does not have a need to be taught. It is the people present who have needs. Teach for life-change. If you can surface a felt need in people's lives, they will be more interested in what you have to say. This can be done by telling a real-life story related to the application.

3. You must have a clear OBJECTIVE in mind when teaching (based on the point of the biblical passage). To help you focus, always be able to boil your lesson down to an irreducible MINIMUM. Be able to state in a sentence or two the main point of the Biblical text being studied. A well-prepared lesson plan is to a teacher what a road map is to a traveler.

4. What example does Ezra 7:10 hold for teachers?

ESV **Ezra 7:10b** Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

5. In general, what can we learn about teaching from 1 Timothy 1:5-6? The goal of proper teaching is love from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith (1:5).

ESV **1 Timothy 1:5-6** The aim of our charge is love that comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion ...

ESV **Titus 2:1** ... teach what accords with sound doctrine.

ESV **Ephesians 4:15** ... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ...

Homework: Take your favorite Bible verse (not book, not chapter, not even paragraph, but one single verse) and prepare to lead the group in a discussion of that one verse. Keep it short. Work up just a few good questions (maybe two observation, two or three interpretation, and two application), think of how to guide the discussion, how to handle any issues that come up and how to end the study. Aim for a 5 to 10-minute discussion, maximum. The entire group will offer any suggestions for improvement after you are done. This is supposed to be fun, not terrifying.

VI. Addendum What To Teach

In this workshop we dealt this how to teach. Now, let's consider what to teach. There are two ways to teach the content of the Bible. One is by topic (or theme). Topical messages deal with biblical themes, such New Covenant Theology, predestination, evangelism, or child training. Topical teachings are targeted to meet perceived needs. The other way is to teach sequentially through a book of the Bible (often called exegetical teaching). Both approaches can be valid and helpful. I do both with

regularity. In my opinion, the proper ratio between the two should be something like 80% Bible book studies and 20% topics. Bible book studies are like the main course of a meal (meat, potatoes, veggies); topical studies more like dessert (really tasty, but ultimately not a diet for a healthy body if that's all you eat). If teaching through a book of the Bible were compared to the regular army, then topical messages are the special forces.

I prefer a majority of my teaching to be book by book because:

- a) A temptation for any teacher is to mostly teach on topics he feels personally comfortable with, or topics that are of special interest to him (hobby horses), while simultaneously avoiding topics that are difficult, intimidating, or controversial. However, when teaching systematically through various books of the Bible, I will deal with the topics the Holy Spirit inspired the Biblical authors to deal with, with the frequency those topics are brought up in Scripture. I will also be forced to deal with topics I otherwise might otherwise avoid.
- b) It won't come as a shock to learn that I am a finite and fallible person. I simply cannot know how everyone in the church is struggling. Even if I did know, I couldn't address everyone's needs through my teaching. I'd be like a pain management physician, which is important, but a better approach is to try to deal with the cause of the pain rather than simply treating symptoms. Teaching through books of the Bible will expose the church to the whole counsel of God.⁵ I prefer to get out of the way and let Jesus be the Great Physician.
- c) Most churches in the USA are under 100 people, so you have a fairly intimate group. If people go to the leadership with personal problems, and then a pastor teaches on those problems, they will naturally assume they are being singled out, ratted out, or have simply provided ammunition for yet another sermon. To avoid this, the leaders might be tempted not to teach on the subject at all, when it really did need to be dealt with anyway. However, if everyone knows that the teacher is committed to simply teaching through a book of the Bible, if that problem comes up in the text, no one can justly accuse the teacher of singling him out.
- d) Unlike the wildly popular celebrity preachers, I'm genuinely not smart enough to craft a clever topical message every week. However, I am smart enough, with the Spirit's help, to develop the messages already laid out in the various books of the Bible (passage by passage). Furthermore, it is often necessary in a topical message to pull texts from multiple places in the Scriptures. In so doing it is extremely easy to unwittingly pull a verse out of context and misapply or misinterpret it (unless one has previously studied the entire book from which that text was drawn). Eisegesis is not as likely to happen when teaching through an entire book of the Bible. And anyway, I

⁵ Orrick, Payne, Fullerton, *Encountering God Through Expository Preaching* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 60-75.

generally prefer the inspired logic of a biblical passage over my own logic in developing topical messages.

- e) Teaching systematically through the Bible has been called “cheating” and “easy.” I freely admit that one benefit of teaching through Bible books is that I don’t have to spend time wondering about what to teach each week. Instead, I simply deal with the text that immediately follows the passage I dealt with the previous week. It has even been said that people don’t grow spiritually from teaching through the Bible (!). No doubt it is possible to bungle Bible teaching. However, done properly, I fail to see how our inferior wisdom could possibly improve upon the Spirit’s wisdom found in God’s Word.
- f) Teaching through a book arguably causes increased learning by the congregation. This is because flow of the week-in, week-out continuity of the teaching allows people to know what to expect next, to read ahead, to study in advance, etc. It also tends to teach people how to think when reading the Bible, and builds a foundation for the future in understanding what the Bible is all about, equipping them to handle the Word for themselves.

Stephen E. Atkerson NTRF.org Revised 04/25/2023