

4 Preparing the Bible Study Creatively

Preparing for a Bible study is one of the most creative activities you can do. How so?

Four Steps in the Creative Process

One way we show that we are made in God's image is the patent or latent capacity for creativity in all of us. *Creativity is the ability to produce something new or fresh that is potentially useful to the human race.*

These are the four recognisable steps in the creative process. (For a Thai Version see page 31 in Appendices. Though you may not know Thai, you can pick up more ideas about Creativity.)

1. **Imagination:** Feed your mind.
2. **Incubation:** Rest your mind.
3. **Illumination:** Eureka!
4. **Verification:** Test it.

If you have prepared Bible studies creatively, you were already following these four steps.

Begin as early as possible. You can see that these four creative steps cannot happen in one or two hours the night before your Bible study group meets. You actually save time if you begin as early as possible, because your ideas can be incubating while you're doing other things.

Wrestle with the text. Hear the Lord speak to you first. Make God's truth be personal by applying the lesson(s) to yourself first. You'll also be able to pick up current illustrations from the news and things going on around you.



- * Pray regularly for members of the group and yourself as you prepare. (Even your prayers should be creative!)
- * Be glad for the opportunity to work with the Holy Spirit. He's there for you! He is the Source Of our Creative work for the Kingdom of God.

Thoughtful Adapting Required

Thank God we live at a time when hundreds of prepared Bible study guides are available (though this not true in many countries). One problem, however, is that guides are limited by the writer's cultural windows. But it is still possible to get a lot of mileage from them by adapting their in-depth questions, theological grounding and often helpful background information.

The secret is to adapt them creatively. Prepared guides usually have more questions than you will use. But they're useful for preparing you more thoroughly. Omit, combine or add questions. Think through each question and its aim. Write out all possible answers to each question. Rephrase the question so it sounds like you and is readily understood by the group.

At the end you should have the following elements in your guide.

- **Aim/purpose** Keeps you on track. What do you want the group to go home with?
- * **Textual notes** For "deep background" (the files behind a newspaper article),
- * **Warm up/bridge** Quick link between people's concerns/experience and the biblical subject
- * **Context** Link with preceding text to give continuity and help in interpretation
- * **Questions** Your best tools to help the group dig, discover and do
- * **Comments** For introducing a major question or making a transition
- * **Reflection/action** Pushing on to application, the goal of all Bible studies

Try it! Look for these elements in the Philemon guide on page 27.

Try a Mental Dress Rehearsal

A mental dress rehearsal is your private practice. Visualise people as you ask your question. How might different people respond? What kind of answers could you expect? Will they accept your assumptions? Will they understand your terminology? Do they have the background to answer it? Might you sound intimidating?

So, how may you have to modify your questions?

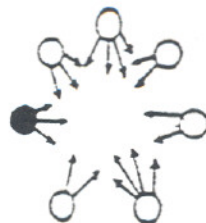


Creative Ideas for Active Participation

Groups need concrete and varied ways to search the text or think more on an important idea. Here are some suggestions to stimulate deeper discussion. Keep instructions simple.

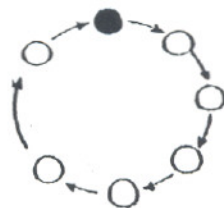
- 1. Brainstorm** Fast, free-for-all imaginative suggestions to encourage maximum possibilities on a question. No criticisms or other comments are allowed until afterwards. (If dealing with a major problem, ask someone to write people's ideas on a board. This stimulates more ideas.)

Example from Mark 1:14-20 If you were Jesus recruiting disciples what character traits would you look for?



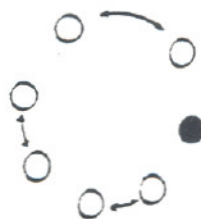
- 2. Circular Response** Each in turn gives his/her view on a provocative question. Allow for "passing" so no one feels pressured. No comments are allowed until all have had a chance to speak. The leader, picking up suggestions, then starts discussion.

Example from Mark 1:21-28 People quickly sensed Jesus' authority. In what ways can you tell whether or not a Bible teacher or preacher speaks with authority?



- 2. Neighbour Nudging** Two neighbours "gently push" each other's thinking on a question for a few minutes. All are included without moving. Then the leader asks for reports from each pair, summarises and opens discussion.

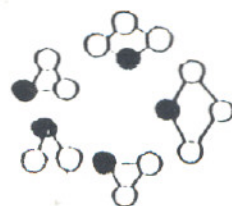
Example from Mark 1:21-28 Why do you think Jesus sternly forbids the demons to publicise who he is?



- 4. Buzz groups (Jigsaw puzzle)** This is especially useful in an "oversized small group". Each sub-group discusses one of several parts of a major point for 10 to 15 minutes.

Reporters summarise their group's main ideas in re-assembly.

Example from Mark 2:29-31, 32-34, 40-45 Here the writer shows us three healing events in Jesus' early ministry. Each of three sub-groups takes one event and discusses: What is unusual about Jesus and this particular healing?



- 5. Role-playing** Chosen ones act out a situation to express a significant point. It could be trying to understand a character or presenting a problem people have.

Example from Mark 1:40-41 Show how the leper and Jesus met. Communicate thoughts and feelings non-verbally.



5 Asking Questions Skillfully

Every question we use has an aim. The most common aims are -

1. To get information – “What’s the best way to get to your house?”
2. To introduce a problem/issue - “Why are there so few men in our church?”
3. To point to an accepted assumption – “Aren’t our programs all run by women?”
4. To provoke harder thinking – “What drastic changes must we as a church make to attract more men?”

Examine the questions in Luke 5:21-23 – two from the critics and two from Jesus. Guided by the list above, what was the aim of each question?

Marks of Good Discussion Questions

1. They catch the group’s immediate attention—but are not too broad.
2. They are brief and clear—but not simplistic or mechanical.
3. They bring out main points—not merely correct details or speculation.
4. They are relevant to the groups’ background—and do not make false assumptions.
5. They stimulate searching and thinking about the text—not merely test reading ability.
6. They move from the known to the unknown—but are not too complex.
7. They are open-ended with three or more possible viewpoints—and are not dead-ends.
8. They progress textually (or topically)—and don’t skip, hop and jump all over the text.
9. They encourage critical thinking—and not mere agreement.
10. They focus on one point—and not confuse with two or more points.
11. They help the group identify with people in the story—and not remain academic.
12. They move people to a practical response to God and his purposes.

Exercise: Poor and Better Questions

The following pairs of questions are based on Mark 4:35-41. From the above guidelines explain why a) is a poor discussion question and why b) is a better discussion question.

Bridge

- a) What is this passage all about?
- b) It is 7 P.M. You have worked hard all day under pressure. You arrive home and find it's been burglarised. How do you feel?

A. Background of the Encounter (vs 35-36)

- 1. a) Why did Jesus suggest crossing to the other side of the lake when the crowds were still eager to learn more about the kingdom of God and he himself wanted more people to believe and follow him?
- b) Jesus had been teaching the crowds all day and explaining privately to his disciples. He then suggested going to the other side of the lake. What could have been his reasons?
- 2. a) Who were in the other boats (v. 36)?
- b) *Note* This is a useless question. It leads only to speculation.

B. People Who Encounter Jesus (vs 37-38)

- 1. a) Do you think the disciples were afraid of the sudden storm?
- b) If you were there and saw Jesus sleeping, how would you have felt?
- 2. a) Why are the disciples so rude in their question to Jesus?
- b) The disciples' question to Jesus their teacher seems rude. Why do you think they use such strong language?

C. Jesus and His Response (vs 39-40)

- 1. a) What do Jesus' words to the wind and waves say about him and what impact did this have on the disciples?
- b) Before this event (Chaps. 1-3) the Twelve had seen Jesus' authority in teaching, in healing and delivering people from demons. They had seen his authority in debating with religious leaders. But what is different about this present event? (v 39)

2. a) What is unfair about Jesus' questions to the disciples (v 40)?
- b) Compare the ways that Jesus talked to the storm and then to his disciples. What's the difference? Why the difference?

D. Results of the Encounter (v 41)

- a) How were the disciples totally convinced that Jesus was God?
- b) We probably would also have been terrified like the disciples. They thought they knew Jesus well. But what new view of him are they apparently now discussing?

E. **Relevance/Action** This section is not for testing your discernment of poor or good questions, but for suggesting possible applications. Some of these practical questions may have already arisen earlier on. Good!

1. "Doesn't God care if we drown?" Many of us have felt like the disciples: God is indifferent to our problems—or powerless to do anything about them. How does this event show that God's attitude is exactly the opposite? If God is all powerful, why doesn't he stop the storm before it hits us?
2. **Miracles and Faith** Are miracles necessary for personal faith? Why do some people demand a show of divine power before they trust God? What may this reveal about their concept of God? What other ways does God reveal his power and purpose in our world?
3. **The Deity of Jesus** This event does not show that suddenly the disciples believed that Jesus is God. The result of the event shows they are moving towards that stupendous fact.. But what difference does it make whether or not Jesus is God? Is it not enough to follow him as the most moral man who ever lived?
4. **Immature or Incomplete Views of Jesus** What inadequate views of Jesus do people have today? How can you tell if you have an inadequate or incomplete concept of Jesus?

6 Leading the Group Sensitive



At the beginning we considered the overall tasks of a leader (page 4). Now we will look specific guidelines.

Guidelines for the Leader

1. Leaders set the tone for group learning. Be an example of a good member—eager to listen, learn and link to others. Balance seriousness with a light touch.
2. Know your prepared questions well. But be flexible and alert to help the group search and think harder with probing questions.
3. Encourage maximum participation. Listen and interact sensitively with others rather than give out the answers.
4. Don't be satisfied with only the first answer from the group. Keep probing for various viewpoints for a richer discussion.
5. Remind members to check their opinions against the text. (But do encourage opinions.)
6. Avoid cross-references unless they quickly clarify a point.
7. Let tensions lead to a deeper study and a stronger fellowship. (See page 25.)
8. Be alert to body language and other non-verbal clues about how people are responding.
9. Relax as you depend on the Holy Spirit to guide the study through you!

Encouraging Group Learning

Upon first joining a group study many people may not know how to participate in the give-and-take of Bible discussions. The best way to learn is to join an ongoing healthy group. But there may not be one nearby! Leaders can start by showing members how they also may "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Col. 3:16). For example- they can-

- a. Expand someone else's idea.
- b. Illustrate a truth.
- c. Introduce a fresh viewpoint.
- d. Ask relevant questions—for Clarification, information or probing.
- e. Tactfully correct a misunderstanding or reword a vague idea.
- f. Share themselves appropriately.
- g. Help the leader relieve a tension.
- h. Test a proposition, especially for realistic application.
- i. Participate in any way to move the study to a proper end.

This group is studying Mark 3:1-6. Which of the above contributions is each person making to group learning?



Ways to Relieve Tensions

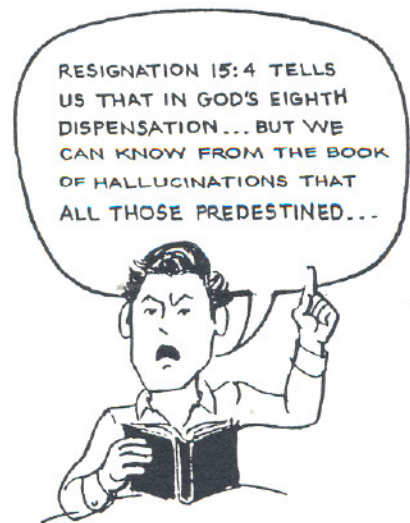
Situations or individuals may raise tensions that could stifle an otherwise healthy climate. A wise leader can turn tensions into opportunities to express understanding and care. Encourage other members to be alert to do the same.

Silence Maybe your question was too simple. Or too complex. Try rewording it. Perhaps the lead-up to the question did not adequately prepare people to discuss the subject. Or suggest, "Let's take time to think before any speak."



Church language Religious terminology, clichés, in-group references are usually barriers to seekers and even to churchy people themselves. Ask people who use them to re-phrase their ideas in a contemporary, more meaningful way. Be an example yourself in using fresh language that communicates biblical truth vividly yet accurately.

The distractor Is he one who confuses with many cross references? Or one who keeps introducing other subjects? Try, "That's interesting, but let's stick to this text and dig deeper into its meaning first." If someone has many experiences or personal problems to air, suggest that you or someone else can talk with him/her later.



The domineering talker Do not look his way. Deliberately call on others by name. "Let's hear someone else's viewpoint." Ask him/her privately to aid you in getting others to participate; e.g., by asking helpful questions. A young man who knew he dominated "cured" himself by counting 1 to 10. That gave time for others to jump in. (He is now a lawyer.)

The Shy One Include her with a smile or casual comment. Be sensitive to what may be threatening to her. Silence can mean she is thinking more carefully than some others. Look for non-verbal cues that they want to say something. Ask her opinion on something you know she can handle. But never embarrass by forcing participation.



The dogmatic attitude, superficial view or wrong understanding Let the group work out these tensions as much as possible "What do others think about this view? Or, refer to parts of the text that can give light. A correction made casually and/or with good humor can be disarming. Spend quality time with these persons.

Comparing religions or churches Avoid it. This is usually fruitless and moves the discussion away from the text. Worse, it can lead to arguments and bad feelings. If the group wants a discussion on it, suggest a later time after adequate preparation.



Strong differences of opinions This is not always bad. They can be stepping stones to deeper understanding of people themselves as well as the text. Let the group try to resolve this tension, keeping to the text as much as possible. Be aware of feelings, not only factual correctness. Spend time with each.

Questions you can't answer Leaders are not expected to know all the answers to spontaneous questions raised. Others may be able to answer. If not, be honest. "I haven't thought about that before" can do wonders for the atmosphere and inspire others to work harder. If it's important enough, assign someone to Research and report the next time.



Appendices

A GBS Guide

PHILEMON: "Problems in Forgiving"

- Purpose
- * To learn from Paul how to mediate between hostile Christians
 - * To check ourselves for unhealthy attitudes as the offended party

Bridge *Why is it so hard for us to forgive someone who has offended us?*

Background of the problem A few years before this letter Paul had evangelised Asia Minor where Philemon lived. (Near Colossae or Laodicea—*Col. 4:16*) Philemon, one of his converts (*v* 19b), became a valued friend and co-worker (*vs* 1, 17). The local church met in his home. He gained a reputation as a loving, faithful brother and leader (*vs* 1-2, 4-7).

One of his house slaves, however, had apparently run away to Rome with stolen goods (*vs* 15-18). Then probably down and out in the big city he met Paul again in prison. There he became a Christian through Paul (*vs* 10-14).

A. Problems for Paul

1. *What do you generally know about slaves in the ancient world? Does someone happen to know especially the Roman law regarding a runaway slave?*

2. *Imagine Paul's dilemma as a Roman citizen and a Christian! If you were in Paul's sandals, what factors must you weigh in sending Onesimus back to Philemon?*

3. *Paul is extremely tactful in asking Philemon to take back his runaway slave. He doesn't mention the problem till verse 10. What does he first establish in verses 1-7?*

4. *What do you think Paul is risking in his specific appeals to Philemon in verses 11-14?*



B. Problems for Philemon

1. *Philemon is also in a difficult position. If he reinstates Onesimus with forgiveness, what would be the probable reaction of other slave owners?*

Note E. Gibbons in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* estimated that about 95% of the Roman empire was made up of slaves. The economic system depended totally on slavery.

2. On the other hand, suppose Philemon doesn't forgive Onesimus. *What would be the implications for Onesimus? for the church? for Philemon himself? for the pagan society watching the new Christian church?*

Note Letters were read aloud to the whole church. See verse 2 and Col. 4:16.

3. *How does Paul show in verses 15-20 that he is sensitive to Philemon's struggle?*

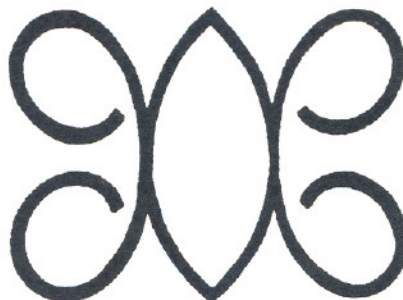
Note Verse 19a with Paul's signature was a legal promissory note, an IOU. Up to that point Paul had a scribe writing the letter, as was his custom.

C. Should I Forgive or Not?

1. What do you think of Paul's final appeals in verses 21-22? *If you were Philemon at this point, how persuaded would you be?*
2. *How would you describe Paul's probable frame of mind as he concludes his letter of appeal to Philemon? (vs 21-25)*
3. We are not told anywhere if Philemon forgave Onesimus. *On the basis of this letter, what do you think probably happened?*

D. Reflection for Application

1. *What happens to us when we hang on to past grievances and refuse to forgive an offender?*
2. *What can we learn from Paul's example about being a mediator? Could God be calling you to be a mediator between two hostile Christians?*



West African symbol for forgiveness

A Working EBS Outline

A Prostitute and a Pharisee Encounter Jesus, Luke 7:36-50

A. **Background of the Encounter** Jesus has just publicly evaluated the Pharisees' rejection of him. He knows they are calling him a party animal, a lush.

B. People Who Encounter Jesus

1. **The Woman:** Her need is to have her sins forgiven

Negative Party Crasher, social outcast, social boor, no self-control

Positive Knows Jesus can forgive her sins (but would he?)

Fully acknowledges she is a sinner

Senses his acceptance of her despite a most awkward situation

Totally focuses on Jesus; understands him better than Simon does Lavish in her gratitude to Jesus; loves Jesus, first man to respect her

2. **Simon, the Pharisee:** His need is to find out more about Jesus

Negative Identified with the party that Jesus has just condemned

Does not show Jesus either common courtesy, respect, affection

Apparently doesn't want to take a chance on being too open to Jesus

Positive Economically and socially well-off

Highly respected religious leader

Very intelligent

Somewhat open to Jesus

Interacts fairly, if reluctantly, with Jesus

Taking a risk in hosting Jesus

C. Jesus and His Response

1. Communicates with two very different people in two very different ways

2. Shows great sensitivity and wisdom dealing with a woman of deep intuition

3. Doesn't embarrass the woman; in fact stands up for her at great social risk

4. Direct with Simon, engaging him in a progressive dialogue, respecting his intellect

5. Knows when to make concrete application, completing the lesson with visual aid

6. Bold as a guest criticising his host before other guests

7. Wants Simon to be like the woman, deeply aware of his sins and need for forgiveness and love

D. Results of the Encounter

1. Jesus publicly affirms he has forgiven the woman.

2. The guests question the identity of Jesus who forgives sin.

3. Jesus clarifies her faith in him, not in her gifts or emotions.

4. Simon???

An EBS Guide

People in Crisis, *Mark 4:35-41*

Bridge You have worked hard all day under pressure. How do you feel when you get home—and find that it has been burglarized?

The people in today's event had a similar experience. Let's see what happened.

Read *Mark 4:35-41*, visualising each dramatic change of scene.

A. Jesus' Initiative, vs 35-36 (*Background of the encounter*)

What are possible reasons that Jesus suggests going to the other side of the lake?

B. A Sudden Storm, vs 37-38 (*People who encountered Jesus*)

1. Several of the disciples are fishermen familiar with this lake's sudden storms. But this one is beyond their control. *What possible feelings are behind their wake-up call to Jesus?*

2. Share an experience when you felt God did not care while you struggled with a problem. *What were your thoughts and feelings?*

C. A Sudden Calm, vs 39-40 (*Jesus and his response*)

1. Look at Jesus' actions and his words. *What clues to his character do they give?*

2. Jesus *commanded* the winds and the waves. But he *questioned* the disciples. *What do you think he wanted them to do with his questions?*

D. A Sudden Realisation, v 41 (*Results of the encounter*)

1. The disciples are terrified. The physical crisis turns into a spiritual crisis. They had previously seen Jesus only as teacher, healer, deliverer. *What do you think they now are discussing?*

2. The disciples do not yet realise that Jesus is God. But they do realise they don't really know his true identity after all. *Why is this a significant step for them or any new follower?*

Reflection and Action Be prepared to discuss one or both of these areas.

1. *What do you find attractive about Jesus here? What puzzles you about him?*

2. *In what ways can you see that Jesus knows your situation and does care about you? Turn to him and ask him to help you. You can do this right here and now.*

Four Steps in the Creative Process

You don't have to know Thai to learn about Creativity from these illustrations. For example?

ทำงานสร้างสรรค์ได้อย่างไร?



- (1.) การเตรียมตัว
(จินตนาการ)
คิดถึงความเป็นไปได้ทั้งหมด

- (2.) บ่มพัก
(สงบอยู่ใน)
ให้ความคิดของคุณเพาะตัว



- (3.) ทำให้ชัดเจน
(รวบรวม)
อะฮ้า! นี่แหละ

- (4.) ผลิตผล
(นำมาปรับใช้ และปรับปรุง)
ทำสิ่งที่คุณคิดออกมา



Evaluating Your Group Bible Study

The aim of an evaluation is to strengthen good points and correct weaknesses. For objectivity it's better to evaluate with others. Be positive and encourage unity; e.g., "we...us...our group" rather than "you guys". Preface evaluations with "We could improve if we..." Constructive, responsible Criticisms begin with "If I were the leader, I would have...."

Rate your evaluation of each area below as follows:

- 1 = not satisfactory
- 2 = satisfactory
- 3 = Very satisfactory

1. Biblical Content

- a. **Questions** They were well-prepared to stimulate searching the text, thinking about its implications and inspiring further questions.
- b. **Cooperation** Members worked together, listening responsibly and linking their contributions to what others said.
- c. **Grasp of the passage** The passage was adequately covered. The group seemed to get the main points.
- d. **Practicality** The group gained fresh knowledge and insight about God, themselves and their relationship with others. The applications were realistic.
- e. **Timing** The study began and ended on time. Discussion was balanced between observation and interpretation of the text and application to life today.

2. People Dynamics

- a. **Attitude** People came with expectancy, humility and a sense of responsibility.
- b. **Atmosphere** There was good balance between informality and seriousness. Both leader and members promoted a climate of love, openness and acceptance.
- c. **Fellowship** Members were concerned for one another. They listened to one another and seemed to hear what others said and meant. They linked their contributions to other people's contributions. They accepted each other's feelings.
- d. **Tensions** (Boredom, dogmatism, hostile disagreements, domination by one or two, withdrawal, etc.) Leader and others helped to relieve group tensions.
- e. **Conclusion** There was a good ending. People felt they wanted to return.