

## PRAISE FOR NOW THAT'S A GOOD QUESTION!

For years I've used Terry's book in the classroom. It's a great resource for students on developing skills for leading discussions.

DR. TOM HUTCHISON  
Christian Education professor, Cedarville University

Terry is out to banish boring Bible studies for good! I enthusiastically recommend this guide to anyone who wants to lead effective Bible discussions.

DR. BRUCE WILKERSON  
Best-selling Author and Founder of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries

I really love Terry's book on Bible discussion! I've studied, highlighted, and meditated on it. It's well written and readable. I like the stories and numerous examples of observation, interpretation, and application questions for a variety of Bible passages.

DR. JOAN HAVENS  
Former Director, Master of Christian Education program, Columbia International University

Terry is an excellent writer, this book is easy to read, and will help you become a better Bible study leader. I know no one in the country who has his wealth of knowledge and experience on this topic. Whether you're writing your own studies or you're using published study guides, you'll grow as a leader by reading this book. If you lead a church's small group ministry, do what I did and buy a copy for every leader!

MICHAEL MACK  
Director, Small Group Leadership

*Now That's a Good Question!* has been a great resource for enlisting teachers as well as teacher training.

RYAN MASON  
Pastor of Adult Ministries, First Baptist Church, Colleyville, Texas

Giving examples of questions and group scenarios throughout the book is so helpful. This is such a neglected area because it's so hard to do. I really like what Terry has done here.

MARY FAITH PHILLIPS  
Former Director of Bible Teaching program, Columbia International University

Terry shows both new and seasoned leaders how to lead discussions that challenge participants to explore the depths of Scripture. This book, well marked and often referred to, belongs on every group leader's shelf.

MARLENE LEFEVER

Author and Christian Education Specialist

After more than 20 years of leading small groups in Young Life, your book is the best training material I've seen in preparing others to lead such groups.

SHELLY BLOMSTEDT

This book is very enriching for my teaching.

PASTOR PAT SANCHEZ

Philippines

When I attended Columbia International University, Terry Powell was my mentor, friend, and professor. He modeled skillfully and with precision how to teach with questions in a course titled, "Leading Bible Studies." *Now That's a Good Question!* is that course in print form! Buy it. Read it. Apply it. It will increase the impact of your teaching or group leadership exponentially.

TONY SOUDER

Executive Director, Chattanooga Youth Network

I have used Terry's book on leading Bible discussions for several years as the main outline for Bible study leader training and development. The primary focus of my training is to help Bible study leaders go beyond presenting material they have learned to guiding students to learn from the Bible themselves. As participants read through Terry's book, they study a passage and develop a Bible study lesson that consists almost entirely of observation, interpretation, and application questions. This lesson is then presented to our class for feedback. The use of good questions in Bible discussion benefits the leader by encouraging interaction, involving students in better discussion and assessing learners' needs and progress. The student benefits by active learning, being motivated and engaged with the Word of God through guided inductive Bible study. I highly recommend Terry's book for anyone who wants to more effectively teach "the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13).

EILEEN GORNALL

Women's Ministry Leader, Fort Bliss, Texas

## PRAISE FOR TERRY'S *SERVE STRONG: BIBLICAL ENCOURAGEMENT TO SUSTAIN GOD'S SERVANTS*

Among Satan's devices for weakening the work of God's servants is the fomenting of discouragement and depression. But there is a biblical counter to this, which Terry Powell spells out vividly and with proven authority. His book is a potent, all-purpose antibiotic for the Christian worker's soul.

JAMES I. PACKER

Regents College, Professor of Theology; Author, *Knowing God*

If I needed surgery, I would look for the best surgeon I could find. If you need encouragement in serving Christ, you've already found the man who's spent his entire life walking in your shoes. Not only has Terry Powell dedicated his life to service, but he is also uniquely qualified to infuse you with enthusiasm to stay at the task.

JERRY B. JENKINS

Novelist and Biographer, Owner, Christian Writer's Guild

What Terry has written, stemming from decades of experience in ministry, recognizes that God's servants often need encouragement. This book will go a long way toward convincing God's servants that their labor is not in vain.

STUART BRISCOE

Prolific author and speaker

Terry's book is a cool drink of biblical refreshment for battered spirits. I have struggled my whole life with negative self talk and debilitating feelings of inadequacy. Here is an amazing arsenal of what he calls learning to 'preach to yourself,' in a positive manner. I highly recommend this book to anyone who struggles with discouragement and faces opposition in their life. That should be just about everyone!

DR. HANS FINZEL

Best-selling author, *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make*

Terry Powell is offering a heart-to-heart talk to his fellow Christian workers. Whether you serve on a volunteer or vocational basis you can use this counsel and encouragement. Terry knows the rugged landscape of ministry and he refuses to sugarcoat his story or yours. Writing with deep authenticity about struggles and challenges with which we all wrestle, Terry offers Biblical insight that builds hope and courage without indulging in tinny triumphalism. If you're a leader responsible for volunteer or vocational Christian workers, you're going to want to give this book to your co-workers—and keep a well-worn copy close by for yourself.

RALPH ENLOW

President, Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE)

As a leader in a growing global mission organization, I am only too familiar with the opposition, sense of inadequacy, and overwhelming discouragement that derail so many men and women in Christian service. Terry Powell's *Serve Strong* is a powerful, Biblical counter-weight to the many forces that drag down God's workers. Its message of encouragement, born out of deep biblical reflection and personal experience, is desperately needed in today's churches and mission fields.

STEVE RICHARDSON  
President, Pioneers-USA

Terry Powell's book is packed with practical help in maintaining enthusiasm in our walk and work for Christ. *Serve Strong* is a booster shot of encouragement for dragging footsteps, and I commend it to you with pleasure.

ROB MORGAN  
Pastor, Donelson Fellowship, Nashville; Author, *The Red Sea Rules*

*Serve Strong* will encourage those who serve and renew their confidence in God's call and leadership. His chapters deal with realistic, practical issues with which those who minister to others struggle, but with powerful Scriptural reminders and personal testimonies that will restore hope and renew the reader.

JERRY RANKIN  
President Emeritus, International Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention

I enjoyed reading Terry's encouraging, Word-centered perspectives for persons involved in ministry. His personal approach will be helpful to whoever reads this.

LARRY RICHARDS  
Author of over 200 books, including *Creative Bible Teaching* and *Bible Teachers' Commentary*

If you are discouraged, disheartened, or at the point of just wanting to quit, *Serve Strong* will be of help to you. If you are excelling in ministry and experiencing fruitfulness, this book is profitable as well—to keep you faithful and centered on the prime things that matter in ministry, and to keep you serving strong.

MARV NEWELL  
Editor, Missio Nexus

As leaders, not many of us like to confess that we are broken, but we all are. Terry addresses that issue and many others in practical ways to assist leaders in walking through times of difficulty. I've been a Christian Education/Family pastor for over 40 years, and now lead an Awana Lifeline prison ministry to inmates and their children. *Serve Strong* is on my "top five" list of books on leadership.

MIKE BROYLES  
Executive Director, Awana Lifeline

NOW THAT'S A GOOD QUESTION!

*Now that's a*  
**GOOD**  
**QUESTION!**

**HOW TO LEAD QUALITY  
BIBLE DISCUSSIONS**

**TERRY POWELL**

**SERVESTRONG**  
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*Dedicated to Larry Richards, educator and author extraordinaire.*

*Larry, from your teaching at Wheaton Graduate School, and your seminal book *Creative Bible Teaching*, I learned how to think about and apply the teaching/learning process. To say that you shaped my career as a Christian Educator is the understatement of the millennium! Any effectiveness I've had in teaching, or in training other Bible teachers, is in large part due to your influence in honing my grace-gift from God.*



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Kelly Smith of Tallgrass Media deserves kudos for the book cover and internal design of content. He does an excellent job with book editorial and design work, as well as website development. You can contact him at [www.tallgrassmedia.com](http://www.tallgrassmedia.com).



## INTRODUCTION

# *Preview of Coming Attractions*

Can you identify with the following prayer?

*Dear God, so far today I've done all right. I haven't gossiped or lost my temper. I haven't cheated anyone out of money or stared at a beautiful woman with lust. I haven't been grumpy or selfish, and I'm really glad of that. But in a few minutes, Lord, I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on, I'm going to need all the help I can get. Amen.*

Who doesn't need lots of help to make it through the day! "Help" is often the cry of small group leaders and Sunday School teachers too. I've had my share of times when I needed counsel or a fresh idea. That's the purpose of this book: to help you in your significant role as a group leader.

The help you'll receive here relates to the "Bible discussion" aspect of your role. Together we'll explore the factors that affect group members' motivation and find ways to foster a hospitable group climate in which discussion thrives. You'll learn how to delve into God's Word for yourself to prepare for discussion. You'll discover how to ask questions so participants can observe, interpret, and apply the Bible. We'll illustrate the guidelines for questions that are educationally and biblically sound and then show you how to put your questions and study notes into a logical sequence on paper. Next we'll examine leader behaviors that improve the quality of group interaction and increase the number of people who participate in the discussion. Then we'll examine how to prevent or minimize problems such as monopolizers, tangents, and a "pooling of ignorance" that characterizes some Bible discussions.

Perhaps this book will be the way God answers your cry for help. Before we go any further, let me explain what I mean by “Bible discussion.”

**DEFINITION**

*Effective Bible Discussion*

*Effective Bible discussion, generated by a hospitable learning environment, is a guided conversation that involves people in observing, interpreting, and applying God's Word.*



*Take the above definition to heart. By the time you finish this book, you'll know why it is crafted in this precise manner.*

Of course, all Bible discussion should be done in prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit to illuminate God's Word and guide the interaction. Beyond this, successful Bible discussions have at least six components:

- 💡 A leader who originates and directs the conversation
- 💡 One or more questions to provoke thought
- 💡 A meaningful, specific goal for group interaction
- 💡 Two or more interested participants
- 💡 An authoritative source of truth (God's Word)
- 💡 A supportive learning environment

In chapter 1 you'll learn how to accomplish the “hospitable learning environment” part of the definition.



## CHAPTER 1

# *Creating a Climate for Discussion*

A local advertising periodical offered the following disclaimer: *Just in case you find mistakes in this paper, please remember they were put there for a purpose. Some folks are always looking for mistakes, and we try to please everyone!*

Now that's an original way to cover your tracks! Just make light of any failures somebody might spot. Then no one thinks twice about them. When it comes to making mistakes, we're all pros. But there's one mistake discussion leaders make to their own peril: taking the group's "learning atmosphere" or "feeling tone" for granted. We flirt with failure when we're insensitive to the factors that either stimulate or stifle folks' participation.

*This chapter advances the principle that effective Bible discussion depends on a warm, hospitable climate.* If the environment is cool, impersonal, or unsafe, discussion fizzles, no matter how sound the questions are that we ask. What follows are seven strategies for creating a climate that fosters sizzling interaction.

### **CARING**

My wife and I were in our mid-20s when we joined our first small group Bible study. We became fast friends with others in the group. When one of us had a problem or faced a challenge, we knew we could count on the others. When we moved out of state a year later, I wept because of the bond that would be broken.

The first critical factor in establishing a motivational climate is caring. When leaders show genuine interest in people and when group members put

a premium on relationships, Bible discussions receive a boost. Participants are more likely to interact when they know others in the room accept and care about them.

The interpersonal dimension of a Bible-teaching ministry was paramount to the apostle Paul. While reminiscing about his ministry among the Thessalonians, he wrote, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

Here are ways to facilitate a caring environment:

- 💡 **Pray for the Holy Spirit to create a strong bond among group members.** Cultivating close fellowship is a spiritual endeavor, not solely the result of human effort.
- 💡 **Ask the Lord to give you love for each person in the group, especially those whose temperaments or idiosyncrasies tend to get on your nerves.** Then ask him to show you concrete ways to express that love. One strategy is to pray regularly for them. God often changes our attitude toward people when we intercede for them. And let them know you’re praying for them.
- 💡 **Be the first to arrive at the meeting site and greet people as they enter.** Ask them questions about their week or follow up on something they said in the previous session. I’m an introverted, task-oriented person, but I still shower people with attention when they enter the room. I force myself to do it, even when I don’t feel like it, because it sets a positive tone for the session. I won’t allow my fluctuating emotions to control me.
- 💡 **Be sure you or someone in the group calls anyone who misses a session.** Don’t harass them for not attending; just let them know they were missed.
- 💡 **Send handwritten notes in the mail to encourage participants.** Salute someone who exhibits enthusiasm for learning or has a big appetite for God’s Word. Thank a group member whose transparency took a lot of courage. Express gratitude to someone who

comforted a hurting group member.

- 💡 **Plan and implement a Bible study on authentic fellowship.** As a group, examine the Bible passages in the box and discuss these questions: *What expressions of fellowship can we glean from these verses? Who can share a time when you've been on the receiving end of one of these forms of fellowship? What are some hindrances to experiencing fellowship of this sort? How can we demonstrate these forms of fellowship within our group?*
- 💡 **When you form a new group, don't delve into Bible content right off the bat.** Employ get-acquainted or team-building activities to increase folks' comfort level with each other. See the Team-Building sidebars scattered throughout this book.

## *The Word on Caring*

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16).

"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2).

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

"Be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18).

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10).

"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15).

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7).

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

## LAUGHTER

Humor surfaces normally when folks enjoy being together. Don't feel constrained to collect an arsenal of jokes and fire a volley at the group each week. It is wise, however, to plant a humorous anecdote in a study when you can connect it to a concept or principle from a Bible passage.

I once led a sobering lesson on the evidence of moral erosion in King Solomon's life. The older he got, the more foolishly he acted. To introduce this high-profile exception to the "older is wiser" rule, I offered a few telltale signs of aging.

### *You know you're growing old when...*

- 💡 you sink your teeth into a steak...and they stay there.
- 💡 your back goes out more than you do.
- 💡 you lean over to pick up something off the floor, and you start wondering, "Now what else can I do while I'm down here?"
- 💡 you sit in a rocking chair and can't make it go.
- 💡 you turn the lights out for economic rather than romantic reasons.

Next, I made a clear transition into Solomon's later years. Laughter is a social lubricant for the learning environment. The absence of appropriate humor in small group interaction settings may be an indicator of poor bonding.

Humor also aids retention of content you're covering. Researchers tested two different college classes six weeks after they received the same lecture from the same professor. One class received

### *Try This!*

Ask group members to select one item from their wallet or purse to use in introducing themselves or to disclose personal information, such as a photo, receipt, or business card. Give everyone time to display and explain the items. Encourage others to ask probing questions that elicit even more information.



several humorous anecdotes that related to the material while the other didn't. Students who had heard the humor-laced presentation remembered more (Debar Korobkin, "Humor in the Classroom," in *College Teaching*).

How does humor improve recall of information? Humor is graphic and causes a visual image to appear in the mind. Images are easier to remember than abstract ideas or mere words.

The Internet teems with clean humor. You can also peruse the shelves in the humor section of a bookstore. My favorites are Richard Lederer's *Anguished English* series and Jay Leno's series on true but ridiculous headlines. These books are dated, but the humor is timeless.

It's okay to share humorous stuff once in a while, even when it doesn't tie into your Bible study. There's truth to the old adage that humor breaks the ice and heats up the atmosphere.

### *Wise Words*

"I have lost count of the times I have stood before an audience that was hostile to the message of Christ, only to see their hearts made soft and receptive by the appropriate use of humor. Whether the audience is six or sixty, humor can break down barriers that almost nothing else can." — Ken Davis, *Secrets of Dynamic Communication*

### **⚠ CAUTION!**

Exercise sensitivity in your use of humor. What you say shouldn't make anyone look bad, whether or not the person is part of your group. Don't belittle an ethnic group or nationality. Any joke you tell should be acceptable to you if you heard it from your child or teenager. But it's usually okay to poke fun at yourself! The person who learns to laugh at himself will never cease to be entertained.

## INTERCESSION

I once heard intercession defined as “rebellion against the status quo.” To pray for your group members and to reserve meeting time for them to pray for one another acknowledges dependence on the Holy Spirit. It shuttles them from the “spiritual status quo” to greater Christlikeness. Folks who bear each other’s burdens in this manner will feel free to ask or respond to questions during a Bible study.

Consider the following ways to enhance the ministry of intercession within your group.

- 💡 **Tag the following questions onto the end of your Bible studies:**  
*What personal needs has the Holy Spirit exposed during this study?  
How can we pray with you about those needs?*

- 💡 **Link times of intercession to lesson application.** In a study I led on “The Ministry of Encouragement,” everyone shared with a partner the names of persons who were experiencing discouraging circumstances. After brainstorming for concrete, realistic ways to encourage those in need, everyone prayed for his partner to follow through on at least one idea. If you have a close-knit group, ask everyone to huddle with one or two others before dispersing. They can discuss application ideas and pray for each other’s follow-through.

### *Wise Words*

“If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer. Intercession is a way of loving others.” —Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*

is chock-full of references to intercession. For instance, my title for Nehemiah 1 is “The Ministry of Intercession.” The following questions directed learners into the passage and encouraged application:

- » *What need prompted Nehemiah’s intercession?*
- » *What needs of people in our phase of life should prompt our prayers for one another?*
- » *Based on Chapter 1, what qualities did Nehemiah possess?*
- » *Why are those traits essential to intercession?*
- » *What can we learn about intercession from Nehemiah’s prayer in verses 5-11?*
- » *What insights from Nehemiah 1 are most applicable to our relationships within this group?*

- 💡 **Model the level of personal disclosure you want group members to reach.** Share prayer requests of your own that are personal, reveal a struggle, and show your dependence on the body of Christ for support.
- 💡 **Distribute a list of all group members’ e-mail addresses.** Encourage everyone to e-mail or text all the others the day they become aware of a group member’s illness or special need. This way they can start interceding before the next gathering of the group.

## METHODOLOGY

A mom asked her first-grader, “What did you learn in school today?” A frown creased his face as he replied, “Nothing. The teacher taught and taught so much I didn’t have time to learn anything!” A variety of methods is important for all ages. Bible discussion flourishes in a small group or class where participatory methods are the norm, not the exception.

The more consistently we involve learners, the more successful any attempt at discussion will be. If we pop a question out of the blue to a group accustomed to straight lecture, we’ll likely receive limited responses.

Yet in a group where a mix of methods is routine, what happens when we pose the same question? The room buzzes with dialogue! Involve your group members with a variety of approaches, and watch the learning atmosphere heat up.

What prompts me to strive for variety in my discussions is the predictability principle. Howard Hendricks suggests that *the more predictable one's teaching methodology, the lower the impact on learners. The less predictable one's choice of learning activities, the greater the impact (Color Outside the Lines).*

You also need guidelines for determining which method to employ for a particular lesson or group. Here are a few questions I ask myself when I'm trying to decide which learning activity to employ or how to adapt published lesson plans:

- 💡 **How should the nature of this Bible passage affect my choice of methods?** Is some of the material so complex or controversial that I need to set the stage for discussion with a brief lecture?
- 💡 **How does the location where my group meets affect the choice of learning activities?** Is there enough space to sit in a circle or divide into smaller buzz groups? Will a particular approach disturb a group that's meeting nearby? How do I adapt a lesson I've taught in Sunday school to the more informal setting of the den in my home?
- 💡 **How does my time limit affect the approach I take for this study?** Should I substitute one discussion strategy for another that will take less time?
- 💡 **Which approach is most likely to facilitate a hospitable climate and get members interacting with each other, not just with me as the leader?**
- 💡 **Will my methods and questions enable group members to experience all three phases of Bible study: observation, interpretation, and application?** Chapters 2 to 4 equip you to ask questions corresponding to all three phases of study.
- 💡 **What activities are most appropriate for my particular group?**

How does group size, age, level of spiritual maturity, educational background, or amount of small group experience affect their degree of receptivity to particular strategies or questions?

- 💡 **Am I comfortable implementing a method I've never tried before?** Am I confident it will succeed, or do I fear that it will flop? (I want to expand my horizons and try new things, yet I need to believe in a learning activity for it to succeed.)



*Note: The Super-Size It! sections throughout this book contain tips that are relevant to larger group or classroom discussions.*

## SUPER-SIZE IT!

Recruit an outgoing “class host or hostess” for the Sunday school class you teach. This person’s ministry is vital to establishing a warm, hospitable environment in a large class. The role alleviates the pressure on you as a Bible-discussion leader and allows you to concentrate on the day’s study. Here are several things this person can do:



Arrive early and greet any visitors to the class, then introduce them before the Bible lesson starts

Circulate a sign-up sheet so different class members can bring refreshments from week to week

Update the class about members who are sick

Elicit “news and prayer requests” from members, which lead to a short period of intercession

## ASSIMILATION

How well does your group assimilate new people? Find out by answering these questions:

- 💡 *What percentage of guests attending my group return?*
- 💡 *How frequently do newcomers drop out after a few weeks or months?*
- 💡 *What words describe the behavior of “regulars” toward visitors?*
- 💡 *What strategies do I employ to cultivate a sense of belonging and improve assimilation?*
- 💡 *How do we follow up and make contact with a person after he or she visits the first time?*

### DEFINITION

## *Assimilate*

To absorb into a system or into the cultural tradition of a particular group of people. Assimilation occurs in a small group or class when a visitor feels welcome and quickly shifts from marginal commitment to consistent participation.

Right after a new person or couple joins your group is a good time to implement another team-building activity. Select one that expedites the learning of everyone’s name.

## TRANSPARENCY

Sometimes the pivot on which a good Bible discussion turns is the leader’s transparency. Transparency takes the form of sharing a personal illustration or asking participants to intercede on your behalf. What happens when you add a personal dimension to your leadership? You send positive messages to group members.

*“What we’re studying has encouraged or convicted me.”*

*“This has been prepared in my heart, not just my head.”*

*“I’m not self-sufficient. I need to lean on Christ daily, and I need others in the body of Christ.”*

Genuinely identify with learners or come across as real, and you've found the key to their hearts.

Thirty interviews with Bible college students unveiled to me the power of revealing personal experiences. In my doctoral dissertation research, I asked students to describe behaviors of faculty members that improve student-faculty relationships. What they shared also applies to Bible-study settings. Twenty-six out of thirty mentioned transparency as a positive teaching trait leading to non-classroom student-teacher interaction! I heard these kinds of phrases often:

*“When a teacher shows the down side of himself”*

*“When they share personal experiences”*

*“When an instructor talks about her own problems in daily living for God”*

One student echoed the sentiment of others when he said, “It shows that a teacher understands what I’m going through.” Another respondent remembered his youth ministry professor’s testimony about a time she was “disappointed with God” and didn’t feel connected to him. “I was having trouble with the same thing,” he reported, “and I could relate to her and we talked about it.”

Should a leader publicize every secret she’s ever shared with God? No. Divulge every private sin that’s ever plagued him? Of course not! Be discreet about what you say. Don’t feel you have to show all your failings to others in the group. Before choosing what personal things to share, think about these six guidelines:

### *Wise Words*

“Our earthiness must be as apparent to others as the power is, so they may see that the secret is not us, but God. That is why we must be transparent people, not hiding our weaknesses and failures, but honestly admitting them when they occur.”

—Ray Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*

## 6 GUIDELINES FOR PERSONAL SHARING

1. Will my personal anecdote accelerate biblical understanding by clarifying a truth we're covering?
2. Will my personal illustration show either the benefits of obeying a particular truth, or the painful consequences of neglecting it?
3. Will my self-revelation encourage others to share needs and prayer requests?
4. Will self-disclosure meet a genuine need in my life for emotional support and prayer?
5. Will my illustration portray family members or friends in a negative manner?
6. Have I received permission to tell the story from people who could be embarrassed by it?

Although you should be selective in your sharing, transparency is an in-your-face slam dunk against hypocrisy and superficiality in a group.

Also strive to promote transparency among your group members. Perhaps the wisest approach is to ask for personal reactions to the Bible lesson you're covering. In any given session, I may employ just one or two questions. I reserve questions of this sort for the final minutes of a study. Here's a list of questions that have been successful for me:

- 💡 What personal application or carry-over idea has the Lord given you from this study?
- 💡 What personal need or issue has the Holy Spirit exposed during this study? How can we pray with you about it?
- 💡 Who can illustrate one of our lesson truths from your personal experience?
- 💡 What fresh, I-never-thought-of-that-before insight did you glean from today's Scripture?
- 💡 As we identified timeless truths in today's lesson, perhaps a positive role model came to mind. If so, tell us about this person. How did



he or she apply or demonstrate some point we covered?

- 💡 What unresolved questions on this subject matter still goad you?

## ENVIRONMENT

The nature of your surroundings—your physical environment—affects the learning climate. Years ago I read a study showing the correlation between the quality of relationships among members of deacon boards and their meeting location. Those who met in homes, with softer seating and more informal surroundings, reported deeper-level friendships and more meaningful intercession among members than the boards who met at church (*Church Administration*). What can you do to make your meeting place more hospitable?

If you want to “think outside the box” and be really creative, try the “rotation principle.” Periodically change the meeting location so it fits the theme of your Bible study. Let these examples serve as catalysts for your thinking.

- 💡 Launch a series on Philippians from an empty jail cell. Paul wrote from prison and demonstrated joy despite confinement.
- 💡 Discuss God’s creativity from Genesis 1 or Psalm 8 during an outdoor picnic.
- 💡 To explore the role of discipline in spiritual growth, meet in a gym or exercise room. Cite parallels between discipline in the physical and spiritual realms.
- 💡 Go to a cemetery to examine texts on the brevity or uncertainty of life (Ps. 39:4-6; 49:5-12; 90:10-12, or James 4:13-15). Or use the same site to study 2 Timothy 4, where Paul gave his “last will and testament” before his impending death.
- 💡 Meet in the conference room of a bank for a Bible study on money.
- 💡 Start a series on parenting by sitting on the carpet in your church’s nursery.

## **SUPER-SIZE IT!**

If space permits, try a U-shaped layout in your youth or adult classroom. This allows all participants to see each other and promotes an interchange of ideas. You can still sit in front,



with a marker board behind you for use. Your spot still connotes a measure of authority and control if you consider that important. You can switch between standing and sitting during the lesson, as needed. There's an added advantage if everyone sits around tables. Tables provide learners a natural protection against the discomfort some may feel about sharing. They feel less exposed, less vulnerable to peers' analysis of their ideas. This is especially true for teens.

### **WHAT MESSAGE DOES YOUR MEETING LOCATION CONVEY?**

*Do the cleanliness, décor, and seating arrangement provide a welcome mat? Are refreshments provided to help achieve an informal atmosphere? Is the room temperature too stuffy or uncomfortably cool? Is interaction enhanced by a seating arrangement where everyone can see others' faces?*

## BRINGING IT HOME

Seven words provide an organizational framework for this chapter, representing strategies for creating a group climate that stimulates discussion.

- C**ARING: Show concern for group members and work to enhance their relationships with each other.
- L**AUGHTER: Weave discreet humor into your meetings.
- I**NTERCESSION: Make prayers for one another a priority.
- M**ETHODOLOGY: Vary your approach to discussions.
- A**SSIMILATION: Make visitors feel welcome and accepted.
- T**RANSPARENCY: Model the kind of openness you want to see in the group.
- E**NVIRONMENT: Prepare your meeting place so it's warm and hospitable.

The first letter of each word forms an easy-to-remember acronym: **C-L-I-M-A-T-E**. You don't have to be a meteorologist to keep tabs on the climate in your group.