

Prework

**Know the
Gospel**

Intro

In week 2 of our CG Leadership Training, we'll be talking about how we Know the Gospel together in community group. This component of our church's mission focuses on how we grow in our understanding of God and his ways through several means, most centrally through his word. In community group we Know the Gospel primarily through our study of the Scriptures. This is not to exclude the ways we learn more about God through prayer and other spiritual disciplines, or from outside sources like other books and resources. However, as we discussed in the Big Story of the Bible (week 1), it's God creative and re-creative Word that makes us his people; thus the Bible is the axis upon which our community groups revolve.

Below you'll see four sections that will prepare us for our next session together:

1. How to make sense of the Bible
2. What is a Bible study discussion?
3. How to run a Bible study discussion
4. CG Leader Role Description

1. How to make sense of the Bible

To be upfront, the goal here is to point out that making sense of the Bible is neither effortless nor impossible. In your experience reading the Bible you've surely come across some passages that felt understandable and others that felt incomprehensible; you know that some stories read rather simply while other sections require some pondering. Perhaps you've also found that it's not quite as clear cut as that. Often times if you sit with one of the more innocuous passages for a little bit—like we do in CG discussion—you'll find even there questions to chew on for a lifetime.

And that chewing, whether in a simple passage or a complex one, is the whole point. Psalm 1 describes a blessed person who is devoted to the Lord, who meditates on God's word day and night. That word meditate has in mind a slow, thoughtful process, almost like a cow chewing the cud. This is something we need to consider as we approach the Scriptures. Perhaps we're used to Googling for answers to questions, but engagement with God's Word is a slow, thoughtful, lifelong process, filled with questions and reflection and waiting on the Lord. There's no other way to go about it.

This slow process isn't without effort, but as mentioned above, it's not impossible. This is one of the amazing things about the Bible: in it, God has stooped down to our level to speak in a way we can understand, and yet in the same breath has given us things to chew on for the rest of our lives. The Bible is a treasure that you can never exhaust; it yields riches both immediately and after decades and decades of mining.

So, where do we start? We'd like to suggest that you already have quite a number of tools at your disposal for understanding the Bible, tools at your fingertips through various resources and, native within yourself, tools for reading and digesting that you've picked up over the course of your life.

Here's an exercise to illustrate this.

Exercise 1

Take a moment to read Ezekiel 47 (the whole chapter), and don't look on the next page or you'll spoil it.

Now that you've read Ezekiel 47, answer this question in the space below:

How would you go about trying to make sense of....

1. What is going on in this passage?
2. What this passage means for your life?

What questions would you ask, what information would you try to dig up, what connections would you try to make? Jot out your thoughts below.

Vital signs and microscope to wide-angle

Hopefully Exercise 1 gave you an idea of various tools already at your disposal, from reading comprehension skills you picked up in school to Bible-specific skills you've learned from other Christians. On that first point, perhaps you listed out certain information that's always helpful for understanding a passage. Think of these like vital signs. Whenever you go to the doctor, someone is going to take your temperature, blood pressure, etc., as an essential starting point for determining your health. Similarly, the below bits of information are starting points for understanding a passage. There are others you could include here, but this is a good shortlist.

Passage vital signs

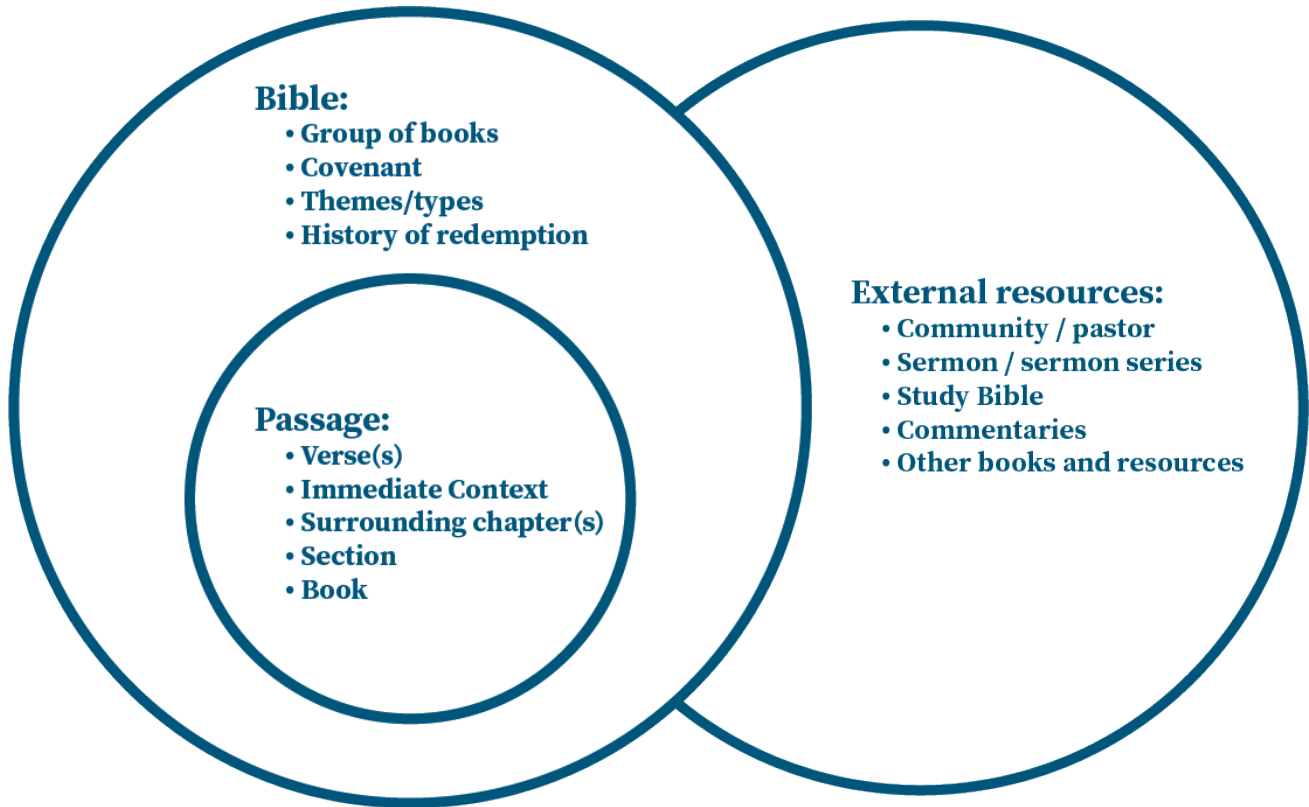
- Author: Who wrote it?
- Audience: Who were they writing to in their immediate context?
- Genre: Is it poetry or prose, narrative or instruction, prophetic vision or Covenant Law? This will determine *how* you read the passage.
- Time period: This is less about a precise date (scholars debate endlessly about specific composition dates) and more about where in the biblical story arch the specific passage occurs. FYI, for some books/passages we might can only give a rough time-frame.
- Place in the history of redemption: This is similar to the above, but specifically where does this passage fall in God's plan of redemption? Is it before or after Christ's death on the cross? If it's before, is it prior to the giving of the Law (Exodus 20) or after? As Christians we read every passage through a Christ-centered lens.

From microscope to wide-angle

On the next page you'll see an illustration of concentric circles for understanding a passage from the Bible. Think of this like starting out with a zoomed-in, microscopic view of the passage that slowly zooms out to a wide-angle view. The zoomed-in view starts with the immediate context of the passage, just those verses, then zooms out to encompass the immediate context, the surrounding context, the whole book it's in, and then the place of that passage and book in the whole story of the Bible.

To be clear, this is not to suggest you need to know everything about the whole Bible in order to make sense of any single verse (you're not going to know all that anyway). Instead, this is merely to discipline us in making sense of any one piece of God's revelation in the context of God's whole revelation, if only so we don't miss the forest for the trees.

3 circles for understanding a passage:



The organization of the circles is intentional; a passage stands within the whole Bible, while external resources stand alongside the Bible, not over it. At Vintage “we believe that God wrote the Bible, through men, without error.”⁷ However, all external resources to the Bible (this training document included) are fallible, manmade products. Thus, all external resources must be read with a discerning eye looking for biblical coherence. That being said, you will find ample resources at your disposal, free online and for purchase in print, that will assist you in making sense of the Scriptures.

⁷ Vintage Church Statement of Faith, Article 1.

Some helpful resources when studying scripture:

- cg.vintagenc.com – This is our CG Leader website, go check it out!
- A study Bible – the ESV Study Bible or another non-topical study Bible are good options.
- Bible Gateway, You Version, Bible Hub – these websites/apps offer multiple translations, commentaries, and original languages
- Commentaries – The *Christ Centered Exposition Series* and John Stott’s *The Bible Speaks Today* series are two highly accessible commentary options.
- Your CG coach and Vintage pastors – utilize your community!

2. What is a Bible study discussion?

There are plenty of approaches to Bible study, and you’ve perhaps had an experience at a prior small group or Bible study with a certain way of doing things. At Vintage Church, our community groups utilize something called Inductive Bible Study.⁸ Other methodologies, especially Deductive study, provide a very clear start and end point, with a pre-determined path for thinking through the passage and applying it to your life. That’s not without its merits; it makes the study highly didactic, suitable especially for Sunday school or traditional Bible study environments with a clear teacher-student dynamic. However, it’s not as conducive to peer-to-peer environments, and is significantly less approachable for doubters and seekers.

Inductive Bible study, on the other hand, provides less of a predetermined path by allowing the group to surface their own insights into the passage. It’s significantly more open-ended, which allows for a wider range of possibilities in a conversation and enables individuals and groups to make sense of the passage for themselves.

That open-ended-ness can be a weakness, if conversation ambles off into soapbox speeches or theological battlegrounds. It can also lead to a theologically thin sort of subjectivism, where the passage can mean anything we want (or nothing we don’t want). However, some careful superintending of discussion can prevent most of this, as we’ll discuss in the section below, 3. *How to run a Bible study discussion*.

And thankfully, the strengths of Inductive Bible study outweigh those weaknesses. Inductive method gets readers in the text, training them to be attentive to the text and thoughtful in its implications for their lives. It’s also significantly more accessible to folks with less Bible knowledge, making it the clear choice for groups that want to engage doubters and seekers.

⁸ This whole section is deeply informed by InterVarsity’s *Small Group Leader’s Handbook* (2009). See chapter 5, “Not Just Bible Study.”

Inductive Bible Study

Inductive Bible study operates by moving through three phases: Observation, Interpretation, Application.

1. Observation – What does the text say?

This step focuses on carefully reading the passage and noting details without jumping to interpretation or application too soon. Key techniques include:

- Reading and sitting with the passage.
- Noticing key details – who, what, where, when, and how.
- Looking for patterns – repeated words, contrasts, connections.
- Identifying structure – how the passage is organized.
- Asking questions – what’s surprising or unclear?

2. Interpretation – What does the text mean?

Here, the goal is to understand the author’s intended meaning. Some key principles include:

- Context matters – consider historical, literary, and biblical context.
- Understanding themes – how does this fit into the larger biblical story?
- Word studies – examine key terms.
- Scripture interprets Scripture—connect to or compare with other relevant passages.

3. Application – How does the text apply to us today?

Finally, the passage moves from understanding to transformation. This step asks:

- What does this teach me about God, myself, and others?
- Are there commands to obey, promises to trust, or sins to confess?
- How should this change my thoughts, attitudes, or actions?

Generally speaking, CG discussion questions follow this route from *observing* key facets of the text, to *interpreting* those facets and their underlying significance, which generates insights or ‘aha’ moments, to *applying* those insights to our daily lives. However, you’ll notice in our weekly discussion guides that we don’t always give equal weight to all three sections, and there’s a key turn in the bit between interpretation and observation that we emphasize because it helps us reiterate the gospel message.

The gospel every week

One thing we want to do every week in community group is revisit or reiterate the gospel message. Sometimes that will happen explicitly, if there’s a particularly salient connection point in the discussion, but often it will happen implicitly as we chart a gospel-informed trajectory through the text together. We can do that by making sure we don’t move too quickly from Interpretation to Application. If we speed along

from chewing on the text in Interpretation and head straight into Applying the text to our lives (ex. What is this telling me to do? How should this change my life?) we will miss this crucial gospel truth: hearing and obeying God's word can only come from an encounter with God that produces faith-filled repentance in us. Consider 1 John 1:5-9:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Here we see the consistency between obedience to God's word and repentance over sin. In fact, the two are often the same; to obey God's word is to repent when he says repent. When Jesus started his ministry, he came preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17). When we read God's word, we should be prepared for it, through the work of the Spirit, to cut us to the heart (Acts 2:37), convict us of our sin (John 16:8), or expose our lack of faith (Mark 9:24).

So, here's a way to word the sort of movement we take through discussion guides each week; you'll see the influence of OIA in there, but with this crucial gospel element added:

- What is this passage talking about?
- What is God saying to us/me through this passage?
- How does this passage reveal my sin, lack of faith, and/or my inability to obey God on my own?
- How does this text reveal the way God's grace works in my life to make me right with him and to obey his word?
- What is God calling me to do or believe more fully in this passage?

To reiterate, each week you might see a different emphasis on the different aspects of this overall trajectory, but we follow it for the most part.

At this point you might be wondering why we're including all this information about how the discussion guides are written. We want you to know how the sausage is made because 1. It'll better prepare you to move through the discussion guides each week and 2. Because it'll help you know how to riff on the pattern when you want to supplement or edit the discussion guides for your own group (more on that in Session 2).

Exercise 2

Here's an example of a set of discussion questions for Matthew 28:16-20. Take a moment to note the following:

- Which questions are Observing, Interpreting, and Applying questions?
- Where do you see the opening for folks to repent of sin and faithlessness?
- If you wanted to adjust or edit any of the questions, how would you do so?

Discussion questions

- Could someone read Matthew 28:16-20 for us?
- What stood out to you from the passage?
- What does Jesus commission his followers to do here?
- How do you think the disciples felt in this moment?
- How does it feel for you personally to receive this mission from King Jesus?
- What do you think is your next faithful step in Jesus's mission to make disciples?
- How does this passage provide you with hope and encouragement for carrying out Jesus's mission?

3. How to run a Bible study discussion

What skills do you think it takes to facilitate a discussion about a passage of the Bible? There's probably a solid dozen you could list out without much reflection; that's because a lot of the skills you use in a conversation are things called soft skills (or people skills), which are scores of tiny little skills like not talking too loudly, using body language effectively, monitoring the tone of a room, relating to different people differently, etc. There's really a lot going on when people talk in a group setting. In addition to those soft skills, we could list out skills that are unique to studying the Bible like knowing how to cross-reference texts, proper exegesis of a passage, what to do when someone misinterprets the Bible, etc.

Thankfully, you're a person, so God has already given you people skills. You use them every day, both consciously and subconsciously, and those skills are far more powerful and trained than you're probably aware of. Leading a community group discussion gives you a chance to employ those skills in ways that lead people to God's word. Similarly, as a follower of Christ, God has already given you everything you need for life and godliness in his word (2 Pet. 1:3), though to be sure, bringing others to God's word starts with you going to it yourself. God equips us to help others value him through his word when we take time ourselves to value God through his word.

Out of the dozens of skills we could focus on as community group leaders, here are five that are worth highlighting: preparation, leading people to the word, asking good questions, exercising humility, and facilitating discussion.

1. Prepare.

Preparing for your group discussion involves a prayerful heart and a preparatory mind. Before you meet, pray that the Lord would use your time together to the benefit of his people and to the advancement of his Kingdom, that simple things like circling up in a living room would have an eternal impact. Prepare by understanding the passage and thinking through the discussion questions. Read over the passage a couple of times before meeting, trying to gain a firm grasp of what the passage is saying, looking out for difficult concepts or phrases that people might get hung up on, and thinking through the implications the passage has on our lives. Take a look over the discussion questions that are provided each week and consider how they would work with the people in your group. Edit, reword, or add to the questions in order to help the discussion fit your people best.

2. Lead people to the word.

The goal of community groups isn't to come and listen to the leader's thoughts, ideas, and insights on life. The goal is to go to God's word together, hear from it, and be changed. It's the leader's job to make sure that's what the group sets out to do every week.

3. Ask good questions.

Asking a good question is harder than it seems. A paragraph long explanation before asking a question will make people wonder where the question was. A question with big, Christian-y words could ostracize folks who don't have much background in the church. A yes or no question doesn't give any room for thoughtful discourse. Your group will learn over time how to handle the flow of conversation, but good questions early on in a group's life will teach your people how to go about a Bible study discussion. As your group ages, good questions will keep folks engaged and challenged, rather than serving up t-ball level answers. We'll go into more detail about questions and using the discussion guides effectively during Session 3.

4. Exercise humility (and be quiet).

The goal of community groups isn't for the leader to teach. That's a sermon and those happen on Sundays. We gather in groups to go to God's word and leaders help take people there by prioritizing the ideas, stories, and responses of group members. Being a CG leader doesn't make what you have to say more important than what others have to say. That doesn't mean you shouldn't ever contribute to the conversation with your own responses; in fact, doing this can help group members know that you're seeking to learn from the text just like they are. That also doesn't mean you shouldn't speak up when people make off comments. Taking all of that into account, one aspect of good leadership is prioritizing others over yourself, particularly by being quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19).

5. Facilitate discussion.

"Facilitate" is a good catchall bucket for many of those soft skills we mentioned earlier. This includes everything that it takes to hold a thoughtful discussion as a group, like what to do when one person talks too much, how to draw out a quiet person, and how to wade into difficult topics. We can talk about theoretical situations like those, but most of the time you employ these skills on a case-by-case basis, and you develop these skills through experience. Generally speaking, it's best to lead your group in being extra gracious towards one another, to help people feel welcome and heard (even when they say weird things), and to think before you speak.

Structuring your weekly gathering

Different groups run their gatherings differently. Some meet in the afternoon on weekends because they have kids, others meet on weekdays after work. Some groups eat dinner together every week; others don't. However you structure your gathering, here are the important points:

- Gather everyone together - Food works great for this, either a meal or just snacks/dessert, but that's impractical for some groups. Anything that helps put people at ease, hangout, and talk to one another before discussion will get your gathering off on the right foot.
- Discuss scripture - The goal here isn't to check a box and "complete" discussion, but to meaningfully deal with scripture and what it means for our lives.
- Pray together - Again, don't make this a box to check. Look through the book of Acts and you'll see believers praying together as if God himself was with them. That's the goal.
- Leave space to hangout more afterwards - This is especially helpful for folks who have questions or comments they weren't comfortable mentioning during discussion.

Community group gatherings typically last anywhere from 1.5-3 hours, depending on the group. You'll notice the above schedule allows for hangout time before and after discussion. This is crucial in helping your group get to know one another and feel comfortable sharing with each other. Like we'll talk about in Sessions 4 and 5, the more time you spend growing closer in your friendships, the richer your discussion will become.

4. Community Group Leader Role Description

Lastly in this prework reading, take a moment to read through the CG Leader role description. The role description won't exhaustively describe what it means to be a CG leader (hopefully the training does that), but it should give you a helpful overview.

Qualifications

- Be a member actively fulfilling the duties as outlined in the Vintage Church membership covenant.
- Fulfill the character qualifications of a deacon as taught in Scripture. (1 Tim. 3:8-13)
- Have a personal commitment to seeing Jesus' mission for the local church, specifically the making of disciples, take place in community groups. (Matt. 28:18-20, John 20:21, Acts 1:8)

- Have a personal commitment to the wellbeing of the church and of community group members.
- Complete Community Group Leadership Training
- Recommended: Be an active member of a community group for 6 months or more prior to leading.

Expectations & Responsibilities

- Lead your community group to:
 - Know the Gospel: Be a primary leader for and champion your group's regularly occurring community group gatherings (see Know the Gospel).
 - Live the Gospel: Champion the sharing of each other's lives in community group (see Live the Gospel).
 - Advance the Gospel: Champion loving and serving our surrounding communities (see Advance the Gospel).
- Equip members of your group to accomplish group functions and priorities.
- Report attendance for every normal community group gathering (can be delegated to a group member).
- Meet with your community group coach at least once a quarter.
- Attend twice annual Community Group Leader Gatherings.
- When necessary, represent (or delegate representation of) your community group at new visitor events (e.g. Connections Sundays).

Desired Outcomes

- That you would be supported in your role, connected with church leadership, and thriving in your faith and the fellowship of the church.
- That your community group members would thrive in their faith and the fellowship of the church as well.
- That you would feel sufficiently prepared to navigate changes, challenges, and growth in your group.