

# GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS

## INTRODUCTION

***This is the bread and butter of a coach — leading a small group discussion.*** We believe that students learn better and more deeply through a discussion than through a lecture. A lecture is passive; students sit and listen to it. A discussion is active. The student must think, he must participate, and he must verbalize his thoughts. We recommend that you read this lecture every week for the first month, then read it once a month for the first four months, and then next year go through it once a quarter and after that study it once a year. I've done it myself and it has really helped me.

## I. THE FUNCTIONS OF THE LEADER

**The main responsibility** of a discussion coach **is to ask good questions.** The coach is not to provide mini-lectures or a statement of his own views on the topic that is being studied. We all have had the temptation to do that, "You know what I think..." and we want to tell everybody what we think. Somehow, we assume that what we think is a little bit more important than what the other person thinks. Or maybe a student gives a short answer and then you give a five-minute sermon.

**A discussion coach asks and re-asks questions,** phrasing them to meet the needs of the group as it goes through the learning process. The coach may make limited remarks but beware of giving speeches. The coach's remarks should not be with the intention of agreeing or disagreeing or adding opinions. His remarks should indicate to the participants that he is listening eagerly to hear more, or seeks to understand what is being said. The coach is a catalytic agent who should fade into the background when the group can proceed without him. So, you begin a discussion or may change the discussion, but when people are really talking, you just let them go to it and all you have to do is just say, "And what do you think about that?" to somebody who is not participating. The whole idea is that you are the driver. The group is the motor. They do all the work, but you steer it so that at the end of the session you have arrived at your destination.

The coach should not talk more than 20% of the time and much less is even better. Some good coaches can ask one good question, one main question, for a whole hour. And after that they can say, "And what else?" Everybody is thinking and studying and learning. The coach should not be afraid of silence. I think that's the only thing I'm afraid of in my whole life. If nobody talks, I want to talk. coach

### A. Initiating

The coach knows the topic. He knows what he wants his students to learn that in that session. He knows how to get from A to Z. So, he begins it. If you ask a student to begin you may go off on a wrong track. The coach must have a good question, and with one jump you are in the center of the lesson. The coach knows what the group needs to learn from this lesson.

#### 1. **Guidance of transition**

In guiding transition, the coach takes the discussion from one topic to another smoothly. There are several transitions to be made during a session. To begin with he helps the people move from their thoughts about where they have been that day and the problems at home to what they have been preparing. He can do that with an appropriate question based on some of the factual parts of the lesson. Once they are thinking about that, then he can move them on to some of the deeper elements. And then on to the application. But each time he must move the group, having planned how important one area is and how much time he thinks they must spend on that part of the lesson.

#### 2. **Ask questions**

That's his main task. Come prepared with good questions. If you have not studied and reviewed the lesson, you cannot ask good questions. Even if you have taught this lesson a dozen times, make sure

you reviewed this lesson again and thought how best to communicate it to this particular group of students.

### 3. *Getting something started*

A good coach plans how he wants to begin the lesson, how he wants to involve the students. This is the one time when he needs to talk, although briefly, as he moves the students to begin thinking in the direction he is going.

## B. Information input

The coach can give additional information that helps the students' understanding. The books don't cover all information and so **a good coach gives some additional information**. Why does he do that?

### 1. *To stimulate group thinking*

If you are coaching *Old Testament Survey* lessons, this is a good time to give some historical background that hasn't been included in the lessons. Explain what the world was like at that time, what kind of culture the Egyptians had, and the influence Moses' training had on his leadership.

### 2. *Clarify*

In a discussion about the life of Moses you may want to give details about different critical experiences in his life to explain why he is revered in Scriptures. Sometimes during a discussion, a point needs further clarification, for emphasis or for understanding, and the students do not have the knowledge or experience to provide that.



### 3. *He gives input by providing resources*

A coach may have been able to collect some of his own resources — a commentary or Bible dictionary or other related books. He can make those available to the students, or ask one student to read a section before class and prepare a report on it. Or if he thinks it is really valuable, he can photocopy a certain section, but only if it makes the lesson clearer and more meaningful to the student. Not just for the purpose of more facts which are just minor details.

### 4. *Linking*

Linking is what you do when you repair a chain. Who has ever repaired bicycle chains? You have two parts, and you put them together. For instance, she says something, and he says something, and everybody says, "Huh? They are just the opposite." And the coach says, "What she just said is interesting. And it's interesting that he said that. You know, if you'll think a little bit more about the Bible, then you can actually see that these two things go together even though they look like opposites. There are two sides to everything." And everybody says, "Aha." And then you say, "What do you think about that?" And now there is a lot of talk because he brought these two ideas together.

### 5. *Reflection*

When the group has been discussing a topic, it is good to take the time to "reflect" back with them what they have been saying. Pulling the loose ends together so the coach is assured that everyone is following the progress of the discussion. Sometimes it sounds different coming from someone else and may spark new ideas or help people to complete their thinking without going off on a tangent.

## C. Regulating

### 1. *Setting and maintaining goals; having an agenda*

The coach should make sure that he has thoroughly studied the objectives for the current lesson and has added any that he feels are important or decided if he is going to cover all of them. Then he needs to plan how long will be spent on an objective. If you are going to Kiev and it's already late in the evening and you arrive at Zhitomir, "Oh, wonderful. We came a long way, but we didn't get to Kiev." Next week you still need to go to Kiev, and actually the plan for next week was to go all the way to Crimea! No one plans their travels this way, and it is just as ineffective when you are trying to lead a lesson. So, the idea is to try to finish a lesson, to reach the goal. A coach needs to know exactly how long the group will meet and how that time can be used most effectively.

### 2. *Keeping on track*

People very quickly become sidetracked because they have their own areas of interest and their own pet peeves. A good coach keeps the group moving in the right direction all of the time with as few distractions as possible. There are many ways to go to Kiev, but if you take the main highway, it is the fastest and the simplest, and the easiest. Other roads may be interesting, but some of them may never even reach Kiev! Don't let the group get diverted.

### **3. *Turning questions asked him back to the group***

Right now, I'm giving a lecture. If somebody has a question, I will answer that question but in a discussion I don't do that. In a discussion I would say, "Thank you, that's a good question. I'm glad you asked that. What would you suggest to him?" And I turn the questions back to the students. One of the main benefits of discussions, is that quiet laymen turn into people who can speak about spiritual things. In a discussion the students are learning to talk and that's exactly what we want. We want hundreds, thousands of believers who know how to talk about Jesus.

### **4. *Question wrong conclusions***

When the coach sees the group coming to wrong conclusions he needs to lead them back on track. You can do this by asking how this conclusion fits with the text, or with Scripture. You may need to add or remind them of other information and then ask how that affects the conclusion that was just made. Try to lead them back without flatly saying, "You are absolutely wrong. How could you even think that?" That will shut down their ability to reason through things and make the right conclusions. Take them by the hand and lead them step by step, if necessary, but get them to participate.

### **5. *Summarizing***

At the end of the session it is necessary for the coach to summarize the discussion: "Okay, we learned from the Bible these three main points. Then later on in the lesson we saw how it was useful for us in this and this way. And now just at the end Igor said it would be good to apply it this way or to use it that way. This is what we want to remember and go home and act on it."

## **D. Climate making**

The coach needs to make sure the atmosphere or climate during lesson time is one that will be encouraging and positive and accepting. You want the students to be able to feel free to fully participate, to know that they can make mistakes, or even admit personal failures without judgment and gossip. Here are some of the areas that will provide for a good climate:

### **1. *Listening with understanding***

You need to focus in directly on people and make sure that you understand what they are trying to say. If you aren't sure you understand, ask them questions to draw them out further. People pick up very quickly whether you are listening and understanding or whether you are distracted with thinking of your next question or what you are going to do after the meeting.

### **2. *Treating contributions with respect***

"Thank you." "That's an interesting thought!" "I'm glad you said that." "You must have been thinking a lot about that." There are different ways that you can let the person know you appreciate them and respect them. You need to take each idea seriously and find something to build on.

### **3. *Tension relief***

People can only concentrate intensely for a certain length of time. It is good to provide a light story or joke when you have finished a particularly intense time, or even in the middle of it for a moment. Or maybe you need to just call a short break so that people can stretch their legs and laugh and talk casually together.



#### 4. **Supporting and encouraging**

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that." "Let me hear more about that." "Can somebody add to that a little bit?" "Can you explain it a little bit deeper?" "You have really been studying hard." There are lots of comments you can make that will help people feel free to talk and express their opinions and ideas.



#### 5. **Handling the overly aggressive**

There is usually a student that is very shy and there is usually a student who wants to do all the talking. The aggressive student often wants to talk first or wants to have the final word. So, one way to handle this is by calling people by name, "Simeon, what do you think about this?" "Yes, I know you are ready, Ivan, but I want to hear from Volodia." "Alright now, I have heard from two people now I want to hear from Vladimir before we hear from Ivan." And now comes Ivan, the aggressive one. And you say, "Alright Ivan, we've had several opinions now. Very shortly please, very shortly, share what you think might still be important." Do you get the idea?

#### 6. **Encouraging expression of personal feelings**

The coach should help the students not just to share on a factual level, or with the opinions of what they have read, but actually how they feel. They should never feel belittled because of their feelings. Feelings are not right or wrong in themselves. They are signposts of the direction a person is headed. So, ask for their personal feelings.

#### 7. **Harmonizing and integrating emotions**

"I see that some of you have very different feelings about this. We just need to remember that God made us different, and we have grown up differently spiritually and sometimes it takes time for one person to learn something, and it takes more time with a different experience for somebody else to learn. So, that's OK, don't feel bad about it. You don't always have to agree." And so, you work at harmonizing and integrating their emotions so that people can learn to accept each other and stay united as a group, even if they don't see everything in the same light.

#### 8. **Knowing everyone's name**

**This is very important.** You need to take the time to impress individual names on your mind. When you speak to them, always use their names. If you do this right at the beginning, when you forget a name, it won't be embarrassing because you are just learning. As you focus on the individual and things you learn about them, it then becomes easy to associate their names with what you have learned about them. And it makes it very personal and individual. Your goal is to have a personal impact on each life. You can't even pray for them individually if you don't know their names.

#### 9. **Remembering what everyone has said and how they feel**

Maybe a discussion has been going on for a whole hour already and you still need to remember who said what and how strongly he felt about it. Lots of times I have a paper with me, and I write the initial of each student and when there is something that I need to remember I just make a little note behind his initial. Then later on that helps me to remember details that can be important in dealing with individuals.

#### 10. **Drawing in the maximum number of participants**

When I was a Sunday school superintendent, each Sunday teachers had to give me a little evaluation. On there was a question, "Was every student interested in the lesson?" The teachers said, "The question should be are most students interested in the lesson." And I said, "No, **every** student." Because if you have eighteen students and ten of them are interested, then you have most of them. But if you have ninety-nine that are interested and one is not interested, then you must go out in the hills and mountains at night and find that lost lamb. Have you heard that story before? So, my question was not, "Was everybody interested?" My question was, "Two were not interested. Why?" Do you understand? And so, as a discussion group coach, it's not good enough if half of your students are involved in a discussion. Somehow during the whole session every student should have contributed something two or three times. That's why when you have a group of sixteen it's almost impossible. The ideal group size is six to eight students.

#### 11. **Encouraging minority views**

Many times, through the minority views you get new ideas. Don't fall into the trap of just talking about the common view or opinion on things. It doesn't lead your students to think when they just parrot what is commonly accepted. Encourage students who are thinking from a different angle or who are challenging the common opinion. Don't squelch them. Give time for positive interaction.

## E. Decision making

### 1. *Resolving controversy*

Resolving controversy in your group doesn't mean that everybody has to agree on everything. Sometimes it means that you have to help them see that there is more than one side to an issue. For instance, in our family I often say, "This is orange." My wife says, "No, this is yellow." I say, "No, it's orange." But we mean the same color. You may need to present some applicable Bible truths that help throw more light on the area of disagreement.



### 2. *Recognizing and allowing for conflicts*

There are many things in the Bible that we don't understand. Most people would like to understand God. "If I understand, then I'll do it, then I'll obey." God says, "No, no, no, no. I'm so big and you are so little you will never understand me completely." So, often in our incomplete understanding, we come up with differences. Not five people in one room do exactly everything the same, and in the same way we have different understandings about things. Parts of the Bible are written from God's point of view; parts are written from man's point of view. So, there are conflicts. There are things in the Bible that we won't understand or will not agree on, but you are still a good Christian, maybe even better than I. So don't be upset if there are conflicts and don't try to cover them up or insist that everyone agrees on one answer. Allow students to argue their viewpoints, not in a heated, angry matter, but in being allowed to explain why they came up with a certain answer, and why they don't agree with another student, or with you.

### 3. *Seeking consensus where needed*

There are certain points on which we would like to have most of the people agree. For instance, I heard about one book that said, "We should not pray the Lord's Prayer because it's a part of the Old Testament and we should not use that." Now, technically it is part of the Old Testament. Did Jesus live in the Old Testament or in the New Testament? At least till his death and resurrection it was definitely part of the Old Testament, and somebody here suggests that the New Testament really began at the day of Pentecost. OK, but to me that's not a reason that I cannot pray the Lord's Prayer. And so, when people begin to say, "Don't do that" then I begin to see some problems there. In an issue like this, help the group to evaluate what the real issues are. What the principles are that are involved in this. The coach may want to bring about agreement in the group, a general consensus as much as possible, especially if it is a doctrinal issue.

### 4. *Assisting individual decision making*

"Now that we have really studied the lessons on *Establishing Disciples* which one of you is ready to begin a small group with *Basic Christian Life*?" And some of the students will say, "I am ready," but some are not ready. And you are helping them with making the decision to be involved, to participate. You may not do that in front of the whole group. You may not say, "Alright, let's do it," but you may talk to individuals after the meeting. Or you may simply say, "Alright, I see that almost all of you are ready to do this. And one or two of you are still thinking about it. I want to encourage you to do this, too. It will bring an incredible change in your life even if it seems difficult to you right now." See, you help them to make a decision, "They all want to do this except me? I guess I want to, too." That's a coach's job. He helps the students to make decisions that will bring spiritual growth in their lives.

## II. GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A discussion question should enable the learner to explore the subject, responses, and a possible range of responses. This should be a discussion, not a quiz. Learners are not to spend time finding the answers the coach was thinking of; rather they should be searching their own minds. The student shouldn't have to think, "What does the coach want? What's he thinking about?" He should understand and then explore his own mind. Don't use trick questions. They destroy your foundation of trust. Poor questions have pat answers. For instance, if you ask, "What kind of a king was King Saul?" Everybody will say, "A bad one." Okay, but what have you learned? What has happened? Did it lead to a discussion? Not likely.

## A. Questions have three main functions in a discussion:

### 1. *They start a discussion*

And they should be provocative or present various viewpoints, "Aristotle thought this..., Martin Luther thought that..., John Wesley thought..., what do you think?" or "What would you do if someone said, 'I don't believe the Bible. Prove it's true.'" You want to get the thinking process started with some kind of challenge to the student's mind.

### 2. *They redirect discussion, emphasize the point, or they bring new thinking to bear on a topic*

In other words, you use them to guide the student's learning with direction, emphasis, or some new thought. "Alright, we've just talked about God the Father, but how do you see the role of the Holy Spirit in that situation?" You have moved the group to a new area of discussion.

### 3. *They support a participant and encourage him in self-revelation*

Questions need to draw the student out and help him to re-evaluate his opinions or beliefs or life-style. "Why do you think you feel this way?" "How do you think this might affect your life?" If you really believed this, do you think it would change you? How?"

## B. Not all topics are suitable for use in group discussion

How do you know the difference? Ask yourself the following questions in deciding if a topic can be your basis for a group discussion:

### 1. *Is the topic recognized by the participants as significant and related to the business of Christian living?*

### 2. *Can it be stated in the form of a question that cannot be answered by "Yes" or "No"?*

You need something that can start a discussion and that is difficult to do with yes and no questions unless you have a very argumentative group!

### 3. *Is the topic narrow enough in scope to encourage focused exploration and to discourage broad abstract generalizations?*

For instance, what are the main elements that the key men of faith had in the Bible? Now, that is way too broad, and you only get some general ideas about faith. But if I say, "Igor, how did Daniel show that he was a man of faith?" See, it suddenly becomes very concrete and focused. And he can give a couple of them, and I can say, "Simeon, what do you think?" and he responds and others are challenged to think.

Topics are basically either experience-centered or subject-centered. Subject-centered topics are less threatening to inexperienced groups. If you say, "Let's list and discuss some of the characteristics of God." You can do that all session long and they can go home feeling good, but it hasn't touched them directly. But experience-centered topics allow for more personal involvement and revelation. "Do you believe in the goodness of God, Ivan? How do you know He is good?" And you see that instantly this becomes a very personal thing.



## C. Five different types of questions

The book "Group Discussion As a Learning Process" describes five types of questions which I would like to list for you here.

### 1. Fact

"What does verse five say?" This is a quiz type question.

### 2. Meaning

"What did Jesus mean when he said...?" This calls for an interpretation. "I think he said...." "No, I think he said...." "I don't agree I think he meant...." That calls for interpretation.

### 3. Concretizing

"If you were walking down the road and saw a gypsy lying in a ditch beaten and bleeding, what would you do? Do you think this was what Jesus was talking about in the Parable of the Good Samaritan?" You need to think of some real-life situations for the students to relate to.

#### 4. **Balance**

Questions seeking integration. They help learning fit into something, maybe in your doctrine or in your philosophy, or in your family lifestyle, or in the way you do your quiet time. For instance, "is this your view of the world?" So, you've just read something in the Bible. For instance, Philippians says, "Pray always," or "Rejoice always." "Is that your world view? Do you personally believe that or practice that?" Or "how would you practice that?" "If you had to help a new believer to do that, how would you advise him to practice that?"

You already have certain ideas, a philosophy, a lifestyle, and habits, and now you learn something new. We need to bring balance into our lives by incorporating what we are learning into our thinking and actions. Is this real? Is this really what the Bible says? Is it real for us today? If I decide, "Yes, that's what the Bible says and that's for today," then how am I going to incorporate that into my lifestyle? For instance, if I have just learned about Biblical tithing and I have not been tithing. We just got married and we owe five hundred dollars to the relatives, so if I'm going to tell my wife we are going to tithe she will say, "Good-bye." It is important to bring these questions in because if we are always learning but it brings no changes into our lives, we will end up being hypocrites, always learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth. And that brings us to:

#### 5. **Response**

"What decision for action must I make?" What does it call for? Who can name a classic Bible passage with a question like that, or a reaction like that, or a situation like that? Yes! Apostle Paul. He sees that light; it's so strong he falls to the ground. He doesn't say, "Ho boy, we got a problem." He says, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" I think that's the most classic example in the Scriptures. What action must I take? And you know something? The best coach helps his students to make little decisions almost all the time. For instance, we have a special lesson series on *Communicating God's Word*. In this preaching material we learn that you must preach one idea so that all the church members understand it. One idea and they know they are to go home, and they should be doing that one thing. And if you did that fifty times a year, your family won't recognize you any more. If you have changed fifty things in your life, your neighbors won't recognize you any more. Just imagine!

Now, we want to take a look at some

### D. Questions prepared by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is an organization that does Bible studies especially among university students. They present three divisions of discussion questions:

#### 1. **Observation questions**

We are going to use Daniel 3 as an example to help us follow along.

- a. **Who** are the actors in this passage?

King Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel's 3 friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

- b. **What** is the main point?

Daniel's friends refused to obey the order to bow down before the image of gold.

- c. **When** did this happen?

From the context it was during the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were administrators in the province of Babylon.

- d. **Where** do these events take place?

The plain of Dura in the province of Babylon

- e. **Why** did King Nebuchadnezzar become enraged?

- f. **How** did the men react?

#### 2. **Interpretation questions**

- a. **Definition**



What does it mean? For instance, “idolatry.” What does the dictionary say? What does the Bible say about it in other places?

b. **Relationship and purpose**

What caused a particular action or statement? “Why did these Jewish men feel so strongly about not bowing down to this image?”

c. **Significance and importance**

Why did a fourth man appear in the furnace? Why was it significant?

d. **Consequence and implication**

Did these men understand the price they would have to pay? What did that say about their faith? How did God honor that faith?

e. **Relevance and position**

What does this have to do with the whole? “How does this fit in with God’s honoring of obedience in faith with other Scriptures?”

f. **Twofold meaning — then and now**

That happens many times in the prophetic passages in Isaiah, in Daniel concerning his visions. (Not all of these topics will be relevant to every passage.)

g. **God-man relationship**

What does this imply about God’s relationship to man? What an excellent question. And you can use it many times or it can be reversed. What does this imply about man’s relationship to God?

3. **Application questions**

Do you worship “idols” in your life, something that you are willing to compromise on? How can you make a firm stand for God? How does your faith measure up to theirs? Are you willing to face the consequences of righteous actions? And many more questions can be asked according to what you want to emphasize in this passage, or in any passage.

So, we’ve just had *questions about observation* from the Bible. Then we had *questions about interpretation*, “what does it mean?” And then we have the *application questions* “How do we use it?” What we can do about it? Stand for God at all cost. Have you? Would you?



### III. VARIATIONS ON A DISCUSSION GROUP

Now we will list a few different ways we can use discussions. Discussion groups have the flexibility to be used with many other teaching techniques. The following are just a few of them:

- Neighbor nudging
- Circle response
- Role playing
- Buzz groups

A. **Neighbor nudging**

Two people sitting beside each other briefly discuss a question together.

B. **Circle response**

I would like to hear from everybody, “What do you think?” “What do you think?” “What do you think?” You go around the circle.

C. **Role-playing**

To role-play is to act out a situation that is from real life. Sometimes it is used to practice a real situation, or sometimes just to imagine how a situation could have happened. All of you should do this when you lead the lessons on *Communicating God’s Word*. You definitely need to do it when you lead the lessons on



*Practical Evangelism* on how to use the *Four Spiritual Laws*. I had some really interesting experiences when some of my groups did role-playing. The idea is that one person acts as the believer and the other the unbeliever. When the “believer” shows the *Four Spiritual Laws* to the “unbeliever,” who doesn’t know where to read, so with your pen you are to point and say, “Please, read this,” and you show what he has to read. Those are the instructions. One of my students said, “OK, now please read this.” And he put the booklet in his pocket. Another student said, “Please, read this,” and he was holding it upside-down. So, role-playing can be very interesting and helpful.

#### **D. Buzz groups**

Divide the group into four maybe even six people together to just “brainstorm” as we call it. They come up with some ideas and alternatives in a limited time frame and then give their answer to the group. It’s a good way to draw in people who still are intimidated by the larger group.

## **CONCLUSION**

Group discussion can be one of the most stimulating ways of learning, if the coach knows what he is doing. The coach must know his subject, and he must be willing to listen instead of pouring out his vast storehouse of wisdom and experience. When leading a discussion do not forget the simple question “***What else?***” I think it’s a very good question. It makes the participants dig deeper into the topic and it keeps the coach quiet. For example, try this coach-listening experiment sometime. Take a favorite passage of Scripture, perhaps John chapter 17, and ask your group one key question. For instance, “What does this teach us about the character of God?” and then stay quiet except for the occasional question, “Yes, *what else?*” And a little bit later “Aha, *what else?*” And you do that several times, four or five times. That one little question will draw truths out of the Scripture that otherwise would have been missed. Be a listening discussion group coach not a mini-lecturer!

Blessings to you, our dear friends!