Five Tips for Leading Your Small Group

SEPTEMBER 2, 2014 | Kevin DeYoung

As school starts back up, so will plenty of church-sponsored and church-related small groups. Some will study the Bible. Others will read a Christian book together. Almost all will have a designated leader or leaders. While knowing your Bible and having Christlike character are the more important factors, there are also a number of skills which go a long way in leading an effective small group.

1. Communicate early and often, and then follow through.

A good leader is always leading. If you wait until the meeting to lead, it may be too late. In this era of easy communication, there is no reason leaders can't remind the group of upcoming dates and assignments. Make sure everyone knows what is expected. Conclude every meeting by highlighting what's next–what should be read? when is the group meeting? where are they meeting? who will be leading the discussion? Then before the next meeting send out a reminder email (or call or text or tweet or Facebook post). People forget. People are lazy. People get busy. People need lots of friendly reminders to stay on task–especially students.

As for the meeting itself, respect people's time. Get things started promptly and end at the agreed upon time. Sure, emergencies come up. There are exceptions to almost every rule. But people need to know that they can count on you to get the meeting started and ended on time.

Whenever possible, keep things consistent. Changing dates and times almost always leads to dwindling numbers.

Ask people for specific commitments. Don't do everything yourself. Get someone to bring a snack, another person to organize the upcoming barbecue, and someone else to open in prayer next week. This not only builds up others, it will encourage greater participation. Asking for commitments is better than making a general invitation.

2. Think through your questions ahead of time.

If your group consists of nothing but very mature Christians who have known each other for years you may be able to get away with little preparation. But that's not the make up of most groups (and if so, it's probably time to mix things up a little for the sake of newcomers and those just starting out as followers of Christ). Make sure your questions are crisp and clear. If you aren't sure what you are asking, you can be sure no one else will either.

If the selection you are studying (in the Bible or in a book) is hard to understand, you may need a number of knowledge questions. Don't make them so obscure that only seminary trained Christians would know the answer. But don't make them so painfully obvious (e.g., fill in the blank questions) that everyone is embarrassed to venture forth an answer.

Don't stay at the level of knowledge only. Ask questions which call for analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Prepare final questions which get at the heart.

Be creative in how you phrase your questions. Don't just say "What do you think?" or "How do you feel about this?" or even "How can we apply this to our lives?" Ask questions like:

- What is one thing you want to see change in your life as a result of this study?
- What new promise can you take with you into the week?
- What did you learn about God?
- Where have you seen these things lived out well?
- How does this relate to the cross?
- How does this resemble our church for good or for bad?
- Where is this a struggle for you in your marriage?
- What do you have a hard time believing in God's word?

You get the picture. There are hundreds of good questions you can ask on any given week. Few of them will come to you on the spot without any preparation.

3. Be mindful of group dynamics.

Being a leader is much more than opening and closing in prayer. You should do whatever you can to foster a warm, welcoming environment in your group. This means being especially mindful of new people. The 30 minutes of hang out time before the study may be a sheer delight for the old-timers, but for new people it's bound to feel anxious and awkward. As a leader, you should do

whatever you can to make them feel at ease. Ask them questions. Get the group to introduce itself. Have an exercise ready to encourage group sharing. The less people know each other the more structure is needed.

Keep in mind that newcomers may not know your history, your humor, or your theology. I made the mistake once of teasing one of our longtime small group members about not yet being convinced of paedobaptism. It was playful banter between me and these friends, but for the new folks visiting it sent them the (wrong) signal that credobaptists weren't welcome here. I later apologized and explained that I was only joking with my friends and that we'd love to have them (the new couple) in our group. My bad.

One of the hardest and most important things a leader must do is try to include as many people as possible in group discussion. Obviously, the aim is not to make quiet members feel embarrassed, but often the quiet members simply need to be asked. A good leader won't allow every discussion to be dominated by the same two or three people. He will specifically call on those who haven't said much. He may need to gently add from time to time, "Let me see if anyone else has something to add before I come back to you."

A good leader will be sensitive to the mood of the group, discerning whether there is hurt, confusion, sadness, or frustration that needs to be addressed. Don't just play traffic cop. Be a shepherd.

4. Know how to handle conflict.

The worst fear of most small group leaders is that they will be called upon to quell some raging inferno of disagreement. Thankfully, most Christian groups (in my experience) play pretty nice (almost to a fault). Angry conflict is rare, but it does happen. Depending on the circumstances, here are some of the things you may want to say in the midst of disagreement:

- Sam, it sounds like you are trying to say XYZ. Am I hearing you correctly?
- Amanda has offered a different interpretation. What do the rest of you think? How should we interpret this verse?
- I know it's hard to talk about such a controversial or painful topic, but I don't think we should we run away from constructive conflict. I'd love to hear what everyone else is thinking.
- This is an important discussion, but it's not really involving the whole group. It would be great if the two of you could get together and continue the conversation at a different time.
- It sounds like I may have done something to upset you. Why don't we talk about it after the meeting is done?
- Guys, I'm happy for us have disagreement in this group. But that sounded personal. Let's try to be gentle even when we are passionate.

There may be times where the leader needs to be even more direct. You may have to shut down the conversation, explicitly correct a wrong interpretation, or reprove someone for speaking in a harsh and unedifying way. While we don't

want hot-headed leaders who make conflict worse, neither can we afford passive “leaders” who put their own people-pleasing and fear of man above the good of the whole group.

5. Plan for prayer.

If you expect prayer to just happen it will only barely happen. There is nothing wrong with 60 seconds of prayer to begin and end a meeting, if that’s your plan. Just to know that without preparation, that’s what will almost always happen. Effective times of prayer–whether short or long–take intentional planning. Are you going to ask for prayer requests? If so, how will ensure your “prayer” time is not all sharing with almost no praying? What are prayer requests from previous weeks that need follow up? How long do you want the prayer to be? How many people are you hoping will pray?

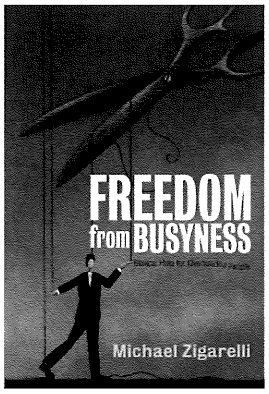
Leading in prayer requires clear direction. Don’t be afraid to call on certain individuals to pray (usually not newcomers). Remind people that their prayers can be short (in fact, you may want to encourage them to be short). Guide people through different topics (family, church, nation, world, etc.). If your prayer time is generally brief, consider setting aside a meeting every few months for nothing but prayer. We’ve often done this in our group, usually separating men and women for these most extended times of sharing and prayer.

The biggest difference between a small group that is spiritually, relationally, and biblically edifying and one that feels like an awkward waste of time is leadership. Good leaders do not always get good followers. But it almost never happens that you get good small groups without faithful, wise, skilled men and women to lead them.

TWENTY TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL SMALL GROUP LEADERSHIP

By Michael Zigarelli
Excerpted from pages 74-82 of the
Freedom from Busyness Leader's Guide

Learn more about this study at www.lifeway.com/mikezig



Every Christian is called to be a leader.

Some are more gifted at leadership than others, for sure, but we worship a God who calls every one of us to influence the people around us—to *lead* them to a fuller understanding of who God is, of what He's done for us, and how He wants us to live our lives.

The Great Commission is perhaps the clearest articulation of our call to leadership (Matthew 28:18-20). It's reasonably straightforward, isn't it? Make disciples. Influence people. Love people enough to lead them from one place to another. Indeed, every Christian is called to be a leader.

Maybe you're approaching the leadership of your small group study with the utmost confidence. Maybe you've done this sort of thing before and you're pretty good at it. But if instead you're one of those people who's uneasy about leading a study because you think God has not specifically gifted you to lead others, try to set those concerns aside. That's not a Biblical way of thinking about who God has made you to be. God *does* want you to be a discipler, an influencer—a leader—and He will give you the ability to facilitate well, if you ask Him.

The Art of Leading a Small Group

There's been a lot written on how to lead a group and how not to lead one. Here's a compilation of some of the best ideas out there—twenty tips that will assist you in leading your group to a life-changing experience.

Tip 1: It's Not About You.
Let's get one thing straight from the beginning: leading a small group study is not about you. It's about God. The more you can remain in the mindset of magnifying God and minimizing yourself, the more others will learn from the study. Take a cue from John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30, NAS).

For some small group leaders, this humble posture is quite natural. For others, the ego has a funny way of creeping into everything they do. If you find yourself saying and doing things out of concern for what others will think of you as the leader, that's a red flag. Instead, try not to worry about your reputation—about people-pleasing, in Paul's words (Galatians 1:10). Your job as a small group leader is simply to co-labor with God to draw people closer to Him.

So to boil it down to a sentence: to lead a small group with excellence, be the "guide on the side," not the "sage on the stage." This is God's group. Keep Him at center stage and He will bless everyone in the group.

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Tip 2: Operate in God's Strength.
Tip 1 said that successful small group leadership happens when you make the study *about God*. Here's the flip side: successful small group leadership happens when you lead the study *through God*. The best leader is one who's first a follower. Ask God to empower you to lead beyond your abilities, and return to this prayer often. Additionally, make prayer the bedrock of your group time together as well, at the very least opening and closing each session by collectively talking to God.

Tip 3: Operate in Joy.
The disposition of the leader powerfully drives the disposition of the whole group. When you adopt a joyful and celebratory disposition throughout the study, others will follow. When you smile, when you're upbeat, when you're genuinely excited to be leading, when you celebrate successes, it will infect the group—and that will significantly improve the experience for everyone involved.

As you know, though, joy doesn't just happen. It's not something you can engineer on demand, nor is it something you can fake for very long. Rather, real joy starts with seeing clearly the opportunity with which God has blessed you. You have been commissioned to help Him make people's lives better through leading this study. Your work with this group is, in fact, *a sacred ministry*. This sort of perspective leads to gratitude for the opportunity, and out of gratitude flows joy, both in your preparation and in your leadership of the discussion.

Tip 4: Encourage Accountability.
Accountability matters, and because it matters, we see it in a lot of contexts. CEOs answer to boards. Elders oversee pastoral performance. Accrediting bodies hold schools to high standards. Governments guard against excessive power of their branches by maintaining checks-and-balance systems.

Accountability matters in small groups as well. We're more likely to experience permanent change when we have an accountability partner who will support us, ask us whether we're keeping up with the studies, and check on our progress. So, early on, encourage people to walk through the study with at least one other person.

Tip 5: Preparation, Preparation and Preparation.
The familiar real estate axiom is that the three most important things in a property are location, location and location. In small group leadership—and in teaching generally—one could piggyback on this axiom and say the three most important things are preparation, preparation and preparation. There's simply no substitute for it (as some of us have seen from witnessing an unprepared group leader or teacher.)

If you're going to facilitate effectively, you need to have mapped out how you'll begin the group meeting, what questions you'll cover, approximately how much time you'll be devoting to each of them, some proposed answers for each question, and a way to bring the meeting to effective closure. In your planning, though, don't worry about becoming an expert on the subject matter. Great facilitation can easily happen even though you might lack expertise (remember, you're a "guide on the side.") But it's unlikely to happen without planning and thorough preparation.

Tip 6: Model the Way.
If you want people to listen to one another, then listen closely to people. If you want them to be transparent and candid, then you go first. If you want them to dig deeper to identify root causes of their problems, then model that yourself. If you want them to be accountable to one another, then be sure they know of your accountability relationship. Lead by example, not just by what you say.

Tip 7: Create a Safe Environment for Sharing.
In almost any small group, there will be people who are intimidated or shy about participating. There are some things you can do, though, to make it "safe" for them to engage. For starters, be transparent. Share your own struggles. Admit your own challenges with the issues being discussed. Confess your own imperfections and others will feel freer to then share their own.

It's also important to be supportive early in the study of almost every comment. That doesn't mean you tolerate heresy, but it does mean signaling that people don't need to be profound to contribute something of value. Try to avoid strongly disagreeing with people until such a point when everyone's had an opportunity to feel comfortable contributing.

Along the same lines, it's also wise to remain sensitive to others' traditions. More and more, people are crossing denominational lines to participate in group Bible studies. If you have an ecumenical small group, seek to understand where others are coming from and minimize the disparagement of other denominational perspectives. Of course, there will be times when it's appropriate to raise and examine these differences, but those discussions should probably be deferred until the group has matured a bit.

Tip 8: Hone Your Listening Skills.
There's an old adage that says: "Being listened to is so close to being loved, that most people can't tell the difference." You may have experienced the feeling first-hand. Do what you can to make sure everyone in your group feels it as well.

Concentrate on what each person is saying, rather than thinking about your own response. Rephrase their point when appropriate, so they'll know they've been heard. Use non-verbal cues as well that show you're listening—cues like maintaining a comfortable level of eye contact with the person speaking, occasionally nodding, positioning your body to squarely face the speaker, leaning toward the speaker slightly, and so on. You'll be amazed at how such little things can make a person feel "listened to"—and loved!

Tip 9: Stay on Point.
This is the bane of many small groups. One tangential comment gives license to the next, and before you know it, a series of loosely related remarks has eclipsed your entire meeting time.

Ever been there? My guess is that you know exactly what I'm talking about, since this happens with unfortunate regularity.

This is a leadership problem more than it's a participant problem. To avoid it, keep the group focused on the question at hand and follow up tangential comments by

bringing the group back to the actual question. Everyone benefits when a leader steers the conversation, and everyone suffers when he or she does not.

Tip 10: Be Sure That Scripture Is Your Filter.
One would think we wouldn't have to say such a thing, but it seems that sometimes, our filters for right and wrong get clouded, even in Christian circles. Some people use their experience as an arbiter of right and wrong. Others use society's rules. Some are pragmatists, basing the right thing to do on "what works."

There are a lot of worldviews infecting Christian thinking these days, so when group members suggest solutions to problems, don't shy away from asking whether their suggestion aligns with scripture. Ask them if Jesus did it that way, or would do it that way. Ask them for any Biblical support they can think of.

If, as group leaders we persistently come back to the Bible as God's standards, our group members will too.

Tip 11: Listen for Segues to the Next Question.
It's invaluable to always know where you want to go next with a discussion. Sometimes you simply have to announce the transition (i.e., "let's turn a corner now and look at the next question"), but the meeting flows more smoothly if you capitalize on natural transition points. Expert facilitators listen closely for comments that connect to where they want to go next and quickly use those comments to move the discussion forward.

Tip 12: Echo What's Been Said.
This is such an essential facilitation technique! From time to time, you'll find it helpful to restate what somebody has just said—to "echo" it for the group. Echoing not only lets the speaker know that he or she has been understood, it also serves to clarify that person's point for everyone else. Beyond that, echoing makes it more likely that the rest of the group will respond to that person's comment, rather than just following with an unrelated comment.

So echo comments where appropriate, and then, since you have the floor at that moment, invite commentary on what's just been said. The flow of discussion will improve dramatically.

Tip 13: Connect the Dots.
Another way to enhance the flow of discussion is to connect some people's comments to other people's comments. "So Sherry, you think that the verse calls us to action but Fran, two minutes ago, you said you didn't understand it that way. Can somebody else help us out here?" This is good facilitation because it clarifies where we are with the discussion and where we want it to go.

Tip 14: Cut Off Dominators.
Let's face it, they're out there. Many groups are blessed with that spirited person who contributes a little too much. And that can diminish the experience for everyone else. Usually, if the leader doesn't take control of this situation, no one will.

One solution is to talk to the person away from the group. It doesn't take much. Start by affirming the positive and then candidly make your request. "Hank, you really have a lot of good stuff to contribute in this study, but I want to make sure

that others have an adequate opportunity to share, too. Would you be willing to scale back—at least a little—the number of times you contribute?"

A second way to balance contribution is to simply cut in when the dominator takes a breath, echo what he or she has said to that point (so they know they've been heard), and invite someone to respond to that. As a last resort, you might say to the group something like: "I don't want you to feel like you're in school, but in the interest of managing this discussion, it would help me if you all would raise your hand when you want to comment." Then regulate the dominator's contributions in a way that's more helpful to the group.

Tip 15: Ask for People's Opinions:
"How 'bout somebody who hasn't spoken yet?" "Anyone else want to comment on this issue?" "Does anyone have a different perspective on this?" These and similar questions are non-threatening ways of inviting people into the conversation. Write out some phrases with which you're comfortable and use them at strategic points in your group meetings to draw in quiet group members. Sometimes just this little nudge can be a turning point for people.

Tip 16: Frame Questions Using "Why" and "How."
Usually, when you ask a question that begins with "why" or "how," people tend to answer with more thoughtful, more extensive responses than if you ask a question that begins with "who," "where," or "when." Think about it. Questions that begin with these latter words can lend themselves to one or two word answers, right? But try answering a "why" or "how" question with one word. Not likely. If your goal is to get people talking, think about reframing the questions you ask.

Tip 17: Permit Silence After You Ask a Question:
Eventually, it'll happen. You'll ask a question and no one will say anything. Avoid the temptation to fill that void with your own voice. Give people time to think. Let them muster the courage to answer a tough question. Give them a moment to hear from God, if that's the prompting they're seeking.

Get comfortable with silence after posing a question. Often, your patience will be rewarded with some of the richest and most poignant answers of the week.

Tip 18: Stay With Fruitful Conversation, Even If It's Taking Too Much Time.
For group leaders who are especially time-conscious, it's natural to march through a set of questions and make sure everything gets covered in the time allotted. The best group leaders remain mindful, though, that *the real goal of the meetings is transformation, not completion*.

Sometimes a question will stimulate lots of discussion. It will go deep; it will touch a chord; it will create excitement; it will surface pains or misunderstandings that need to be addressed; it will plant the seeds of lasting change for people. Avoid cutting off God's work in these situations. Don't be a slave to a script, insisting on covering all five questions in ten minutes each. Some questions may require twenty minutes, others three minutes. So be flexible and learn to discern when to deviate from your original plan.

Tip 19: Use a Board or Easel, if Appropriate.
Chronicling on a board the relevant points that people make is a wonderful way of

affirming, echoing, and clarifying what's being said. It will also help you to "connect the dots" more easily. Beyond that, many people will retain more of what's said if they've both heard it and seen it in writing.

Tip 20: Summarize Key Points.
Many people will find it instructive if you can recap some of the more important lessons from the discussion. The end of the session is a natural time to do this, but it's also helpful to do it at the beginning of a group meeting ("this is what God's taught us so far in this study"), as well as after particularly important or complicated points in the discussion. Brief, oral summaries from the leader enhance learning and retention, so take notes during the discussion and bless the group by emphasizing the essential take-aways.

Chapter Four

RIGHTLY DIVIDED: THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE

Composed of 73,000 tons of steel, its structural frame would make more than 50,000 automobiles. It contains more than 1,500 miles of electrical wiring and 250 miles of pipes. It has 16,000 panes of bronze tinted glass, 640,000 square feet in all. It towers some 1,468 feet into the air, or 110 stories. It has 4.4 million square feet of floor space, equal to 101 acres or 16 Chicago city blocks. It uses 625,000 kilowatt hours of electricity in just one day, equivalent to a community of 2,500 persons. Its total weight is 445 million pounds.

We are describing the United States' tallest building, Chicago's Sears Tower. But, as impressive as its superstructure appears, the unseen aspects of the Sears Tower are the most essential. A building like the Sears Tower depends on a strong foundation. Designed to withstand the winds of Chicago, the Sears Tower is built on caissons anchored in bedrock. Each caisson is 65 feet long and has a permanent steel shell liner. All of the caissons are tied together by a 54-inch deep concrete mat that covers the floor area of the Sears Tower basement. Built on two million cubic feet of concrete foundation, the concrete in the Sears Tower's foundation walls could pave an eight lane expressway for four miles.

Why all this data on a skyscraper? Because we know that a solid foundation is essential to a strong, secure, and stable building; and, in a similar way, Bible study serves as the secure foundation to creative Bible teaching. What your students see when you teach is the superstructure of the class lesson. What they do not see is the foundation—your dili-

gent study of the Word of God. Bible teaching that affects people's lives begins with effective study of the Bible.

THE BASIS OF AUTHORITY IN TEACHING

Paul told Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). Correctly handling the Word of Truth is an essential issue for the creative Bible teacher. Creative Bible teachers have a high regard for the Scriptures, and they see their ministry as a sacred trust. They are servants of God used to communicate His Word in a timely and relevant manner. As such, they desire to be faithful to its teaching in their teaching.

John H. Walton, Laurie Bailey, and Craig Williford warn their readers of "an authority crisis" in Bible teaching and in Bible-based curriculum. By this they mean that curriculum producers and Bible teachers often use the Bible to teach to their own developmental and behavioral objectives rather than actually teaching what the Bible teaches. They are concerned that the Bible is merely being used as a jumping-off point for teaching. Much of Bible teaching simply uses the Bible to teach ideas that are only loosely related to the teaching of Scripture. The result, they contend, is teaching marked only by human authority, teaching unable to change lives by the power of the Word.

> If the Bible is used only as a jump-off point for one's own objectives, the Bible's authority is being bypassed, because if a passage is not being used to teach what the Bible is teaching, the teacher stands only in his/her own authority. Too much of today's curriculum teaches only with human authority rather than with the authority of God. This then is the authority crisis in curriculum.[1]

Walton, Bailey, and Williford argue that authority in Bible teaching can only come from the authority of Scripture, and that authority is found in teaching what the authors of the Bible intend to teach. A second quote illustrates this point.

> It is only the things that Scripture intends to teach that carry the authority of the text. For example, it is very possible to learn much about leadership from a study of Nehemiah. In the end, however, there is no indication that the author of Nehemiah was preserving or presenting his material so that readers could be instructed in leadership. That being the case, when leadership is taught from the book and life of Nehemiah, the authority of Scripture is not being tapped. . . . If someone desires to claim biblical authority for what he/she teaches, Scripture must be used only and always to teach what it intends to teach.[2]

Walton, Bailey, and Williford's point is an important one. But how can teachers be certain they are teaching what the author intended? The answer to that question is found in the process of Bible study. Through careful exegesis (reading the meaning out of the passage) using some foundational rules of hermeneutics (the rules of Bible interpretation), the student and teacher of the Bible can indeed come to an understanding of the biblical author's central principle. That principle can then be applied in appropriate ways today. The central principle of the passage or, as Haddon Robinson terms it, the big idea,[3] serves as the bridge principle from the "then and there" world of the Bible to the "here and now" world of today.

We have found the inductive method of Bible study to be the most reliable means of identifying the bridge principle or central idea of the passage. By the use of the inductive approach, the Bible student allows the authors of Scripture (both human and divine) to communicate the intended message.

THE CREATIVE BIBLE TEACHER'S INDUCTIVE STUDY METHOD

The word "inductive" means to go from specific details to a general principle. We use inductive reasoning in scientific and mathematical study to develop laws and theories from a collection of data. For example, one could study several right triangles (triangles that have one angle equal to 90 degrees) and eventually conclude that all right triangles have a common property. You might state your finding in the formula $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ or by stating that "the sum of the square of the sides of a right triangle is equal to the square of the hypotenuse of the triangle." What you would have just stated is known as the Pythagorean theorem. Deductive reasoning reverses the process. Here, one begins with a general principle and moves to specific application of that principle. For example, one could begin with the Pythagorean theorem. Using the theorem of right triangles, one could determine the diagonal dimension of a rectangular room by only knowing the length and width of the room.

For the creative Bible teacher, biblical study should begin with inductive study. Inductive Bible study is a study method that seeks to be objective and impartial in its approach to the text of the Scriptures. Typically, the inductive method demands that students of the Bible follow three steps in the study process—observation, interpretation, and application. For those who plan to teach the Bible as a result of their study, we have expanded the inductive process to include two more essential steps that make the link to teaching more direct. One of these we term "generalization." The other we call "implementation" (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

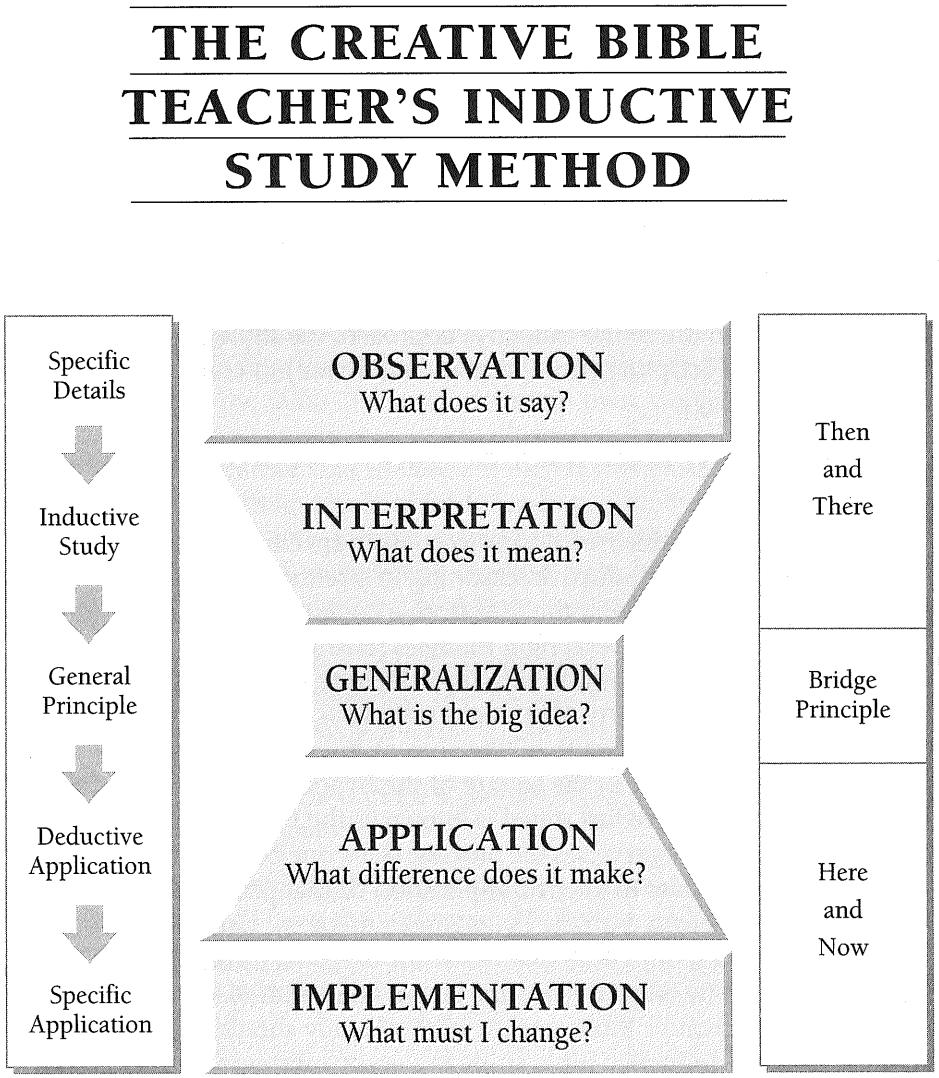


Figure 5 depicts the inductive method that creative Bible teachers will want to employ in their preparation to teach. This model involves five stages in the process of study. These stages, in order, are observation, interpretation, generalization, application, and implementation. Each stage focuses on a specific overarching question. The first two stages in the process deal with the biblical world, that is, the "then and there." The third stage serves as the bridge between worlds. The fourth and fifth stages deal with our world today, or the "here and now." You will note that the model progresses from specific details to general principles in stages one through three. This is where inductive logic is employed. It then moves from general principle to specific application using deductive logic. The hourglass shape of the diagram represents a progression in time from the world of the Bible to our modern world. This method of study is not the only approach a creative Bible teacher can use, but it is well suited to lesson preparation.

Observation: What Does It Say?

The observation stage in the study process takes us back to the biblical world—the "then and there" side of Bible study. The goal of this stage is simply to identify what the author actually said to the original recipients of the text. Remember, the Bible was written in a historic time frame to real people. In a sense, we are reading someone else's mail. It is important to understand what was happening when the mail was originally sent to really grasp the message of the letter. In other words, to understand the message of the text, we must understand the world and the events that surround the text then and there so that we do not misapply the text here and now.

The overarching question of the observation stage is, "What does it say?" The observation stage requires careful attention to the specific details of the passage. This is most effectively accomplished through the use of some basic questions. By asking a consistent list of study questions, the student will begin to gain skill in probing the depths of the biblical text. We would suggest three lines of questioning.

Setting Questions

1. Who is the author or speaker?
2. Why was this book written? What was the occasion of the book?
3. What historic events surround this book?
4. Where was it written? Who were the original recipients?

Context Questions

1. What literary form is being employed in this passage?

2. What is the overall message of this book, and how does this passage fit into that message?
3. What precedes this passage? What follows?

Structural Questions

1. Are there any repeated words? Repeated phrases?
2. Does the author make any comparisons? Draw any contrasts?
3. Does the author raise any questions? Provide any answers?
4. Does the author point out any cause and effect relationships?
5. Is there any progression to the passage? In time? Action? Geography?
6. Does the passage have a climax?
7. Does the author use any figures of speech?
8. Is there a pivotal statement or word?
9. What linking words are used? What ideas do they link?
10. What verbs are used to describe action in the passage?

By this point, some structure or flow to the passage will probably become apparent. You may want to note any structure or logical sequence of thoughts you believe the author was using when he wrote the passage. Your observation may serve as a clue that will help you later in the interpretation and generalization stages. We will actually try the observation process together as we look at a passage in the next chapter. Also, note that Table 1 at the end of this chapter recommends several helpful Bible study tools.

Interpretation: What Does It Mean?

At this point you are ready to draw some interpretive conclusions about what you have been studying. The overarching question in this stage of inductive Bible study is, "What does it mean?" Although the Scripture may have many different applications it can only have one correct interpretation. The correct interpretation is the one that the author intended the reader to come to understand. The task of the Bible student is to discover the original intended meaning. Despite the temptation to jump from observation to application, care must be taken to hear the Word of God as the original readers or hearers did and to find out what the Spirit of God was teaching them.

You do not need a seminary or Bible college degree to discover the intended meaning of the Scriptures. Often it is stated directly by the author or it can be discerned from the structure and emphasis of the passage. The Bible is written so that ordinary people can read and comprehend it. Although there are debated passages and some difficult ones, most of

the Scripture is easily understood when its literary form and general theme is known.

A rather remarkable incident happened in the book of Acts. It seems that an Ethiopian official in charge of the queen of Ethiopia's treasury was on his way home from worshiping in Jerusalem. Apparently he had stopped his chariot to rest and was reading from the book of Isaiah. Specifically, he was reading the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah about the suffering and death of the Messiah. The Holy Spirit led Philip to ask the man, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30). This question is the basic interpretive question of biblical study. Three basic rules of biblical interpretation will help answer that question in the affirmative.

Rule # 1—Continuity of the Message. This rule reminds us that the Bible has a unity to it and that we must use the larger teaching of the Scriptures on a subject to help understand the meaning of a particular passage. This is known as the law of non-contradiction. This law of Bible study says that we should use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Although the Bible has a variety of human authors, it has one divine author, the Holy Spirit. Because the Bible is inspired by God, it speaks a consistent message. When dealing with two passages on a subject, the clearer passage should help interpret the less specific passage. Because biblical revelation comes in a progressive and widening manner, the reader should see if other passages, especially New Testament passages, expand the teaching of the one under study. For example, the book of Hebrews gives us insight into the meaning of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. At the same time, the Old Testament passages describing priesthood and temple practices provide the context for understanding the imagery of Hebrews. To interpret either segment of Scripture, some awareness of the other is important.

Rule #2—Context of the Material. It has been said that "a text without a context is just a pretext." There is a great deal of truth to that statement. One of the dangers that Bible students must avoid in the interpretation of the Bible is "Scripture twisting." Scripture twisting is taking a text out of its context in order to make it say something we want it to say. One sad example of this problem is found in a mission agency that used a verse from Matthew as its theme verse. On a plaque hung prominently above the door of the organization was this quote of Scripture: "All of these things I will give to you if you fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9). Although the passage has an evangelistic ring to it we had better check the context. This is a quote not from God, but from Satan. The context is the temptation of Christ. Clearly, this extreme example makes the point that context is everything in the task of interpretation of Scripture.

When applying the rule of context it is important to remember that not only is the immediate context important, that is, the paragraphs before and after the text, but the historic and cultural context must also be considered. For example, again in Hebrews we read, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:25). Many a preacher has used this verse to encourage a congregation to be in the morning service at church on Sunday rather than on the golf course. Although it is not good for anyone to become habitually absent from the Sunday service, the passage is about a persecuted people. The author of Hebrews is warning them concerning the temptation they feel to avoid contact with other believers in order to avoid persecution. His point is that they need the encouragement such contact provides despite the inherent risk. In this case, historic context helps fill in the picture for the reader.

Rule #3—Customary Meaning. Probably most significant of all of the rules for interpreting the Bible is what has become known as literal interpretation. Many confuse and misunderstand literal interpretation to mean interpretation of every word in an absolute sense without allowance for figures of speech or literary genres. In fact, this is not what conservative Bible scholars mean by literal interpretation. Literal interpretation simply means that we interpret the Bible as one interprets any other form of literature, giving it its natural, normal, and customary meaning. We do not seek to read special hidden meanings into the text or to "demythologize" the accounts of Scripture because of a bias against the authority and historicity of the Bible. Instead, we regard the statements of Scripture as revealed truth written in human words by inspiration of the Spirit of God.

The conservative holds that the key to understanding the meaning of the text is found in the normal approach to language. In this way we take the Bible literally. This does not mean, of course, that we fail to recognize poetic expression like that found in Habakkuk 3:10, which reads, "the mountains saw you and writhed. Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high." Nor do we fail to understand that the Bible contains symbolism such as one would find in statements like "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want" (Ps. 23:1). What it does mean is that when the Bible makes a statement such as "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14), we understand the statement in its normal linguistic sense. A virgin will have a son. This, of course, is biologically impossible. And so the reader is expected to believe that God accomplished a biological impossibility. We

do not reject the option of the miraculous and seek some other explanation or meaning for the passage. In fact, those who practice the rule of customary meaning would suggest that it is the very idea of the miraculous nature of the conception of Jesus Christ that is the point in this passage.

The rule of customary meaning simply states that the very words of the Bible are to be taken for what they communicate. We follow a simple principle: When the natural, normal sense of the Scripture makes sense, seek no other sense. By this we do not exclude cultural or historical factors in interpretation. We mean that the Bible is not a book of hidden ideas demanding that the reader reinterpret the words to discover these religious thoughts. The meaning of Scripture is plain in its normal, literal sense.

Generalization: What Is the Big Idea?

Bible teachers have a significant and sometimes challenging task. They must bridge a gap between the world of the Bible and that of modern living. Consider the fact that teachers are at best third parties communicating to those even further removed from the original writer and recipient. They face a gap of culture, history, and language. How can they hope to communicate the truth of Scripture to their students in a way that is relevant and life changing? The key is the stage of study we call "generalization."

The terms might be slightly different—big idea, proposition, central theme, thesis statement, or central principle—but the concept is the same. Effective communication depends upon a single unifying principle or point. Whether we are considering a term paper, a speech, a sermon, or the Word of God, it is essential to identify the author's thematic focus. This is the goal of the generalization stage. At this point in the process of inductive study, the Bible student formulates a single sentence statement of the main point of the text. Until that is accomplished, the teacher is not ready to move on in lesson preparation.

Haddon W. Robinson has provided a great aid to the Bible teacher in regards to identifying and formulating the "big idea." In his book entitled *Expository Preaching,* he suggests that the main idea of a passage be formulated by asking and answering two questions of the text. The first question is, "What is the author talking about?" The answer to this question he calls the "subject" of the passage. The second question is, "What is the author saying about what he is talking about?" This he terms the complement. By answering both questions, the Bible student can begin to formulate a single sentence that entails the major idea or principle being taught in the passage. Robinson terms this idea the "exegetical

idea" because it is the idea presented by the biblical author and it is derived from the text exegetically, that is, through a careful inductive approach to study.[4] He explains that this is a mandatory step in understanding and communicating the Word of God as a creative Bible teacher.

> Since each paragraph, section, or subsection of Scripture contains an idea, an exegete does not understand a passage until he can state its subject and complement exactly. While other questions emerge in the struggle to understand the meaning of the biblical writer, the two—What is the author talking about? and What is he saying about what he is talking about?—are fundamental.[5]

At this point an example might help. Let's take John 15:1–8 as a model for formulating the exegetical idea or central principle of the passage.

> I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:1–8)

A. subject

B. compliment

What is the author talking about? The passage presents an analogy. Luke records the words of Jesus in which Jesus Himself draws the analogy between His relationship with His disciples and the relationship between a vine and its branches. *What is He saying about what He is talking about?* He makes the point that as branches are dependent on the vine for their productivity, so too are Christ's followers dependent upon Him. If we were to state the principle of the passage that is transferable to all believers we might say, "Just as each branch must remain connected to the vine to produce fruit, so too must Christ's disciples remain connected to Christ and His words to be productive spiritually." The principle or exegetical idea that comes from the passage and that can be transmitted from culture to culture is clear: Apart from Christ, we cannot be spiritually productive.

C. Generalization: what is the transferable principle?

Application: What Difference Does It Make?

In the application stage, the Bible student seeks meaningful connections between the passage and contemporary living. In order to achieve this goal, the student of the Bible must follow a few basic guidelines.

Interpretation always precedes application. Application should be rooted in the central principle taught in the text. In fact, application of a passage cannot and should not be made apart from careful interpretation of the passage. The question, "What difference does it make?" is a legitimate one, but we must exercise care here that we do not make a passage say what it does not say. Walton, Bailey, and Williford are again perceptive in their comments regarding application. "The teacher's task in application is to recognize and communicate Scripture's relevance, rather than to make it relevant."[6] Once we understand the principle taught in the passage, we can more easily apply the principle in a way consistent with the Word of God.

Application focuses on biblical answers to common issues. We tend to think of people in Bible times as far different from ourselves. The fact of the matter is that people have always laughed and cried for many of the same reasons. People in all periods of human history have lost loved ones, seen personal calamity, experienced hurt and broken relationships, and sought meaning in life. We deal with the same issues, emotions, questions, and concerns. Human needs are similar across time, geography, and culture. This commonality in our lives gives the Bible its timeless quality in application.

The Bible was written in concrete, rather than abstract, words. Given that fact, the student of the Bible should look for biblical perspectives that give insight to current matters. Consider application points that center around such matters as attitudes, conduct, character, and knowledge of God. Consider also the contexts of human relationships when applying biblical principles—contexts like one's marriage, the family, employment, school, social life, recreation, the church, the community, and the nation. Each of these provides fertile ground for applying biblical answers to life's pressing issues.

The Bible must be applied as God intended. Do you remember what Paul said was the reason God gave Scripture in the first place? "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Notice the four-fold use of Scripture proposed here. For teaching, for rebuke, for correcting, and for training in righteousness—all of these are points of application. We can ask,

- Is there a teaching here to be learned and followed?
- Does this passage communicate a rebuke to be heard and heeded?
- Is there a correction to be noted?
- In what way does this passage train us to be righteous?

Each of these questions can help bring the application of Scripture into a clearer light. Haddon Robinson suggests four additional application questions.

> 1. What was the communication setting in which God's Word first came? What traits do modern men and women share in common with that original audience? . . . 2. How can we identify with Biblical men and women as they heard God's Word and responded—or failed to respond—in their situation? . . . 3. What further insights have we acquired about God's dealings with His people through additional revelation? . . . 4. When I understand an eternal truth or guiding principle, what specific, practical applications does this have for me and my congregation?[7]

We move now to the final stage in inductive Bible study—implementation.

Implementation: What Must I Change?

The implementation stage of study becomes highly individual and concrete. It is important that as readers of the Bible we do not merely approach the Word of God as information to be learned, but as life changing truth meant to transform us. James warns us,

> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22–25)

Ultimately, the blessing of reading and studying God's Word is found in living out God's Word. The Bible teaches us about God, and in that knowledge comes implications for our relationship with Him. We cannot study the God of the Bible through the pages of the Bible without response. We must ask ourselves how we need to change. Do we need to change a viewpoint? Maybe it is an attitude that needs adjustment. Are we to change a habit or behavior? Is there some new perspective, attitude, or behavior we should embrace?

The implementation stage of study requires us to take action. As

teachers of the Bible we must live its message. We must allow it to change us as we call others to change. Teachers who do not personally apply what they teach lack credibility and can even risk developing the pharisaic, hypocritical attitude that Jesus condemned.

In his book *Taking the Guesswork Out of Applying the Bible,* Jack Kuhatschek says, "As we immerse ourselves in Scripture, our goal is to develop within ourselves the mind and heart of God. We want to be able to think and to respond to every situation the way God himself would."[8]

This, then, is the ultimate implication of Bible study for personal life—godliness.

In the next chapter we will briefly demonstrate how the creative Bible teacher's inductive method actually works. If you're ready to try your hand at Bible study, then let's embark on the first step of lesson preparation—studying the Bible.

NOTES

1. John H. Walton, Laurie Bailey, and Craig Williford, "Bible-Based Curricula and the Crisis of Scriptural Authority," *Christian Education Journal,* Volume XIII, Number 3, 85.
2. Ibid., 88.
3. Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 31–48.
4. Ibid., 79.
5. Ibid., 41.
6. Walton, Bailey, and Williford, "Bible-Based Curricula," 92.
7. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 94–95.
8. Jack Kuhatschek, *Taking the Guesswork Out of Applying the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 24.

again. The Book, like the plane's cross-country flight, requires planning and some navigating by a skilled pilot-teacher to bring the class ultimately to the destination of effective learning and application.

Eventually, your teaching session turns from the Book to the Look. The Look is the phase in teaching in which general applications are discovered by the class. This is like the maneuvering a plane must make before it can touch down. By carefully turning to align with the runway, the pilot prepares the plane for landing. Similarly, the creative Bible teacher must help the student explore potential application points by preparing the student's heart for the final landing—personal application.

Then it's time for the final and most important part of the flight, the landing. Let's face it. You can have a rough take-off and a bumpy flight, and you can have turbulence on your approach, but the ultimate measure of a flight is the quality of the landing. A bad landing can ruin an otherwise perfect flight. Serving the same function as the landing of a great jet, the Took is the last section of the creative Bible lesson. The Took is the touchdown. It is the lesson's final destination—the heart and life of the student.

This section introduces you to the third step in the creative Bible teaching process—structuring the lesson, using these four elements. Here you will discover how to plan the flight. So let's get this bird off the ground, shall we?

Chapter Nine

THE PATTERN: HBLT APPROACH

Imagine boarding an airplane you know was designed without a plan. Or how about zooming up an elevator to the sixty-seventh floor of a urban skyscraper that was built without architectural drawings and plans. Frightening thought! Because of the risk to life and limb, haphazard approaches to airplane design or structural engineering are unwise. But even in the lesser things of life, planning seems to be a wise action that prudent people undertake. Whether we are making a dress or making investments, a well-thought-out plan is essential. Most human endeavors require planning. As a general principle, things done right are done with a plan. Generals need battle plans, coaches need game plans, and teachers need lesson plans. This chapter is about lesson planning. It is about doing things right when it comes to teaching the Bible.

Spontaneity has its place. Certainly it is a welcome aspect of a relationship between a husband and wife. When he brings home flowers just because he saw a person selling them on the street corner, that's a good kind of spontaneity. Or when the family pulls off at John's Rock Museum on its way through the Black Hills just out of curiosity and it turns out to be a highlight of the family vacation, that's another good kind of spontaneity. When a student in your adult Sunday school class tells openly and spontaneously her personal story of a life struggle that fittingly illustrates a point made in class, and as a result people open up and discussion becomes more meaningful—that too is a good kind of spontaneity. But ironically, in teaching the Bible, planning must be

done for spontaneity to be meaningful. Otherwise "spontaneity" is more likely to be small talk. The wise teacher knows when to set aside his agenda and even his theme, but he also has a theme that can bring students back to look at the passage when the discussion turns to topics more suited for casual conversations outside class. He is open to teachable moments, but his class does not wander aimlessly in the name of spontaneity.

It is interesting how some equate spontaneity with the leading of the Holy Spirit. Planning is looked at as a human characteristic that hinders the work of God in a group. It is believed that God works in a spontaneous, unpredictable way. Some believe that worship services and teaching sessions should be free-flowing and unplanned. They believe that God leads in spontaneous ways that cannot occur when an order of service or a lesson plan is followed. They come to class and simply trust God to lead them and the class concerning what to say and what applications to make. But spontaneity is not God's way of working in the vast majority of situations. Remember what Paul said in response to the Corinthian church, whose spontaneous approach to worship had gotten out of hand. He said, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. . . . everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor. 14: 33, 40).

It is God's nature to plan. In fact, we take personal encouragement in the midst of our life struggles from this truth. We rest on the fact that God is not haphazard. He has a sovereign plan for our lives. God designed His world by very exacting plans. He orders events by a master plan. And we as human beings made in His image have an innate tendency to make plans as well. We plan our days. We plan events. We plan travel. We plan our work. We plan our homes. We plan our lives. We plan worship services. We even try to plan our families. Should we not develop plans for teaching the Word of God as well?

A PLAN FOR TEACHING

There are numerous ways one could plan a classroom experience. We are going to look at one with you in this book. We call it the HBLT approach. That stands for Hook, Book, Look, and Took. Don't worry, we already know it's a bit corny, but that's why you will never forget it! It is an easy-to-remember approach to lesson preparation that, when followed, opens up the student to learning biblical truth and to making meaningful application of the truth in his or her life.

It is not a new approach. In fact, when Paul addressed the philosophers at the Areopagus on Athens's Mars Hill, his approach to teaching paralleled the lesson planning approach we'll present here. So pause

now and read the account from Acts 17. What steps did Paul follow in teaching his audience?

> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. . . . Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.
>
> "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'
>
> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." . . .
>
> A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. (Acts 17:16, 22–31, 34)

We find Paul in Athens waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. While he waits for his ministry companions he takes a stroll around the city. He becomes personally distressed by what he observes. It is a city filled with idols. It is a place utterly lost and in need of Christ. So many idols exist that one even bears the inscription: "To an unknown God." How does Paul approach a people that so desperately needs the truth of Christ?

After doing his observational needs assessment, Paul strategizes the best approach with this group. He begins teaching in his students' world. He starts where they live. He tells of his observations and he stimulates their interest. In particular, his statement "now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" is designed to stimulate curiosity while giving direction to his teaching. Surely his listeners' ears must have perked up at that point. He had them hooked! They were ready to listen to more.

His next step was to explore the truth with them. He told them that all persons are created by God and that each one longs for a relationship with Him. He also declared the truth that the resurrected Jesus Christ provides the means for that relationship.

After gaining attention and presenting his message, Paul helped his hearers identify a general implication for all persons. He said, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed."

Finally, it was time to respond. Paul's teaching ministry moved from general implications to personal application. We are not told exactly how Paul brought learners to this response. Possibly it was without prompting from Paul at all. But some did believe, and, of course, others did not. Application can go either way when we teach biblical truth. Some may respond by rejection. There are no guarantees that all will respond as we would like. The important point is that all are brought to the place of a response. The lesson must lead to the point of action, which indeed Paul's did.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF YOUR LESSON

Your teaching aim has been developed from a study of the passage to be taught. It spells out in a flexible way the response for which you are teaching. You have a clear idea where you want to go. Now it's time to design a lesson that will get there. Creative Bible teaching lesson plans are composed of four basic sections—the Hook, the Book, the Look, and the Took.

It's best to avoid thinking of these as mechanical steps. They're more like four parts of a continuous, systematic but exciting process. In class the students probably won't even notice passage from one part of the process to another. No part is marked by routine; each is full of opportunity for flexibility and interaction. Yet each of these parts in the process has its own—and essential—role. Let's look at the four in sequence.

The Hook

You have prepared the class. You've been gripped by the truth you're to teach. You've seen it work in your life. When you come to class, you're excited about the lesson. But your students aren't. They haven't had your experiences, and they aren't thinking about your lesson. They have their own problems. One adult may be worrying about a late income tax return. Another is thinking about the iron left out: *Now, did I turn it off, or didn't I?* Others are contemplating significant personal matters like lost jobs, broken relationships, or sick and dying loved ones. A

teen may be replaying last night's game or nursing the tragedy of a rejected date. A child may be still fuming over a fight with her sister and the fact that she was punished and her sister wasn't. All differ, but each comes to class operating on his or her own wavelength. You must seek to entice them away from their private thoughts and share in this time of learning. And so you use the hook. Fishermen use it to get the fish out of the lake into the boat. You use it to bring your students into the Word of life.

There are several qualities of a good hook:

1. *It gets attention.*

"When Princes Diana lost her life, it seems the whole world felt her loss. Many people say she had finally found happiness after years of searching. Team up with a person near you, and in two minutes come up with a list of what most people think makes them happy," asked Pete Carson of his senior adult Sunday school class. Here's something everyone can do, a way in which all can take part. He has their attention. The hook is in. But getting attention isn't the only task of a good hook.

2. *It surfaces a need.*

All of us have needs in our lives. Many of these are right at the surface of our conscious lives; others are more hidden from view and less obvious to us or others. Maybe we are experiencing tension with a coworker or neighbor. Possibly the need is in the form of financial stress or chronic illness. Some have need for friendships and a sense of belonging. Others may face family problems and failing marriages. Then there is the need for encouragement or mutual support in Christian parenting. We want to be godly husbands and wives, mothers and fathers. Children face needs related to family, friends, or school. They have needs that include encouragement, attention, recognition, and acceptance. Adolescents face needs requiring understanding, decision-making guidance, building healthy relationships with the opposite sex, and developing a sense of identity.

When we design the hook, we should have the needs of our group in view. The needs assessment we did earlier should guide us in devising a hook that surfaces needs in the group in a non-threatening, thought-provoking manner. When students sense that the class is related to their needs, they are far more likely to participate in the activities of the class and in the learning process. This can be difficult because frequently students' perceived needs and their true needs differ. The teacher must work to open students' minds and hearts to the spiritual needs Scripture addresses.

3. *It sets a goal.*

We might call this the "direction step." The Hook must provide something to answer the question, "Why should I listen to this?" This is a fair question. If this lesson is going to be about something important to me, I want to pay attention. If it's an irrelevant recounting of dusty data, I do not. Students make that decision quickly. In just the first few words you speak, students tune in or tune out. That's why a hook must set direction for the class. The teacher must give students a reason for listening.

After Pete's students listed their ideas of typical sources of happiness, he showed that the writer of Philippians spoke of joy at a time when his life was far removed from anything we associate with happiness. He then made this statement: "Our goal today is to discover what gave Paul joy, when he had nothing that most people think makes them happy." By this statement he told his class why they should pay attention. All of us want joy. To discover its source the class would listen. He had earned the right to teach. When your students have no reason for learning, no reason that is important to them, you'll find it hard to hold them. But set a goal they want to reach, and they'll be with you. Sometimes students set their goals too low—most of us would prefer to avoid suffering rather than finding purpose in it, for example—so helping them see Scripture through the mind of Christ and set worthy learning goals is part of the teacher's task.

4. *One more thing.*

The hook should lead naturally into the Bible study. When Pete turned to Philippians, the class was under way. A good hook is one of the secrets of effective Bible teaching. When you capture interest, set a goal, and lead your students into the Word, you have a good start on a creative class.

The Book

In the Book section the teacher seeks to clarify the meaning of the passage being studied. In this part of the teaching-learning process, the teacher helps his students get—and understand—the biblical information. Many methods are available for this purpose. The teacher can use a participatory one, such as buzz groups and small group reports. Or he can use a teacher-centered method. A good lecture is the fastest way to cover content and make points. Or one can use charts, visuals, and so forth. Whatever the method, the purpose in this part of the lesson remains constant: to give biblical information and help students understand it.

Pete decided to have the class divide into small groups. He gave each group a set of questions to consider that helped explore the meaning of the passage. He gave one volunteer member of each group a blank overhead transparency along with a marker to record their findings. Each group was to review several references to joy in Philippians. Then the groups reconvened to share the result of their study. After the groups reported back, Pete summarized the comments and said, "Great, now let's put the message of Philippians into a single sentence." After a few tries the class had a single sentence that described the theme of Philippians. Pete had led the class in meaningfully and purposefully exploring the text. As a result, the class had a much better understanding of the overall message of the book. Not only had Pete laid the foundation for the next several classes on this book, but he had set the stage for an investigation of the implications of biblical joy in the lives of his students.

The Look

When the students understand what the Bible says, it's time to move to implications. Their knowledge must be tempered with "spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9). So the next step the teacher must plan for in the lesson preparation process involves guiding the class to discover and grasp the relationship of the truth just studied to daily living.

In the Book section of the class, Pete's students discovered that the sources of Christian joy are getting out the gospel, sacrificing self for others, and the Lord Himself. They learned this through the use of small group inquiry methods. In essence, they gained a head knowledge understanding of the passage. What they discovered together was true information about the nature of Christian joy. But they had not yet identified the implications of that information for Christian living. Pete had to lead the group a step further. Through the Look section, Pete guided the class in dealing with the essential question necessary to reveal life implications. He asked, "But what does this mean for the pattern of our daily lives?" This is the issue explored in the Look section of the teaching plan. Let's see how the Look section unfolded in Pete's class.

Pete recognized that his senior adult class was comprised of Christians with a wide range of life experiences to draw upon. He decided that he would tap that wealth of experience in the group by using a combination of a case study and probing questions to encourage the discovery of implications from the group's study of Philippians. Pete distributed a case study. Here is the case the class was to discuss.

> Bob and Peg Short are a retired couple living in the Midwest. Bob has been retired from his job with a major airline for nearly eight years. He has just turned seventy-three and is in moderately good health. But Bob

faces a debilitating condition that will worsen in the next two to three years to the point where Peg will not be able to care for him alone. So, with reluctance, they decided to move into a life-care retirement community. Both were unhappy with the decision to move but felt that it was the best thing to do in their situation. They dreaded giving up their home and moving into the cramped apartment, and they wondered if they could ever be happy there.

Pete asked the class to consider how the principles they had just learned together might apply to this couple's lives. After much discussion and telling of personal stories related to the case study, the class concluded that Bob and Peg should look at the move as a commissioning to a new mission field. They suggested that they would have opportunities to tell of their faith, minister to others, and deepen their dependence on Christ. In the process of discussing Bob and Peg's case, the students were exploring practical ways that the material covered in class could be related to daily living. Pete summarized their ideas on the overhead. The result—the class had gone the next step in the study of the Bible—they had identified implications for daily life.

The Took

But, like a vaccination, the Word of God is of no effect until we can say it "took." Response is required. Normally, response to teaching will take place outside of class, in weekday life. "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action," the Bible says, "is dead" (James 2:17). For spiritual growth and reality in Christian experience, faith demands response in all the varied situations of human life.

In the Look section of the lesson the teacher encourages such response. The teacher leads the class members to pinpoint personal areas in which they could respond and helps them plan specific ways they *will* respond. Often we leave church full of good intentions. We'll be more loving that week, more dedicated. But because the resolution is vague, because we haven't gone beyond the generalization and implementation phase of learning to actually plan *how* we'll change, no change takes place. The creative Bible teacher knows this. The goal is transformed lives—change. Therefore, creative Bible teachers help students respond by leading them to see God's will and by helping them decide and plan to do it.

Pete did this by distributing postcards to his class. He asked everyone to write their name and address on one side of the card. On the other side he asked them to write down how they would apply the passage in the week ahead. He reminded the group of the implications they had discovered and then gave them time to think and write. He collected the

cards. On Monday he dropped them in the mail so that everyone would have a reminder that arrived in their mailbox later in the week. The next Sunday, the class discussed how they did applying the class on joy to their own life situations.

A TRIP THROUGH TIME

Another way to understand the Hook, Book, Look, Took approach is to picture it as a teacher-led trip through time. Movement of the lesson proceeds from the present (Hook) to the past (Book), back to the present (Look), and into the future (Took). Figure 13 depicts the lesson structure in this way. The teacher's role is one of travel agent and tour guide. As travel agent, the teacher plans the journey. As tour guide, the teacher then leads the trip. But, always, the students are in view. They are the ones doing the traveling. They are full participants in the travel experience. Travel agents and tour guides have a purpose—to enable others to make the journey.

Values of Lesson Structure

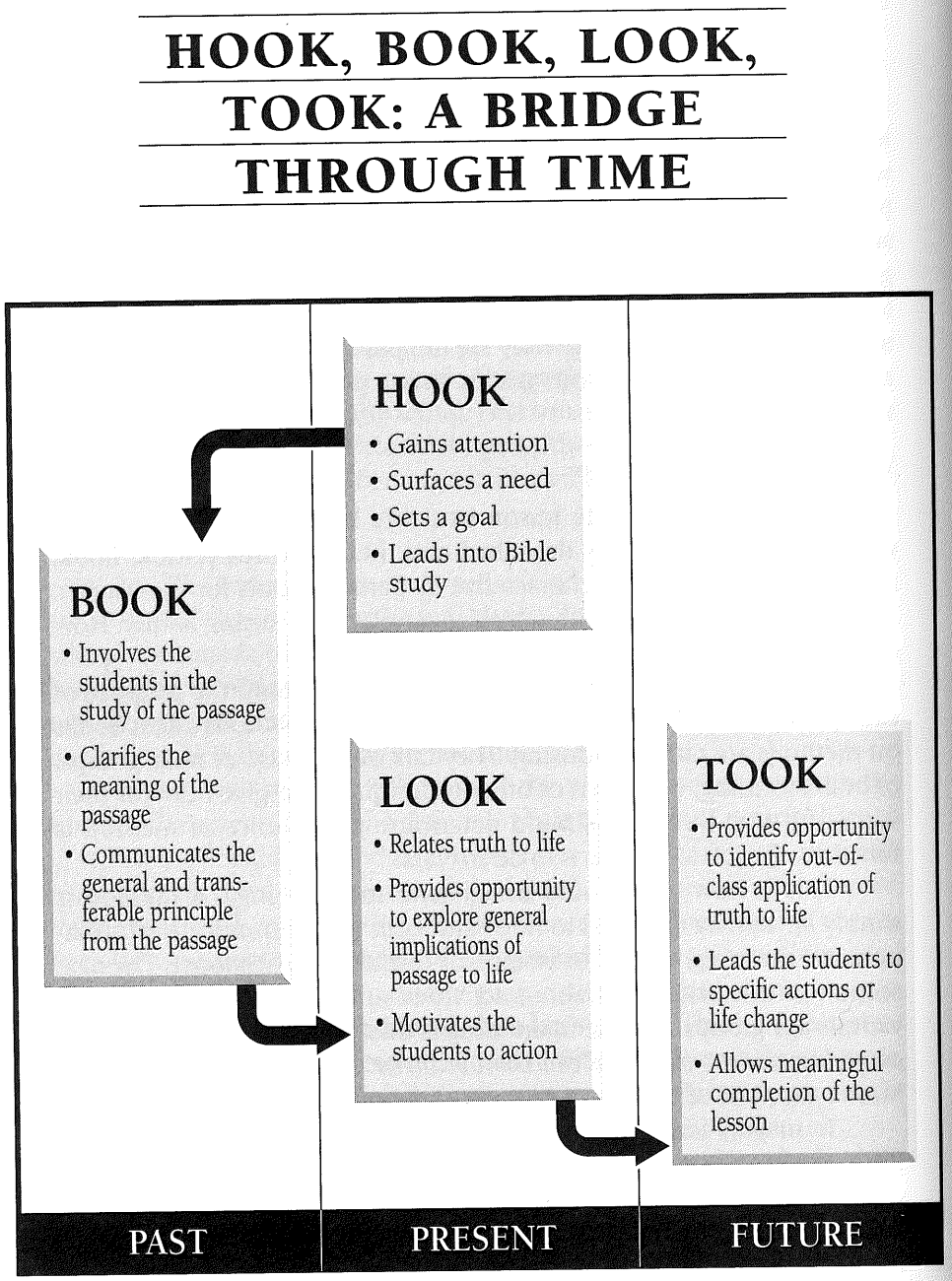
The ability to handle lesson structure is invaluable to the Bible teacher. The process we've described and the key words (Hook, Book, Look, Took) suggested to characterize its parts are tools for the teacher. These are practical tools with which to develop structuring ability. How can these tools be used?

As a guide to method choice. When you understand the purpose of each part of the teaching process, it's easy to select methods. Most books on methods are rather confusing. They talk of role play, of buzz groups, of brainstorming, of dozens of other techniques, and give rules for their successful use. But what should determine your choice of method is function, the job a method is to do in class.

This is how you should understand methodology. A method is simply an activity designed to hook students, to communicate information and meaning, to lead to insight, or to encourage response. The next section of this book talks about activities suited to these purposes for various age groups. But the main thing is this. *If you understand what you are trying to accomplish, you can select or invent an activity to accomplish it.* Master the parts of the lesson process, and method skill will follow.

To simplify lesson planning. Breaking down the process of creative Bible teaching into four parts simplifies lesson planning. It's easy for a teacher who understands the parts of the lesson to build a lesson or to find and correct weaknesses in printed lesson material. Planning is enhanced when some sort of template is followed. That is the advantage of the Hook, Book, Look, Took format.

Figure 13



One More Example

Models are a way many of us learn best. We have to see how something is done, and then we can follow the pattern ourselves. So let's consider one more lesson planning example. We'll see how Alex, the youth worker who leads an urban group of adolescents in a weekly Bible study, planned his lesson on Hebrews 10:19–25. Table 13 is a copy of Alex's lesson plan that shows how he designed the study. You will notice that he has identified his exegetical idea, pedagogical idea, and lesson aims on his lesson plan worksheet. Following this, his worksheet is divided into four sections where he has written his Hook, Book, Look, and Took plans. Through the lesson, Alex hopes to lead his group to establish a group covenant involving a commitment to meet regularly for prayer and mutual support.

NOW YOU TRY IT

Table 14 is a lesson planning worksheet designed to assist you in putting together your own lesson plan. It brings together all of what you have learned to this point in this book. It shows how you can use your understanding of the lesson preparation process to develop a teaching plan. At the top of the worksheet is a place to record the date, the location, and a filing reference for the plan. Use these for future reference. Next is a box to summarize information about the target group. Draw this information from your needs assessment study. Below that are places to indicate the passage being studied and any cross references you plan to use. Continuing down the worksheet you will find boxes to write out the exegetical idea, pedagogical idea, and lesson aims that we discussed in previous chapters. Following these is space for your Hook, Book, Look, and Took. Notice that the Book section is divided vertically so that you can include both your content outline and the methods you plan to use to teach that content. Finally, there is a place to record any evaluative insights you might have after you teach the class. These will help you if you ever teach the material again.

Look over Table 14. Use it to prepare your next teaching session. Review chapters 1 through 9 if you need to. Make sure that your Hook gets attention, sets a goal, and leads into the Bible. Plan the Book to communicate both information and meaning. Check the Look to be sure you guide your students to implications. Finally, construct a Took that will aid and encourage response. The next chapter will give you further help with the application side of teaching, but you already have the tools you need to plan your class!