

Leading a "Peer" Bible Study

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I have noticed, over time, that some of us are reluctant to lead Bible Studies, either because we think we don't know enough, or because we think we do not have enough time to prepare. Even seasoned *chavurah* leaders sometimes become overburdened in preparing their Bible Studies and come to a place where they want a break! The truth is that such "burn-out" can be avoided if leading the Bible Study is approached in the right way. Of course, careful time-consuming preparation is necessary if your way of leading a Bible Study is to be its teacher - to deliver polished discourses on biblical subjects, present flawless analyses of portions of Scripture, and be looked to as an authority for answers. Some of you are gifted as teachers as spoken of in Ephesians 4:11-12:

Furthermore, he gave some people as emissaries, some as prophets, some as proclaimers of the Good News, and some as shepherds and teachers. Their task is to equip God's people for the work of service that builds the body of the Messiah, ..

But you who are Ephesians 4 gift teachers are not the main ones to whom I am speaking today. The title of this message is "Leading a "Peer" Bible Study," but it might also be called: "Leading an 'Iron Sharpens Iron' Bible Study" or perhaps even "Leading a Berean Style Bible Study," inspired by the following Scriptures:

Acts 17:10-11

But as soon as night fell, the brothers sent Sha'ul and Sila off to Berea. As soon as they arrived, they went to the synagogue. Now the people here were of nobler character than the ones in Thessalonica; they eagerly welcomed the message, checking the Tanakh every day to see if the things Sha'ul was saying were true.

Proverbs 27:17

Just as iron sharpens iron, a person sharpens the character of his friend.

I have a theory that any Bible-believer with minimal knowledge and little or no preparation can lead a Bible Study so long as (1) there is sufficient cumulative biblical knowledge among the Bible Study participants, and (2) you the leader do not present yourself as an expert. The trick in leading this kind of Bible Study is to ask questions, let the answers come from the participants, and let the diversity of comments from the participants rub against each other to produce the desired "iron sharpening iron" result. But just as one who uses a sharpening iron must hold it at a correct angle to the knife or tool in order to sharpen it, you as the Bible Study leader must evaluate the comments being made in your study, and direct the discussion in a way that will be profitable.

But there are risks in this approach. One of them is that if your group is lethargic that day and does not feel like participating, you may ask questions and get silence in return. "NOT GOOD!" But if that is the case, your "studiers" will probably snooze through any other approach as well. Another risk is that if the members of your group is not adequately schooled in biblical truth,

they may not recognize unbiblical comments or analyses when they hear them. If you don't either - "DOUBLE NOT GOOD!" But I am talking about leading a Bible Study among Messianic Jewish and Christian believers where there is commonly an abundance of biblical knowledge and experience to draw from.

In the past, I believe I was over-restrictive about who I would allow to lead a Bible Study because I worried that false biblical doctrines might go unnoticed and unchecked. I still have that concern if the study is of the kind where information flows mainly from the teacher to the student. But that is what I now call a "Bible Teaching" as distinguished from a "Bible Study," and is not what I am discussing with you right now. The apostle Paul taught the Bereans and, after he taught them, the Bereans studied to confirm his teaching. I am talking to you now about something similar – a peer leading his peers in studying the Bible as the Bereans probably did, sharpening each other's understanding in the process. Hopefully, this message will exhort some of you to move into the ministry of Bible Study leadership, not necessarily as Ephesian 4 "gift" teachers, but as "peer" leaders.

The opportunities for leading Bible Studies are many – at home with your families; with co-workers during lunch breaks; with gatherings of neighbors and friends; and I may as well also put in a plug for Ohev's Jail Ministry Team where a crew of us from Ohev lead Bible Studies every Monday morning. I am a teacher, but I use the "peer" model of leading wherever possible, because it is much more motivating than listening to a teacher lecture. If, after prayerful consideration, any of you want to try your hand at leading a Bible Study, I have a few suggestions that will help you to get started.

1. Select a portion of Scripture to study rather than a topic. Topical studies require more biblical knowledge and prep time than Scripture Studies, and this message is directed more toward those who are new at this, and have busy schedules.
2. Select a portion of Scripture that has some interesting issues in it to discuss. Studying genealogies may stir the juices of scholars, but are not usually motivating in Bible studies.
3. Announce to your group the portion of Scripture to be studied, explain how you intend to go about leading the study, and what you expect of the participants. Explain that it will be a discussion, and that everyone's participation in presenting material, asking questions and offering opinions is very important.
4. If there is time, you can let your group know the Scripture portion to be studied ahead of time, but don't be naive, believing that most people will prepare for the study and then be upset when you find that they have not.
5. This seems like a no-brainer, but be sure to tell everyone to bring a Bible of a reputable translation, a pencil, and a pad of paper. Paraphrases (such as the Living Bible) should only be used as commentaries, but there is one exception; although David Stern says that the *Tanakh* of his Complete Jewish Bible is a paraphrase, it is so good in its interpretations, that I allow its use.

6. Set an approximate time for the study and keep to it. Open with prayer, begin on time, and end on time. If you consistently wait for late-arrivers, you will train your group in being consistently late.

7. Do not assume that anyone has read the study portion ahead of time. If you do, you are likely to be disappointed.

8. Do all of the out-loud reading yourself while asking everyone else to follow in their Bibles. I know that it is common to ask others to read, but unless you have people in your group who can read fluently and project their voice with interest, you will diminish the benefit of everyone's oral comprehension. There are two other reasons as well: (1) Different participants in your study will own different translations of the Bible, and listening to sequential readings from different versions can be confusing; and (2) Some people are simply not good readers, and folks who stumble in their public reading may be embarrassed and not want to come back.

9. Within the portion of Scripture under study, if verses you want to discuss are widely separated by text that, in your opinion, does not contribute, feel free to skip over the "in between" portions or summarize them rather than consume time reading them.

10. Do not read long passages. Read only enough to acquire the context and until something perks your interest to discuss. Then stop and ask a probative question about what you have just read. If you cannot come up with a question, ask: "What do you think about what I just read?"

11. When a participant in your study contributes something that you think is correct and valuable, tell them so and thank them for it.

12. If a participant in your study says something that surprises you because you haven't thought of it before and you do not know how to answer, thank him (or her) for raising the point and say that you will study the matter, pray (if appropriate), and bring it up again at the next study session. You can also confess that you don't know the answer and ask: "Does anyone here think they have an answer to this?"

13. If a participant in your study suggests that you are wrong about something, don't be defensive. Consider carefully what the person has to say, and either clarify what you have said, or admit that you are wrong and thank (him or her) for pointing out your error.

14. If a participant in your study asks a question that is valid but would take too much of the Bible Study's time to answer, ask the questioner if he can narrow the question. Alternatively, explain that you do not have the time now to answer such a broad question, but that you will be happy to discuss it with him afterwards. Don't be seduced into taking a great amount of the Bible Study's time by attempting to answer too broad a question.

15. When a participant in your study says something that is not correct or is incomplete, your skill in communicating it without offending is crucial. Knowing the person and his or her sensitivities will certainly help, but you have to play it by ear. Saying "Wrong as usual!" is probably not going to be received well, but it can occasionally be said in jest to someone that you

are in good relationship with. Here are some responses I sometimes make to comments that I believe are wrong or incomplete:

- What you said is interesting. What do you others think?
- What you said is interesting. Do others here think he (she) is right?
- I can understand why you think that, but consider this as an alternative, etc.
- A very interesting point of view. How do you think that fits with ABC Scripture?
- Okay, but what about
- That's a possibility, but there may be more. Anyone else?

And in the right circumstance and with the right person, I have been known to say something like:

- Bzzz! Wrong answer! Go directly to jail! Do not collect \$200.

16. If you notice that a certain member of your Bible Study participates very little, you might try drawing him out by directing a question to him. However, make sure that the question is the kind that knowledge is not needed to answer, since you don't want to embarrass an already withdrawn person by their having to admit that they don't know or they don't understand. You could ask questions like:

- Jack, you haven't said much. Is there anything you would like to ask or add to what has already been said? or
- Jack, is what Bob said clear enough to you, or do you want him to restate it?

17. If a participant in your Bible Study speaks too frequently, too long, off-subject, or unbiblically, you must take control of the situation as soon as you become aware of what is happening. It would be uncomfortable for everyone were you to attempt to deal with the person publicly, so you should take him (or her) aside for correction, or you can try one of these approaches in the group:

- John, you obviously have a lot to contribute and you know a lot about the subject, so please understand that, when I see your hand raised but call upon someone else, I am not ignoring you; I am merely trying to get a diversity of opinions and responses. or
- John, I am sorry to interrupt you. What you are saying is interesting and valuable, but you are not answering my question. My question is ... or
- John, I am having trouble following you because you are giving me so much more than I asked. As an experiment in conciseness, can you answer my question in one sentence? Alright, in five sentences! If you can, you get a prize. Who will help us count John's sentences?

If you try the last suggestion, you had better be prepared to come up with the prize!

18. End the study session with a prayer but, before you do, ask if anyone has any last thoughts or comments and, if applicable, reveal what will be studied at the next session.

Now that you know all there is to know about leading a "peer" Bible Study, let's see how it works in practice. Everyone please turn in your Bibles to the Book of John, chapter 1, verse 1:

^{CJB} **John 1:1** *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

² *He was with God in the beginning.*

³ *All things came to be through him, and without him nothing made had being.*

⁴ *In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind.*

⁵ *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not suppressed it.*

⁶ *There was a man sent from God whose name was Yochanan.*

⁷ *He came to be a testimony, to bear witness concerning the light; so that through him, everyone might put his trust in God and be faithful to him.*

⁸ *He himself was not that light; no, he came to bear witness concerning the light.*

⁹ *This was the true light, which gives light to everyone entering the world.*

¹⁰ *He was in the world- the world came to be through him- yet the world did not know him.*

¹¹ *He came to his own homeland, yet his own people did not receive him.*

¹² *But to as many as did receive him, to those who put their trust in his person and power, he gave the right to become children of God,*

¹³ *not because of bloodline, physical impulse or human intention, but because of God.*

¹⁴ *The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw his Sh'khinah, the Sh'khinah of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.*