

Educating and Equipping Women **Book Studies, Bible Studies, and Small Groups**

The terms “book study”, “bible study”, and “small group” I have noticed are used interchangeably amongst most churches. Yet, I contend, there is a distinct difference between each of them. I think if we could, as body of believers, come to agreement on this, it would be helpful in the structuring of our ministry study programs. Whatever you call them, they are important to the overall growth of the ministry, the women and ultimately the church.

For the sake of clarity, as we discuss this facet of women's ministry, I am going to define these terms for our purposes.

Book Studies

Book Studies – These are groups, where members may change according to the interest in the book selected at the time. Book studies are about specific themes, or every day issues that we want to address from a biblical perspective. Usually written by someone who has experience or authority in the topic. These studies might be about marriage, parenting, finances, divorce recovery, grief recovery, correcting behaviors, etc. I generally think of them as “scriptural help” books. They are designed to address a particular topic, from a biblical standpoint, using scriptures and personal experiences to structure the counsel of the book. (Example: Keep It Shut by Karen Ehman)

Book studies can be beneficial because they can help us navigate through a particularly difficult season of life, such as the loss of a spouse. However, they can also be detrimental if they distract you from the scriptures or God's truth. Book studies tend to be topical, emotional, more centered on “me” and “my experiences”, self help sprinkled with spiritual wisdom, motivational, or inspirational.

Bible Studies

Bible Studies - These are groups, where member may change based on the scripture being studied. Bible studies will take a specific book of the bible or selected scriptures and break it down to make it more easily understood. Or, it may select a theme and utilizing scripture exclusively to support and explain that theme. Bible study groups may choose an expository study of the scriptures, which is where the Bible is used as the sole source of the study. Commentaries may be used to assist this process, but they are not the primary source of information or interpretation. Another option would be to purchase a book or study, where someone else has done the work of interpreting the scriptures for you. (Example: Malachi by Lisa Harper)

Bible studies are certainly beneficial, as you are studying the direct word of God. However, they can be detrimental if you allow yourself to only study the portions related to women, or if the person who wrote the study is not credible. To make the most out of a Bible study, we need to make sure that we understand HOW to read the bible. There are many great resources, which include learning from others in your church who already know these techniques or grabbing a book on scripture study. (Example: Women of the Word by Jen Wilkins, or How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth by Gordon Fee)

In the book “Women of the Word”, Jen Wilkin addresses the expository style of bible study. She suggests that when we are studying the scriptures we need to do so with the 5P's of Sound Study:

- Purpose – The Bible itself is the big story of God's redemptive plan for his people, made up of sixty six smaller books that contribute to this bigger story. Our purpose in studying must be to look for that big story, every time we go to the scriptures.
- Perspective – Perspective helps us understand how the smaller pieces of scripture fit to the big story of the particular book we are reading, and how does that fit into the bigger story of the Bible.

- Patience – Reading the bible for purpose and with perspective is going to require discipline, which is not going to come naturally to us. We need to have patience with ourselves; this is going to take time, effort, and we may need to course correct ourselves now and again. We don't have to understand everything NOW, learning is a process that builds upon itself.
- Process - As we dig into the nitty gritty of the scriptures, we can begin to study them with process, which is where we read the scriptures with comprehension (what is it saying?), interpretation (what does it mean?) and application (how should it change me?). We can do this as we look to the scriptures for repeated themes and information, characteristics of God mentioned, or looking for points that are being made. Process includes looking up the words we don't know the meaning of, and referencing outside resources if a passage is confusing to us.
- Prayer – Whether you are studying alone, or in a group, prayer is the most important step of the process. Pray before you begin, that God would direct your study and reveal His word and message to you. Pray during the study, for clarity or should you come across a convicting piece of scripture. Pray afterward, meditating on the revelation of God's character in the scripture, seeking forgiveness if the scriptures revealed sin in your life, and pray for God's guidance in applying that scripture into your life.

Bible Studies are always predominately scripture based, even if they are topical to circumstances of life. They point to what God says about marriage, life, temptation, finances, etc. instead of what others think God says, or their personal experiences as Christian in those circumstances. Bible studies also help us to connect the individual books of the bible into the overarching story of the scriptures, God's redemptive plan for his people.

Small Groups

Small Groups have a very distinct difference between a fore mentioned groups, as they tend to be established, committed, groups of people that meet consistently over a longer period of time. These groups may go the route of Book Studies, Bible Studies, or a mixture of both. They have a two fold commitment to not just learning, but learning together with this particular group of people. This is not to say that Small Groups don't grow, or change. Work schedules change, people move, and we invite new friends to join us in our group; but there is a goal that small groups will create long term relationships, balancing between bonding and scriptural knowledge.

Small groups are beneficial in larger churches, where there are so many people in attendance it can be hard to form relationships in the larger group settings. Small groups can be made up of women in the same stages of life, a group of existing friends, women with common interests, or sometime just similar schedules. It may take a new attendee time to find the right small group where they “fit”, or a small group might form when a group of new attendees decides to band together. There are only two detriments I can think of when it comes to the small group setting. 1) You are happy with this small circle of friends, and don't make an effort to attend larger events where you can fellowship with your other sisters in Christ. 2) Because they tend to dig deeper into scriptures, you may be tempted to skip church on Sunday because of the intensity of your small group study. It is important to stay connected to the entire body of believers in your church. Your Pastor, as well, is charged with delivering a message entrusted to him by God. That message is for the whole church, not just those who do not attend a small group. That message is for you too. Corporate worship should not be sacrificed for small group or bible study attendance.

There is another group, that I'm going to touch briefly on here, but I will expand upon it in a future segment. This type of group is a “Formal Program”, these are usually parachurch organizations that are designed for connecting the community to the church. An example of this, for women, can be MOPS (Mother's of Preschoolers) which is an international organization, that reaches young mothers for support and guidance. It is considered a “life style evangelism” program, because it is usually run by a team of committed Christ following mothers. Their goal is to not only show support to moms in the church, but to invite the community at large to join. In doing so, these women become living models of Christian women, mothers, and wives to unchurched women in the community. On the other end of the spectrum, you have community bible study groups like BSF

(Bible Study Fellowship) which is open to the community, regardless of denomination or what church you attend, with the purpose of digging deep into the scriptures, led by a woman or team of women who are mature in the Word.

Your church may host one of these organizations as part of your Women's Ministry program. They are valuable assets for the mission of reaching the community.

As a final note, I'd like to exercise a word of caution, studies and small groups are great, valuable tools to help us become wise women in our understanding of the Word, and to help us build relationships with other women of faith. However, they can never replace, nor should they suppress, the priority of personal, private, bible study. When we spend time alone in the Word, God speaks to us in an intimate way, that doesn't translate into the group setting. It becomes our time to be still, quiet and wait upon the Lord.

If you are considering leading a bible study, or putting together a structured study program in your church, there are some things to consider.

In trying to select a book or selection of scriptures, evaluate the spiritual needs of the women in your church. There may be something going on locally or culturally that requires exploring. Also consider that over all biblical knowledge of the women in your church, when selecting materials. Determine if the church or the ministry has goals for the end of the study; such as increasing community volunteerism amongst the women. If there is a goal, you will want to select a study that supports that goal.

Some churches elect to select one to three books, that the entire body of women can study; as part of a group or independently if there is not a study group that meets at their availability. Another option is to offer a wide variety to choose from, or a mixture of both. In the fall, there might be one book all the women study collectively, and the spring brings variety.

Not every church, or women's ministry, is going to share the same needs and have identical programs. The important thing to consider is not the details of the program, but the quality of the study. The book, *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*, provides a great evaluation tool for determining if a study is the right fit for your ministry.

Evaluation of Bible Study Materials

- Is Scripture the authority of the materials? *The best books are full of scripture quotations and are built around scriptural principles. Scripture is used to support/prove scripture. The scriptures should have more weight than the author's personal opinions or experiences.*
- What is the doctrinal perspective? *Does the book compromise any of the essentials of faith (creation, fall of man, virgin birth, sinless life of Christ, atonement, resurrection)?*
- Does the book teach salvation by grace through faith? *Does the book support or compromise the need for repentance, reconciliation, and reliance on God? Does it confront sin, call for change, point us in the direction of sharing the gospel? Does it display total reliance on God as a lifestyle not "as needed"?*
- Who is the author? *Do we know the author, their background, or reputation?*
- Who does the author quote? *Authors quote who they read, and who they read influences them. It is important to know who the author looks to as a resource.*
- Is the book man-centered or God-centered? *Is the emphasis on God and conforming to his image or to "be satisfied and happy"?*
- Is the book teachable and useful? *We need to ensure our teachers are prepared and able to teach the materials. If it delves into issues too deep for our teachers to understand, they won't be able to communicate the lessons of the book. What will the book equip our women to know? Is there a workbook or lesson plan suggestion to help our teachers in the process?*

The Women's Ministry team should establish their guidelines for their Women's Bible studies. There are some church's which actually have "Small Groups" pastors who oversee these studies, if your church has one... make sure to involve the Pastor in this process. Decide on the kinds of studies you want to promote, the guidelines for approving studies, and then begin recruiting your teachers. You may need to start with your members of your leadership team.

I have also found, over the years, that you may have amazing teachers... who don't or can't host the study in their home. Or, a person who loves to host people in their home, but really isn't called to teaching. You may have women who step up to teach, but are not quite ready to take on that responsibility yet. This is where your role in leadership will serve to connect these women to each other.

Connect the teacher, to the host. Connect the person who wants to teach, with a teacher they can learn from. Co-taught studies are a great way to prepare future leaders.

And, you will also find the person that God has visibly anointed with teaching, who isn't confident in doing so. Connect that person with a teacher to co-teach a study with, or in the capacity to fill in for a teacher if they should get sick or get called out of town. It provides an opportunity for the woman to build her confidence in teaching in smaller, less intimidating steps.

Our church meets with our small group and study leaders at the end of the summer to prepare for our fall groups. We train teachers on how to facilitate groups, provide support for each other, and discuss the materials we are going to use. Then, we meet occasionally throughout the year. This allows us to problem solve any complications that arise, discuss prospective leaders that are appearing in our groups, and prepare for the spring and then summer sessions.

Regardless of the types of studies your ministry will offer, make sure the priority is that they are gospel centered. There are lots of flashy programs, celebrity sized speakers, and over the top events. *"The last thing we need is another formula guaranteed to make our group grow, or flashy teaching method that will keep everyone entertained. What we need most is to fall on our knees before an Almighty God and beg him to work through us."* (Trevin Wax, *Gospel Centered Teaching*)

In our next segment we are going to discuss discipleship and mentoring, this is the end goal of all of the bible studies and small groups. We are using these groups as a tool to shape, and help women grow in their faith, with the purpose of preparing them to share their faith with others.