

Tips to Help the Bible Come Alive for Bible Study Groups

by Mary Jane Oliveri

Have you ever wondered if the people in your Bible studies are learning and living out what they learn from your Bible study groups? Here are some ideas for before, during and after your gathering to make learning and applying Biblical principles to life more relevant and concrete.

BEFORE

1. **Use time before the Bible study to prepare, so your face-to-face time can be more about engaging with the text rather than just reading it.** A “flipped class” is one where participants have studied the content and related questions BEFORE your gathering starts so that time together can be spent on *application and interaction with* that content and each other. There is no need to go over each question or offer a “message” in lecture format. Give learners options for preparation before class so they can better engage when you are together.

For example:

Assign participants to read the passage of scripture to be studied. Invite them to list what strikes them as meaningful and also write down what questions they have;
Assign the Scripture reading and invite everyone to think of 1 time when this was especially true in their life. Then when you are face-to-face everyone can share their personal application of the text.

2. **Check in with the group.** Allow space for learners to communicate with each other during the week. By checking in around a meaningful question, reminder or quote, the group will keep their Bible study learning top-of-mind.

For example:

Create a Facebook group or wiki, or send out a weekly email or group phone text with a prompt.

3. **Pray.** Reinforce the importance of praying without ceasing! This will help build safety, trust and authenticity in the group.

For example:

Use SMS, Skype text, email or other social media tool to relay prayer requests.

DURING

1. **Use visuals.** Visuals can reinforce learning and are especially helpful for visual learners.

For example:

Compare/contrast Biblical characters using Venn diagram;

Post the discussion questions on a flip chart or handout and refer to them as you work;
Use images as a metaphor for concepts or themes you are working on.

2. **Personalize.** Make the learning relevant by personalizing the tasks.

For example:

Offer choice in how to engage with a Biblical text – adult learners will choose what is most meaningful and relevant for them: “As you read this Biblical text, think of a situation in your work, volunteer or family life that...”;

Ask “How would you feel if?” questions. Read a story from scripture and ask everyone to put themselves in the place of one of the characters and then explore possible feelings and emotions of the person. Heart engagement can often ensure deeper learning and dialogue then head/analytical learning.

3. **Offer variety.** By varying the learning tasks, different learning styles, interests and personality types will be honored and invited.

For example:

Meditate using practices such as “lectio divina” or centering prayer;

Draw an image of what is being talked about i.e. picture of how they experience God in their life;

Change meeting locations;

Engage in a solo task where individuals sit on their own or go for a walk to complete a task;

Do a “walk and talk”.

4. **Foster creativity.** This can help people move from an analytical head response to an emotional heart response. Emotion-based work can tap into otherwise well protected stories, feelings and thoughts. Creativity can evoke this.

For example:

Try group games like Jeopardy on PowerPoint;

Invite groups to share a section of the Biblical text to the rest of the group in a creative way i.e. role play, mime, etc;

Meet in a fun environment i.e. restaurant;

Invite a personal understanding of the Biblical text in a way that is meaningful to each individual.

5. **Ensure autonomy.** When people direct their own learning and are involved in their own decision-making, it sticks.

For example:

Allow participants to explore how THEY would like to do Bible study;

Let individuals personally decide how they want to apply the biblical lesson of the week to their lives.

6. **Make it relevant.** Connect the task to current life events to make the learning concrete, interesting and relevant to each individual.

For example:

Write a newspaper front page about a Bible story, i.e. the Flood or the Fall;
Draw a picture of what your life would be like 10 years from now, if you truly lived this Biblical text out day-to-day.

7. **Respect introverts and extroverts.** Give space for different ways to process – we don't all learn in the same way.

For example:

Provide enough time for reflectors to reflect by giving learning tasks that are done in silence and on their own;
Invite pair work;
Give people a choice of how and with whom they would like to work;
Let everyone write their thoughts down before sharing in the large group.

8. **Ensure everyone has a voice.** People will engage more deeply when they feel respected for the unique experiences and knowledge they bring. Ensure that all are heard as you invite everyone to share and engage in the learning.

For example:

Use pair and small group work;
Make it less about you and *more about them*. A Bible study group is about learning *together* and not about one person having all the answers.

9. **Be authentic.** Learning will only happen when participants truly believe they are in a group and space they can trust with their deep feelings, questions and stories. The more authentic you are while leading, the more the group will trust you to lead them in a learning and discovery process.

For example:

Be willing to say you don't know and would like to explore it more;
Suggest further study during the week and that you will come back next week with what you have learned;
Bounce questions back to the group, suggesting that we all hold knowledge and it is not only the leader who should answer.

AFTER/BETWEEN

1. **Continue the dialogue.** Learning and support of the learning does not stop when everyone goes home – it needs to keep going! It's important to keep the conversations, thinking, inquiry and working going so there is increased possibility of real growth.

For example:

Ask participants to keep a journal where they jot down thoughts and questions as they continue journeying with the Bible text or theme you are studying;

Encourage having “support partners”. These pairs can prayer for each other, connect during the week, and even challenge each other.

2. **Support the learning.** Explore ways of reinforcing the learning.

For example:

Email a relevant YouTube video, short PowerPoint or inspiring quote between one session and the next – connect it to what you are learning;

Email one provocative question or invitation once a week about the topic being learned;

Practice the skill that was taught i.e. certain way of praying, certain spiritual practice in the morning. Then everyone can share how it went when they are back together.

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