

# Keeping Bible Study on Track

by Naomi Schmidt

The history of the Christian church, including WELS, has too many examples of lay led or women's Bible study groups that have wandered from the purpose of Bible study, which is learning more about God and the objective truths revealed in his Word. Knowingly, or unknowingly, inaccurate theology has crept in and created confusion, especially when there are participants that are young in faith. At other times a shift has occurred as sanctification overrides justification, or the main goal becomes a discussion of our feelings or building relationships with one another. As a result, what should be a great blessing has become divisive and damaging within a congregation. The following are suggestions for safeguards to prevent "a good thing going bad."

**Goal:** Recognize the value and purpose of your pastor's (or elders' or church council's) authority under which you are operating. God put them in place to guide, support, and equip you in your teaching. Appreciate, make use of, and listen to them! It is important that the group exist within the context of the public ministry of the congregation. It is wise to avoid a connection between the group and a single personality. Check in with them to discuss how the Bible study is going and see what concerns or suggestions arise. Consider some of these goals and assessment questions:

## **Assessment Question:**

- How is the group utilizing the blessing of spiritual authority?

**Goal:** All study materials should be reviewed in advance and approved by the pastor. There should be regular leader study sessions with the pastor or someone he designates. Any question the leader is unsure of should be referred to the pastor or someone he delegates. Should questions arise in a lesson, your pastor stands ready to guide you to the best of his ability. Share with him concerns and needs that have surfaced.

## **Assessment Questions:**

- How well does the communication/teaching flow between pastor, leader, and the group?
- Do they see the pastor being "connected" to the class as a source of biblical knowledge and spiritual responsibility?

**Goal:** All classes should be planned and led. This is no place for “laissez-faire” (lazy free) leadership styles. Prepare well for each session. Begin each study session and class with prayer. Ask that the Holy Spirit open your hearts to God’s wisdom and that all grow closer to Jesus as Savior and Lord.

**Assessment Questions:**

- How well does the leader prepare for the lessons?
- Does the leader humbly approach God’s Word with prayer?

**Goal:** The leader is a representative of Christ and his Church. As such, a leader will want to live in such a way that will honor and uphold the reputation of God and the church.

**Assessment Questions:**

- Does the leader demonstrate a commitment to the Means of Grace and other outward practices that keep his/her faith strong and reflect well on the church?
- Is the leader kind and willing to involve everyone, preventing cliques?

**Goal:** We need to be careful that sanctification doesn’t overshadow justification. Furthermore, Bible study should be Christ-centered, not with a focus on Christ simply as an example but on Christ as God’s loving sacrifice.

**Assessment Questions:**

- Which has the greater emphasis in Bible study, justification or sanctification?
- Does Christ’s example become something we should follow to live a better life or is there a proper understanding of His vicarious atonement?

**Goal:** While a side effect of the small group might be growth in the Christian life or the development of friendships, the primary objective ought to be study of the objective truths of the Bible.

**Assessment Question:**

- While the discussion may include personal thoughts and encouraging words to one another, is the primary focus of the discussion the objective truth of Scripture?

**Goal:** The overriding purpose and objective of the class should be to focus on our relationship with God, not on our relationships with each other. A *primary* emphasis on building relationships and increasing love for one another takes the attention away from the source of these fruits of faith.

**Assessment Questions:**

- Do “bonding” and group dynamics outweigh the emphasis of our relationship with Christ?
- Is there an emphasis on talking about self and sharing feelings or creating an accountability group?
- Does the focus of the conversation sometimes focus on your “level” of sanctification? Do participants leave with the comfort of the gospel or demands of the law?

Closing thoughts from Professor Tiefel: *“The solution seems simple. Keep the focus of small group study on the objective facts of Scripture. With a primary emphasis on the divine-human relationship, individual sanctification will increase, just as God promises.”*

When surveyed, WELS pastors listed the following advantages of small group or lay-led Bible Studies. How many of these can you thank God for?

- Small group study makes it possible for more people to become involved in discussion and application of Bible truths.
- Small group study recognizes that not all people learn best in formal educational settings.
- Small group study seems to remove barriers that tend to keep people from identifying personal difficulties and problems as well as from making and sharing personal applications of a Bible truth
- Small group study affords an opportunity for people to gain a more personal ownership of Bible truth because they are obligated by group dynamics to participate in the small group discussion.
- Small group study allows for targeting Bible study to more specific groups in the congregation (young married people, singles, etc.)
- Small group study gives people an opportunity to develop the gift of teaching and sharing the

Word.

- Small group study allows lay people to see that the victories of the gospel do not depend on the presence of the pastor but on the presence of the Word.
- Small group study encourages participants to view the life of faith as a whole life matter, rather than a “church-life” or “Sunday-life” issue.
- Small group study provides the context in which to develop a caring, interactive community of believers who work at growing in their ability to give personal support and encouragement.
- Especially in larger congregations, small groups may offer fellowship with other like-minded couples or individuals. It is often difficult in large congregations to identify those with whom there may be an affinity.
- Some small groups might offer opportunities for service that other congregational organizations do not highlight (e.g., child care).
- Small group study provides another side-door entry into the congregation, thus becoming an evangelism tool.
- In a congregation with limited facilities, small group study makes it possible for more classes to meet simultaneously.
- Small group study frees the pastor to be able to focus on other aspects of ministry.
- Small group Bible study can supplement and complement the pastor’s Bible classes.

Source/Work Cited: “Small Group Bible Study and Adult Education in the WELS” Seminary Essay by James P. Tiefel. <http://www.wlssays.net/node/1529>