

Handling Discussion Problems

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As a Bible study leader, are you asking fewer questions due to negative experiences with discussion? Do you feel incompetent responding to problems that sometime crop up when

teens or adults verbally participate? Has some tangent, a monopolizer, a dispute over controversial subject matter or somebody's far-fetched interpretation sabotaged a lesson you worked hard on?

If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, don't give Bible discussions a bad rap just yet. By identifying specific discussion- leading strategies, you will prevent some predicaments and exercise damage control over others. This is the first in a series of Quarterly articles to help you prevent discussion derailments.

I. Managing Monopolizers

Every now and then you encounter a group member who's harder to turn off than Niagara Falls. Though most monopolizers are motivated learners who are passionately involved with the subject matter, their verbal initiatives often cause passivity among others in the group. Here are a few ways to increase the percentage of group members who participate.

1. Introduce a study question with a qualifying remark. I've received lots of mileage out of this one: "The next question should be answered by someone who hasn't contributed yet today." (Except I wouldn't use it if the group consisted of only two or three persons!)
2. Set specific conditions for learner response. Examples: "I appreciate the responsiveness of ladies in the group. Men, now it's your turn to answer the next couple questions." "The next question must be answered by someone to my right (or someone in the last four rows, whose birthday falls in the spring, etc.)."
3. Give a couple of group members who don't monopolize conversations a question or assignment a week in advance. At the appropriate time during the next Bible lesson, ask them to report on their research. Select individuals whom you can count on to follow through, and who possess a high regard for Scripture. Or in the case of teens or relatively new believers, maintain "quality control" by assisting them in the assignment.
4. Plan for a variety of discussion strategies or forms. For instance, divide a larger class into small buzz groups. Give the smaller groups a specific assignment in the Bible text, and a time limit. Tell every small group to appoint a recorder who'll later summarize their findings with the whole class. Mixing the question-answer approach with other forms of discussion broadens participation and may muzzle monopolizers.
5. Speak one-to-one with the monopolizers. If this person's talkativeness is spurred by enthusiasm for learning, make comments similar to the following: "John, you're the kind of learner I'd like to photocopy and put in every chair! But I need your help in getting others as involved in discussions as you are. Because they expect you to respond, they're shifting into a passive mode and aren't wrestling with the questions. I want you to-keep participating. But could you delay your answers to some questions and compel your peers to get more involved?"

II. Controlling Controversies

Identifying ways to confront controversial subject matter is a requisite Bible teaching skill.

1. Anticipate their questions. As you prepare a Bible lesson, try to anticipate questions group members will have about the interpretation and application of thorny issues mentioned in the text. Determining in advance the passage elements that may confuse them serves as an impetus for you to do your homework. By slipping into their Rockports and viewing the passage from the perspective of their age, experience or knowledge level, you'll soon master this

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"head-them-off-at-the-pass" approach to difficult points.

2. If a passage element or topic requires background research to clarify the author's intent, set the stage for discussion with a brief lecture. When the interpretation is unclear at first reading, put a rein on the impulse to ask, "What do you think this means?" God's Word, not human opinion, is the authority. When we pool the ignorance of group members who haven't studied a problem passage in advance, we make a muddle of the gospel and exalt relativism. (For a thought-provoking article on how Bible studies help spread the social disease of relativism, read Walt Russell's "What It Means To Me" in the October 26, 1992 issue of Christianity Today.)

3. Agree to disagree. Different viewpoints on a particular doctrine may exist among your group members. If you're afraid the discussion will bog down, make the following comments: "For centuries, sincere Bible scholars have viewed this doctrine differently. Though it's an important issue, we aren't going to resolve this controversy during this study session. Perhaps the wisest approach is to 'agree to disagree' and move on to other material." (Or if your church promotes a particular interpretation, review it and explain why.)

4. Set a strict time limit for group coverage of the controversial subject. References to predestination or Jesus' return may surface in the context of a long passage that offers lots of other important truths. Remember that the guiding mechanism for your lesson is the main thrust or basic teaching of the passage as a whole, not one problematic phrase or verse. It's easy to spend an inordinate amount of time on an area of disagreement, and neglect practical instruction that isn't up for debate. (For help on the concept of finding the "basic teaching" of a Bible passage, get a copy of Effective Bible Teaching, by Jim Wilhoit and Leland Ryken.)

5. Recommend resources. Mention a book or video series that covers the subject in more depth. Or display a book from your church library that can satisfy their hunger for more meat on the issue.

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