

New Purpose!

Christ's Ambassadors

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” —Matthew 28:18-20

“We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.” —2 Corinthians 5:20

“With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” —2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

When someone becomes a Christian, a whole new purpose for living becomes a conscious desire that he naturally seeks to fulfill. That new purpose flows from his appreciation of having been given the opportunity to learn the great news of Jesus' death and resurrection which made it possible to be forgiven and to have a relationship with God. If a person is grateful to have found out how to be born again to become a dearly loved child of God, then he will want others to have the same opportunity to learn that great news! It's only logical to think that being Christ-like would include wanting “to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10) as Jesus did. Being loving and unselfish is basic to what it means to be a Christian, so it is safe to assume that of every person who has already been “found.”

Starting with that positive assumption, then the logical question needs to be asked: Why don't all Christians share about their faith and Jesus' sacrifice for sins with others? In over 43 years as a Christian, I've heard sermon after sermon admonishing me and everyone else to do just that. But I have to admit that I have become somewhat jaded and tempted to feel resentment every time a preacher raises the subject. Why? Because I have yet to hear a preacher speak from personal experience and tell me first of all how he is doing it and then tell me

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how I can realistically do it, too.

I don't appreciate someone—especially someone who has an easy way to broach the subject of Christianity simply by introducing himself and telling his occupation—telling me to “tell others about Jesus” or using examples like Philip enthusiastically finding his friend Nathanael and asking him to “come and see” (John 1:46). The reality is that even preachers don't practice what they preach. It's just not that simplistic. I'd be open to having a preacher demonstrate effective “evangelism” (telling the “gospel”—“good news”—to others) and then equip me to do as he is doing. Just show me, don't preach at me!

The context of our culture is very different from the days of Jesus entering human history. Few haven't heard of Jesus in America, and most claim to believe in him. Granted, the Jesus most have heard of often bears no resemblance to the truth about him. But the very fact that much needs to be unlearned and then relearned correctly from the Scriptures is the reason that it doesn't work to approach people now as the disciples—and even Jesus—did in the first century.

So in this booklet, the goal is to get practical about how each Christian can actually participate in the process of getting the good news of Jesus out to real people that are in our personal sphere of influence. Assuming that all who love God and are thankful for their own relationship with him would want to find a way to help others become aware of and receptive to what God offers to all mankind, and knowing that very few actually do anything proactive to share their faith with others, what can be done to make it less fearsome and more of a natural part of life in Christ?

There is a way to do it, and that is through small group Bible studies that meet weekly in homes. In this booklet they will be referred to as Bible Talks, which is the best description of them I've heard of and is what I am used to from my own background and experience. (Some who have been exposed to a church group that uses this name—a group which my family was a part of but left when it developed into a cult—may prefer that I use a different name, but I am to the point of being able to use the descriptive name without falling into the errors of that group. I never want to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” So I readily give credit to the good and effective aspects of my experiences of participating in Bible Talks because their effectiveness was due to biblical principles being followed.)

Bible Talks best suit our culture and our desire to share our faith. They are not a program but rather they are the most natural setting for Christians to put into practice the very biblical principles that Jesus promised would impact others and draw seekers to himself.

Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to all the people God has put in my path who are waiting for the opportunity to see his truth in real life. From past experience, I know that God works Providentially to put people together—those who have answers with those who are seeking them. My own experience of having the right person provided to me to be able to show me the answer to my question of what it means to be “born again” has always encouraged me to believe that there must be many others who have questions but don't know where to go for answers they can trust, answers they can see for themselves in the Bible.

Having experienced the effectiveness of Bible Talks both for deepening Christian fellowship and for finding and drawing to God those who are seeking him or who are at least open to learning more about him, I dedicate this booklet also to all fellow Christians who are seeking a way to share their faith as an integral part of their lifestyle as a follower of Christ. The Bible gives a clear vision of dynamic and synergistic relationships among Christians that “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6, KJV) in the first century. They didn't really do anything bold or dramatic, they simply loved one another and shared the good news with those in their sphere of influence. And God drew thousands to himself who wanted what they saw in the lives of the Christians.

So because I long to have a way to experience the same close-knit fellowship and the same drawing impact on others as I see the early Christians did, I hope to find others who long for the same thing. Together we can be used by God to spread the good news about the new treasure, new birth, new life, new love, new family, new Spirit, and new purpose that God promises to all who come to him through Christ.

5. Know God's People

(Read the book of Ephesians before the study session.)

- I. Individual foundations—Ephesians 1:5,7,13-14,17
- II. What the church (Greek “ekklesia” = “assembly”) is:
 1. **Eph. 1:22-23**—Jesus’ body, he’s the head
 2. **Eph. 2:19-22, 3:5**—God’s household/dwelling, built on Jesus with apostles and prophets laying foundations for all time
 3. **Eph. 3:14**—Family of believers
- III. How the church works
 1. Interdependency
-**Eph. 4:7-16ff**
-Each part does its part, speaking truth in love
-Leaders equip the rest so all can minister
-**Romans 12:4-5**—Belong to, responsible for each other
-**1 Corinthians 12:12-27**—All need and needed by others
 2. Involvement
-**Hebrews 3:12-13**—Encourage daily, prevents sin
-**Hebrews 10:24-25**—Meet with and motivate each other
-**Colossians 3:16**—Use the Word to help each other
-**Titus 2**—Learn from others in practical ways
 3. Love—1 Peter 1:22-2:12—Love is the foundation, received from God and cultivated
- IV. The effect of God’s church
 1. **Eph. 3:10-11**—Shows his wisdom
 2. **Eph. 3:20-21**—Brings him glory
 3. **Eph. 4:1-6**—Unity (draws others to God—**John 17:20-23**)
 4. **Eph. 4:13,15-16**—Members “grow up,” become like Jesus

What am I going to do with what I know? I now know enough of God’s foundational teachings to make a decision about what I need to do to have a relationship with Him, and therefore also be added to His body, the church, the family of God.

Jesus wants me to weigh out my decision—**Luke 14:25-3; Luke 9:23-26,57-62; Mark 10:17-31.**

Am I ready? Philippians 3:7-14—It’s worth whatever I need to give up to follow Him !

Philippians 4:13—“I can do all things through him who gives me strength!”

Assumptions

Along with the positive assumption that all Christians want to share their faith with others and to feel the joy of being used by God to bring others to himself, there are two negative assumptions that are commonly and unfortunately true. One is that most Christians have never seen or experienced the conversion process of another adult. And the other is that most congregations do not have leadership that is experienced in effective evangelism, therefore there is no one equipped to turn around and equip others to do it.

Ephesians 4:11-13 describes how the living and dynamic organism of the body of Christ is designed to function: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service [“ministry”—RSV], so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” One of the most important “works of service” that God gave all of us the responsibility—and privilege—to do is to fulfill the Great Commission for our time.

The early days of Christianity gave us great examples of how all the disciples told others about new life in Jesus. The result of the first wave of persecution of the believers in Jerusalem was that, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4). The only designated leaders at that time were the apostles and seven “deacons” chosen for a specific administrative task. The apostles were the only ones who stayed in Jerusalem when persecution broke out after the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr and one of the seven deacons. His boldness resulted in his death, yet rather than causing fear and intimidation, the effect on the rest of the Christians was that they were inspired and encouraged to follow his example of boldness.

But as we look at the example of the early disciples, we can’t help but admit that the circumstances we face in trying to share our faith are much different from theirs. The state of Christendom today, with the division into hundreds of denominations with many conflicting and even contradictory doctrines, has resulted in a mindset in our culture that is very different from those early days. Back then, the clear message was that Jesus is the resurrected Son of God and therefore Lord, and the preaching and teaching called people to believe in and obey him. The Jews should have received that message as the good news of the fulfillment of all the prophecies about the Messiah, the Christ. But they had so missed the point about what the Christ

would be like that most of them—the ones who wanted God to conform to their preconceived ideas rather than humbly seeking his truth—refused to believe even though Jesus’ miracles and sinlessness had been obvious to all.

Today, the clear message about Jesus is muddled by the question of whose version of Christianity should be believed. If I claim to have the truth and try to persuade someone else to learn it, I am judged to be judgmental and condemned as intolerant by those who can’t tolerate anyone who has strong convictions. Our pervasively “post-modern” culture doubts that truth is knowable, which is not surprising in light of the confusion and conflict within Christendom.

So nowadays we can’t simply get into conversations with others about Jesus and try to persuade them to believe in him. We have to deal with the reality that in America and in many other places in the world, many if not most people claim to believe in Jesus, yet their lives may betray either the shallowness of their faith or their ignorance of many of the things Jesus taught about living as his disciple. Many know enough to be religious church-attendees, but they are wary of anyone who is more serious about their faith than they are. In some ways our culture is similar to the early days of the new covenant in that there is much religiosity but little serious spirituality as Jesus’ teaching challenged the Jews to understand it.

Anyone today who wants to be a Christian has a maze of different teachings and denominations to sort through, and it’s understandably difficult to know who to listen to or who to seek help from for finding answers. Many who have been church-goers all their lives are either self-satisfied and not interested in learning more or they will need to unlearn and relearn many concepts their churches may have taught based on tradition or even false teachings. Preachers who are educated at seminaries are taught the doctrines and traditions of their particular denominations, and it’s very easy for false teachings to be passed on from teacher to student to congregation in a self-perpetuating vicious cycle. We are warned in many places in the New Testament to expect false teachings to arise, so it shouldn’t be surprising that many people will claim to be Christians but will still, as 2 Timothy 4:3-4 predicts, “gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”

This cultural reality is discouraging and daunting to anyone who truly wants to help others have a relationship with God. It’s not as simple as many preachers try to present as merely a matter of talking about Jesus to others. And that’s the beauty of using Bible Talks.

1 Peter 2:24)

-*Baptisma*” (Greek transliteration) = immersion (see also **Acts 8:26-39)**

-Death → burial → resurrection of Jesus and me = point in time when Jesus’ death applies to me personally!!

3. **Galatians 3:26-27**—“Put on Christ/clothed with Christ”—God then sees Jesus’ righteousness and perfection and not my sin (see also **Matthew 22:1-14)**
4. **Colossians 2:11-12**—My faith frees God to work (infants? NOT!); God gave us free will and doesn’t force anyone to follow him or to submit to his will
5. **1 Peter 3:18-22**—“Baptism saves you”
-Pledge of/appeal for a good conscience—no holding back
-God used water to cleanse before—the Flood
-No magic in the water itself! A spiritual reality made tangible by being received in a physical and historical event—God’s wisdom!
6. **Titus 3:5** (see also **Ephesians 5:25-26**)—“Washing of rebirth” + Spirit = John 3!
7. **Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:16**—Jesus’ command

Drawing Conclusions:

- What makes us separated from God? *Sin!*
- What removes sin? *Jesus’ blood!*
- Where and when does this happen? *In immersion into Christ!*
- What does this mean for me? Look at time line and compare
- How do I feel about this, regarding my life?
- How do I feel about others I know who don’t know this?
- What actions does this make me want to take?

Additional verses (to read during personal study review):

-**Acts: 8:12, 35-38**

9 (whole chapter) & 22:1-16—Paul’s conversion

10:47-48

11:15-18

16:11-33

18:7-8

19:1-7

-**Romans 8**—Life in the Spirit—promise for a powerful new way of life

-**1 Corinthians 2**—Spirit helps us understand God’s ways

-**1 Corinthians 12:12-13**—baptized by one Spirit into one body

4. Know God's Gift of New Birth

- I. Review my condition before God—"Where am I?" No gray area!
1. **Romans 5:6-11**—Need power to not sin and to be like God; need forgiveness
 2. **1 Peter 2:9-10**—Chart facts of darkness vs. light
- II. Time line—significant life and spiritual events, which will help me see what I've been taught and experienced about having a relationship with God. Compare later with what I see in the Bible. (Examples: began believing, saved, baptized, confirmed, etc.)

<i>Birth</i>	<i>Now</i>

- III. Born again at a point in time
1. **John 1:12-13**—The *right* to be born of God, to become God's child!
 2. **John 3:3-7**—Born of water and the Spirit
Question: When does God give me a new birth? How does it take place? The Bible doesn't say here, but will answer in other verses we'll look at.
- IV. Forgiveness is only possible through Jesus' shed blood and death.
1. **Matthew 26:28**—Jesus' blood brings forgiveness (see also **Hebrews 9**)
 2. **Colossians 1:19-23**—Jesus' death and blood
Question: If Jesus died for everyone, is everyone saved? When does his shed blood apply to a specific person?
- V. How and when Jesus' death applies to me personally:
1. **Acts 2:36-41**—Where we left off in study #3
-Am I cut to the heart?
-Is Jesus my Lord (master)? Will he be both Lord and Savior to me?
-"*What shall I do?*" Am I ready to do something to receive new birth?
-Answer: *When* I repent & be baptized → *Then* God gives forgiveness & Spirit
 2. **Romans 6:1-8**—Meaning of baptism
-Die with him, substitution of his life for my sin (see also

What is a Bible Talk?

A Bible Talk is a group of six to twelve or so who commit to working together as a dynamic and synergistic part of the body of Christ through which God can draw others to himself. The actual hour-long weekly study session is the most intensely-focused time together, but it's what goes on outside of the study session that makes it a wonderful opportunity for the members of the group as well as for visitors who accept an invitation to attend.

A Bible Talk group should not be thought of as a "program" or "church activity." The group will jell in an organic way mostly naturally and without being forced—as long as all the members understand what biblical principles apply and voluntarily commit to following them as part of the group. There does need to be training and equipping of the members. The leaders especially need to be trained and have experiences to draw from if possible (though they may have to learn "on the job" with the help of someone who has led them).

But Bible Talks are not merely means to the end of getting people converted. Rather, they are the most natural way for Christians to live out the specific biblical principles and commands that can be most concisely summarized as loving one another and sharing our faith. (See the booklet *New Family! Koinonia in the Ekklēsia of Christ* for a more thorough look at God's intention for life in the "church.") Another way to express it is to think in terms of combining fellowship and outreach. Christians can experience relationships with one another that are different from what was possible before their own new births. They need a means to cultivate those relationships. They also need opportunities to be able to let those outside of the fellowship see and want to experience what the Christians have. Bible Talks provide the means and opportunity for both of those needs to be met.

When a Bible Talk group is working well together according to the biblical principles that enable Christians to enjoy deep love for and affection with one another, it is a very powerful witness to anyone who visits. That's because the power of God working in the lives of the Christians is able to be seen, so a visitor can view up-close what it would be like for him or her to be a Christian, too.

There is a certain amount of connecting with one another and bonding that happens just by virtue of time spent together regularly. That is true for any group of people, but even more likely for Christians. 1 Peter 1:22 promises and encourages us, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart." But experiences of "going to church" usually are not conducive to the

deepening of relationships, and many Christians have become used to superficial and shallow conversations due to the spectator style of worship service that is the norm in church buildings. So it would be helpful when starting a Bible Talk group to lay some groundwork, to instill in the members a vision for what God intended his children to experience in the family of God and to equip them for putting into practice the many “one another” teachings of the Bible. God works powerfully when there is a combination of the history that naturally develops over time spent together plus inspirational teaching about the depth of fellowship that the group can experience if all members are dedicated to practicing those “one another” principles.

The logistics of a Bible Talk are not too difficult and become part of the members’ regular routine. The group meets weekly on whatever night works best for everyone’s schedule, either at the same home or rotating among members’ homes. An hour is reserved for the study, including some time for greeting and settling in, and then when it’s over those who need to leave can do so, and those who can stay can enjoy the fellowship longer (with sensitivity to the host family). Refreshments are good to provide at the end of the study time—food is always conducive to fellowship! Some groups like to also plan to eat a light supper together of something simple (like sandwiches or pizza) beforehand if that makes it easier for the members not to have to squeeze dinner in between work and the study. If the study hour can be from 7:00 to 8:00 it often makes attending easier for families with young children, but 7:30 to 8:30 works well, too. The members of the group need to work out how they will handle children, usually taking turns watching them in another room during the session.

The format of the study is to look at usually one passage or topic and discuss it. The members of the group need to understand that the focus of the study is to be personal, practical, and aimed at the heart rather than the head. “Conviction” is the overall goal. The Christians need to make comments that help everyone else in the group to deepen their positive convictions about the wisdom of following God’s truth as well as to bring about conviction of sin that will lead to repentance.

For instance, if a parable is the topic, such as the parable of the soils (Matthew 13), then the leader’s goal would be to draw out honest comments that deal with how we have personally experienced the different soils. Admitting our own weakness, the ways that we’ve allowed thorns to choke out our faith for instance, and especially how we are currently tempted to be distracted, hardened, or shallow, and then how we deal with resisting that temptation, can all help bring the

3. *Know Myself*

(Read verses in section III and do some “soul-searching” before the study session.)

- I. Spiritual law: God is holy and perfect and *cannot* be united with sin
 1. **Isaiah 59:1-2**—Sin separates
 2. **1 John 1:5-6**—Light vs. darkness
 3. **Romans 6:23**—Sin kills spiritually
 - Understand the bad news to appreciate the good news.
 - Don’t minimize sin or cheapen the price paid for it.

- II. All sin - sinful nature/fleshly desires
 1. **James 1:13-15**—Temptation—my evil desires, I choose to follow them, I am responsible for my choices
 2. **Galatians 5:17, 19-21**—Acts are symptoms of control of the flesh
 3. **Romans 7:14-25** (esp. 18)—Slaves to sin; honesty about desires: What would I be like if not for spiritual influences helping me to somewhat overcome?
 4. **Romans 3:23**—All fall short—God is the standard for comparison, no “curve”

- III. Specific sins we’ve struggled with help us see our own sinful nature and know where we’re weak and likely to be tempted. “*Can we talk?!*” **Question:** Which specifics have controlled me?
 1. **Mark 7:20-23, see also Jer. 17:9** **Related problems:**
 2. **Galatians 5:19-21** ◆Eating disorders ◆Grudges
 3. **Romans 1:18-32** ◆Substance abuse ◆Incest/rape
 4. **Colossians 3:5-9** ◆Abuser or abused ◆Abortion
 5. **2 Timothy 3:1-5** ◆Homosexuality

- IV. Repentance seeks change, not only forgiveness
 1. **Acts 3:19**—Positive, first step, look forward to “times of refreshing”
 2. **2 Corinthians 7:8-11**—Godly sorrow shows in attitude and action
 3. **Ephesians 4:22-24**—Process—ongoing
 4. **Titus 2:11-14**—Motivation: grace
 5. **Acts 2:36-37**—Cut to the heart” leads to:

Question: “What shall I do?” Desperate for solution?!

personal convictions

2. **2 Timothy 3:16-17**—Use it daily—“What does God say about this?”
3. **Matthew 7:24-27**—Put it into practice as I learn it
4. **John 4:23-24**—Perspective of balance—spirit and truth (see also **1 Timothy 4:16**)

A suggestion: Make a conscious decision and pledge to yourself and to God to seek and follow His will. For example:

“I commit to learning and practicing God’s will for my life, eagerly examining God’s word every day to know what is true.”

Signed _____ Date _____

truth to bear not only on our own lives as we need, but also on the lives of everyone else in the group.

We’ll look more later at how a Bible Talk can be used effectively to give visitors what they need in their personal and individual quests for truth and salvation. But first, in order for the group to be confident it is ready to be used, certain biblical principles need to be in place.

“They’ll Know You Are My Disciples...”

Jesus taught about four aspects of the lives of his disciples that would have a powerful impact on the world. They are all recorded in the book of John. It is significant that as John wrote his gospel long after the other gospels had been written and probably over fifty years after Jesus’ death, he had the hindsight of many years. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he chose what to record for all time from what he witnessed, as he said in John 21:25, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.” John’s gospel is the only one that gives so much detail about Jesus’ final time with his apostles as he prepared them for his death, resurrection, departure back to heaven and the mission for which they were chosen. So these principles were clearly very important in Jesus’ mind for them, and therefore for us, to understand. John’s inclusion of them surely must have been motivated by his awareness of their foundational importance for all time.

And they are all expressed as promises more than as commands. Rather than thinking in terms of how we *ought* to be, they are exciting and encouraging truths of what *will* be true of those who love God. That distinction helps us to look forward to experiencing them instead of feeling them as a burden. As Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30). The work of carrying out Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20 on page 1) seems like a huge responsibility that falls on the shoulders of each new generation of disciples of Jesus. But it is encouraging to be able to see it from the perspective of privilege and promise rather than of responsibility and burden.

These four principles have in common that Jesus said they will impact the world when they are true of his disciples. We don’t have to try to make that happen, it will happen through the power and wisdom of God. We have the privilege of experiencing that power and being God’s instruments for the drawing effect of that power at work. All we need to do is proactively give these principles the means and

opportunity to be practiced and the promised effects will be experienced, in our own lives and in the lives of those who see us up close and personal in a small group home-based Bible study.

The first of these principles is found in John 8:31-32: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” In our postmodern culture where the concept of truth being knowable is not believed or tolerated, this promise of Jesus has great power to impact people. But it will only have an impact if those who claim to know truth are experiencing and therefore able to show others the freedom that Jesus said will result. Jesus offers us freedom from the control and guilt of sin. If a Christian is living daily with a conscious focus on holding to his teaching, which basically means putting into practice specific principles that Jesus and his apostles taught, then he or she will also be experiencing the proof that God’s way is the best way. Life will work as God designed us to function. Problems will be faced with the question, “What does the Bible say about what my attitude or actions should be?” Each time a true principle is acted on, there will be the result of freedom. Romans 12:2 describes the transformation that God intends us to experience: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

If those who don’t yet have a relationship with God are given the opportunity to see that freedom and the goodness of God’s will being experienced, then they will realize that there is something to our claim to know truth. Truth is not an end in itself. The value of knowing God’s truth isn’t merely to have a head full of facts, but rather it is to have a heart full of awe and gratitude that God has given us the instructions for how to live here in this world as we prepare for the next. As we experience life as God designed us to live it, we will want others to have the opportunity also to experience the same thing. The challenge is to have a way to give them the opportunity to see the difference in the lives of Christians, and Bible Talks are a great way to offer them that opportunity in a natural, non-threatening, sociable atmosphere.

The second principle is in John 13:34-35: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” As with the previous passage, there is a need for people to have the opportunity to see this characteristic in the lives of Christians in order for the impact God promises to take place. First

2. Know God’s Will

- I. Jesus makes God’s will known.
 1. **2 Peter 1:3-4**—God provides:
 - Everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him
 - Divine nature, escape corruption through his promises
 2. **John 1:1-18**—Know Jesus to know God (illustration—bird or ant story)
 3. **John 17:6-19** (especially 6,8,13-19)—He did it—provided the way to live above the worldly; spiritual answers and joy

- II. 4 obvious characteristics of a disciple (follower/learner/apprentice) of Jesus
 1. **John 8:31-32**—Holds to his teachings
 - **Isaiah 55:6-9**—Trusts and obeys because God’s ways are higher
 - Practical examples:
 - **Matthew 6:25-34**—Priorities
 - **Matthew 18:15-17**—Relationship problems
 - **Luke 9:23-26**—Give to be happy
 - *Effect: Knows truth and is free!*
 2. **John 13:34-35**—Loves as he loved
 - **John 15:9-17**—Lays down life, shares good things and good news
 - *Effect: Draws others to God!*
 3. **John 15:4-8**—Bears much “fruit”
 - **Mark 1:16-18**—Makes us “fishers of men” (see also **Philippians 1:22** and context)
 - **Galatians 5:22-23**—Gives us spiritual qualities
 - *Effect: God draws others through my life!*
 4. **John 17:20-23**—Oneness with other believers; unity
 - **Ephesians 4:1-6**—Right attitude, effort, and foundations of truth
 - *Effect: Proves Jesus’ Sonship and God’s love to the world!*

Questions: Are these characteristics obvious in my life? Would Jesus say I am a disciple of his? Is God producing the effects in and through me that he promises will be true of Jesus’ followers?

- III. How to begin or continue in God’s will:
 1. **Acts 17:11-12**—“3 E’s” (NIV) - attitudes and actions,

- V. My response—How has God’s love affected me and how do I want to respond to it from now on?
1. **Isaiah 53:11** and context: “He will see the result of the suffering of his soul and be satisfied.”
(See NIV footnotes)—Do I make Jesus feel like what he did was worth it?
 2. **2 Corinthians 5:14-21**—Will I live for him?
 3. **Mark 12:30**—How will my love for God show in every area of my life?

of all, of course, what has to be true is that we need to experience in real life the kind of love Jesus was talking about. Again, we’ll need to ask, “What does the Bible say about this—about how Jesus loved us and how we are to love one another?” There are many specific examples and instructions, both in the gospels and in the letters written to churches and individuals by several apostles and other leaders of the early church. (For a more thorough look at this, see *New Love! Focus on Phileo.*)

Loving one another is no easy or natural goal. Our traditional way of “doing church” even works against being able to cultivate close and deep relationships. Meeting in large groups in a big room, with all eyes on the performances up front and reverent silence during worship services isn’t conducive to quickly forming strong connections with others. But there is just something about meeting in homes rather than in institutional buildings that makes it easier to be warm and real with one another. There’s the opportunity to spend more open-ended time and get into deeper conversations in a Bible Talk setting than in worship services. That in itself is a great advantage and will gradually but surely strengthen the “ligaments and sinews” that connect members of the body of Christ, the church (Colossians 2:19). And when Christians are experiencing Jesus’ kind of love, which runs deeper and is more selfless and purely affectionate than is possible in the world, then it will prove the power of God to visitors, and they’ll want to experience it, too.

The third principle is in John 15:5-8: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

What is this “fruit” that Jesus is describing? There is much debate about that, one side defining fruit as those who become Christians, using the logic that, as Jesus said, “Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars.” That would seem to imply that the fruit of Christians is other Christians, meaning conversions as the proof that shows we are his disciples. The other side of the argument refers to the qualities of being Christlike, especially as described in Galatians 5:22-23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is

no law.” But since Jesus didn’t spell out what he meant by “fruit” in John 15, it seems unnecessary to try to limit the meaning to either conversions or qualities of the Spirit’s work in our lives. The qualities will draw people to God and result in conversions, as was true in the first century, and conversions motivate us to live out our faith with those qualities even more.

“Fruit,” then, is anything that grows out of remaining in Jesus, which will always include godly qualities as well as conversions of those attracted to God through seeing those qualities. The real issue is whether this healthy cycle of fruitfulness is actually a reality in our lives both individually and as a group. There’s nothing more exciting than participating in the process of someone learning and then experiencing the wisdom of God’s truth as he or she becomes a new creation in Christ.

The fourth principle is in John 17:20-23: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Jesus’ prayer for complete unity seems impossible in these days of hundreds of different denominations and contradictory doctrines. Much damage has been done by the inability of those claiming to be Christians to live up to Jesus’ desire and prayer.

What needs to happen is for more people to become part of the solution by seeking unity based on the Bible, not allowing our own opinions and wishes to determine our beliefs but rather continuing always to limit our convictions to what God has revealed to us in his word. Where better to begin seeking unity than in a small group of Christians? When conflicts are faced and resolved using biblical teachings about attitude and doctrine, love and oneness deepens and forms an even more solid basis for unity. Then the group will have the effect on those in the world of letting them know that Jesus truly was sent by God and that he loves us. How attractive that would be to visitors to the Bible Talk!

Can you see how these truths could work together to draw others to Christ? When people actually get to see God’s power at work in the lives of real people who they know, it does have the impact Jesus promises it will. It’s important to keep the right perspective that we don’t (and really can’t) do anything solely as means to the end of con-

1. Know God

(Read Matthew 26-28 before the scheduled study session.)

- I. What is the most important thing in life?
 1. **John 17:3**—Eternal life *is* to know him.
 2. **Matthew 7:21-23**—What is the point these religious people missed? (see also **Galatians 4:9**) Not “Do *I* know *God*,” but “Does *God* know *me*?”

- II. What does God want for me?
 1. **John 3:16**—God loves me so much, he gave his best so he could have me with him!
 2. **Hebrews 8:1-13, 9:14-17, 10:8-10**—The New Covenant promise (**Jeremiah 31:31-34**); relationship vs. rules.

- III. My condition and need
 1. **Romans 5:6-11**—I *need* his love: powerless, ungodly, sinner, enemy. Compare to: love, die for, justify, reconcile, save.
 2. **Acts 2:22-24, 36-37**—I crucified Jesus, my only hope. Am I “cut to the heart”?

- IV. Jesus’ sacrifice and substitution for me—**Matthew 26-28**—Try to grasp what Jesus went through for me! Put myself in his place.
 - ◆ Lord’s supper—loved his betrayer
 - ◆ Gethsemane—alone in time of need
 - ◆ Before Sanhedrin—humiliation, pain, injustice at hands of religious leaders
 - ◆ Peter’s disowning—alone again
 - ◆ Pilate—injustice, flogging
 - ◆ Soldiers—crown of thorns, spit upon, beaten, taunted (see also **1 Peter 2:21-24**)
 - ◆ Crucifixion—slow, agonizing asphyxiation, weight on spikes, rubbing against open wounds from flogging, humiliation and torture
 - ◆ Separation from Father—the true spiritual price for my sin, Jesus’ greatest torture (see also **2 Corinthians 5:21**)
 - ◆ Resurrection—the culmination and goal, and our only source of hope! (see also **1 Corinthians 15:19**)

natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.”—John 1:12,13

“...I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’”—John 3:5,6

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”—1 John 5:13

This study covers basic questions of what it means to be a Christian and how one becomes a child of God—how one is “born again”—which even most church-going people haven’t asked or found answers to. The aim in studying together is to have friendship and fellowship that is based on unity, the hope Jesus expressed just before his crucifixion (John 17:20-23) and which is based on agreement on basic biblical truths (Ephesians 4:1-6).

verting others. But it is exciting to know that when we experience these four characteristics of being Jesus’ disciples, then it will have an impact on others in our world. And some will be drawn to God through seeing in us what he has created all people to yearn for.

Though a Bible Talk is an effective tool for sharing our faith, it’s important to not let ourselves slip into the mindset that it is solely for that purpose. In fact, if comments become aimed primarily for the benefit of visitors, they lose much of their impact. The greatest impact is seen when visitors have more of a “fly on the wall” vantage point, where the Christians are just being real, humble, open with their struggles and joys, and where the love for one another is genuine and not in any way a show put on for the sake of visitors. It’s when the discussion is genuinely helpful to the growth and encouragement of the Christians in the group that the visitors can gain a glimpse of what it would be like for them to become Christians, too.

To set the right pattern, the group should meet for training and to get used to the way Bible Talk discussions are more personal and heart-centered than most Bible classes or other settings they’ve experienced. Members need time to experience the value of open, honest, and vulnerable sharing with one another to gain an appreciation for how helpful it is and how much it results in deeper connections with other Christians. Because our love for one another is promised to have a great impact on the world, it’s important to allow that love to deepen and develop enough history together to feel affection for and genuine care for one another.

An admonition that is not easy to put into practice is Hebrews 3:12-13, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” In our traditional experience of church, this doesn’t usually happen naturally. But in a small group setting with an emphasis on realness and openness, a connection with one another does develop more naturally that usually leads to more consistent contact and awareness of one another’s needs. Anything that can help us move toward the goal of “encourage one another daily” is a good thing. And because the dynamics of the group result from biblical principles being practiced, they are genuine and not forced.

Another passage, in Hebrews 10:24-25, is familiar to most Christians: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the

more as you see the Day approaching.” This often is used as a club to admonish people to come to the church building every time the doors are open. Often our traditional way of doing church fails to provide the connectedness and encouragement that we need, though that is the goal of this passage. Then we may resort to an “ought-to” mentality. But if being together isn’t naturally resulting in the healthy spurring-on and encouragement needed, perhaps it’s because of the setting and not a heart problem. Bible Talks are so ideal for providing for the needs of the Christians in the group, and that in turn is what makes them have a powerful impact on visitors when they “come and see what God has done for” each of the members.

I have had the privilege of experiencing this, and I want to experience it more. Because it is a dynamic that requires at least a small group of Christians, there have been many periods of my life where it was not possible to experience it, and that has been very frustrating. There have been times of not having others who are ready, willing, or able to commit to such a group. And there have been times of meeting with a small group but without a shared vision or commitment and without the equipping and leadership needed to draw the group toward experiencing the depth that is possible. So part of my motivation for writing this booklet is to draw on past experiences in the hope that there may be others who would be encouraged to become interested in forming such a group.

“Let me tell you what he has done for me”

Once a Bible Talk has jelled into a close-knit, loving, involved group where the characteristics Jesus described of his disciples are true, then it’s time to invite “inquirers” (1 Corinthians 14:23-24, see footnote) to visit. And that is the great aspect of Bible Talks that makes sharing one’s faith such a natural part of real life. Psalm 66:16 says, “Come and listen all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.” In a nutshell, this is the power of the Bible Talk.

Having a Bible Talk to invite people to is almost the best part of the experience. I say “almost” because the very best part, and what makes inviting others so exciting, is the true “koinonia” (fellowship) that the Christians experience and that deepens as weeks go by and the connections and bonds deepen. But then it is truly thrilling to have a way to share what we have with others and to know that if they come, they will see what “church” is designed to look and feel like in real life. When an invitation is accepted and a friend or acquaintance actually comes to the Bible Talk, the thrill is even greater. But whether someone accepts or rejects our invitation, just knowing that

“That You May Know...”

(... what “IT” is all about—answers to life’s big questions that may not be answered by going to church.)

Overview

1. **Know God—Why would/should I want to be a Christian?**
Jesus’ death on the cross made it possible to become God’s child and have a relationship with Him that is my closest and dearest. A grateful heart responds unconditionally and trustingly to His love.
2. **Know God’s Will—What does God say is the way He designed for us to live?**
Be a learner/follower/disciple of Jesus. Determine if I am really his disciple by examining myself according to Jesus’ definitions. If I’m claiming it, does it show? If I’m not claiming to be a disciple now, decide if I’m going to be one.
3. **Know Myself—Why do I need help from God?**
What keeps me from being close to God? What barriers do I put up by giving in to my desires and going against His will? What is my sinful nature? What does it mean to repent?
4. **Know God’s Gift of New Birth—How do I begin a relationship with God?**
God offers me a new start—forgiveness and power and a relationship with Him—by participating in Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection, to live a new life following the Spirit and not the sinful nature!
5. **Know God’s People—Why do I need to be part of the church? What is Jesus’ church like?**
God showers me with love in a tangible way through my relationships with His other children; he meets my every need not only by his Word and his Spirit in me individually, but also by working through others. He puts me in a new family where other members love and need me and I love and need them.

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of

take an honest look at our experience of fellowship and become proactive to seek ways help our “life” more closely match our “doctrine.” 1 Timothy 4:16 says, “Watch your life and doctrine closely.” And Jesus said something similar in John 4:24, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

Bible Talks are simply a small group of Christians meeting together regularly and proactively cultivating their relationships with one another. With good leadership, the fellowship and involvement will deepen and the love that Jesus said will impact the world will grow.

Then, when the Christians of the group have become close-knit and are growing in their confidence that they have what others need and that God makes possible, it becomes almost natural to turn the focus of the group outward with the desire “to seek and save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). With some preparation, practice, and tools such as printed invitation cards, the members can discover that inviting others to visit the Bible Talk is not too scary and can actually become exciting!

When we view ourselves as Christ’s ambassadors to this world—and in particular to our own personal family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and even acquaintances—and when we begin to experience the joy of finding others who will respond to our invitation, the feeling of being used by God is an awesome privilege. When we have a practical way to give others the opportunity to learn God’s promises and his will and to see his power work in our lives, we grow and stretch and become much more focused and alert in our own faith and obedience. Our priorities begin to line up with our good intentions and our heart catches up to our head. We begin to experience the “full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ” as Paul wrote to Philemon (verse 6).

The more we grow in our experience and appreciation of what we have, and the more we see others drawn to Christ through us, the more we want to share, with more and more people. Then there will be hope for the Great Commission to be fulfilled. We will know that we are being part of the solution rather than part of the problem!

Is anyone out there willing to give Bible Talks a try? Please email me (see last page) if you have any interest or questions. Bible Talks are the ideal setting for fellowship and outreach. They provide the perfect natural opportunity for us to love one another and share our faith. My hope and prayer is that someday I will have the opportunity to experience them again!



we have a way to get into conversations with others about Jesus and about the Bible is great in and of itself. My biggest frustration in my desire to share my faith with others is when I can’t find a way to broach the subject in a way that is natural and comfortable for me and especially for the other person. Having a Bible Talk invitation card, which is an important and helpful tool, gives a way to break through the barriers we may feel or others may put up.

Steering a conversation toward spiritual subjects is never completely comfortable. But when we have confidence that those who come will observe and get a taste of the body life dynamics that God designed but which are rare to experience, our enthusiasm will show and some will be intrigued enough to give it a try.

Even when someone invited proves to not be interested in spiritual things, the invitation is the easiest way to discern that and not fret about what we can’t change. We can pray for them and trust that God will continue to work to get that person’s attention some other way. We can never know who might be at a point in life where there is at least openness and perhaps even a seeking heart. Paul’s attitude was that our concern needs to be to do our part but trust God to make our efforts fruitful. He said in 1 Corinthians 3:7, “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” It’s encouraging to think that the seed we plant may take root in the future! But whether the person is ever receptive to God’s word or not, at least we can feel good about extending the opportunity. We are Jesus’ body, his feet and voice, his ambassadors to the world.

The simple and straightforward invitation to a Bible Talk has the least discomfort for the Christian and for the person being invited of any way I’ve ever known for broaching spiritual subjects. It works for both old friends (and family) and new acquaintances, and even for inviting relative strangers whenever we have the opportunity to get into a conversation. That is a habit that is not difficult to cultivate. My husband and I have personally experienced meeting people who have been our salesclerks and even fellow shoppers while going about our daily lives who accepted our invitation to come to a Bible Talk, some of whom have gone on to study and become Christians. And we know of many members of our congregation who were invited by strangers when they were receptive and seeking, and God used that invitation to provide the help needed to learn how to become a Christian.

Using a printed invitation card works well as an ice-breaker to jump right in to talking about the Bible Talk. Pulling out a card and handing it to the person being invited is much easier than blurting out

an invitation without it. Yes, it's a "crutch," but a helpful one that works well for both the inviter and the one invited. It serves to change the subject of a conversation immediately without seeming too abrupt. I've handed an invitation to someone, even a stranger, and said something like, "I'd like to give you this. It's a card with information about a Bible Talk I attend (or have at my house) every week. It's been so helpful to me in my faith because we focus on very practical teachings from the Bible and talk about how they apply to our everyday lives. Would you be interested in coming to something like that sometime?" That's really all there is to inviting someone. It can open the door to talking further, or it can reveal that the person is not interested in spiritual things right now. Either way, it has told the person where I'm coming from, what's important to me, and that I'm a person they can open up to about their own questions or concerns about God. It's so hard to get to that point in friendships, so having a way to break through that barrier early on in an acquaintance is one of the most helpful things about being part of a Bible Talk. And even in relationships that have gone on and on without being able to find a way to broach the subject, inviting them to the Bible Talk gives a new opportunity to go ahead and get into spiritual conversations.

When someone does show interest in coming to the Bible Talk, experience has shown that it's best to offer to pick them up. And if they refuse that offer, there's nothing to be apologetic about when we call them close to the day to be sure they remember it and express that we're glad they're coming.

In the whole process of inviting people and then staying in touch with them to help them remember it and actually follow through on their good intentions, it's helpful to empathize with them as much as possible. To be honest about knowing that they may need reminders or a ride helps keep things real. Another principle that Paul exemplified that applies to our efforts to share our faith is in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings." Our aim is to make it as easy as possible for people to be drawn to God through us. We want them to see that just as we are growing and changing through the power and truth of God, they can, too.

Titus 2:10 is a good principle to live by: "...so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our savior attractive." Though written about Christians who were slaves when converted, it's true for all of us in a culture that often sees Christians caricatured in very unattractive ways. It's sad that so many now are turned off to Christi-

When someone we know accepts our invitation to visit a Bible Talk, finds it helpful and keeps coming, develops friendships with those in the group, accepts the offer to study through these foundational topics with two or three of the Christians, and ultimately responds with faith, repentance, and a desire to be baptized into Christ, there is no earthly experience that can compare to how amazing it feels to be part of that friend's journey toward God. And when someone is born again in those circumstances with connections within the body already formed, he or she can grow and mature so much more quickly than is usually the case when someone visits worship services and studies with the preacher or some other individual.

When a Bible Talk's organic and synergistic dynamic results in the new birth of a visitor and that person becomes a dear brother or sister in Christ with deep appreciation for God's grace, then the prayer Paul prayed for Philemon becomes true in our lives (Philemon 6): "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." As we watch others "get it," we also understand more deeply than is possible any other way just how good God has been and is to us.

And that's when the temptation to think of the Great Commission as a burden gives way to appreciating it as a privilege!

Conclusion

Sharing our faith with others who need a relationship with God gives us a new sense of purpose in life. If all Christians had confidence that they could show others what is so great about being a Christian, the natural Christ-like desire to bring others to God would be expressed and God would add many to his church. The majority of Christians lack that confidence and don't share their faith.

What is the solution? What is needed first is a way to provide Christians the way to experience the close-knit fellowship where the "one-another" principles of the New Testament can actually be put into practice. In order to draw others to Christ, we must be able to show them God's truth in the flesh. We can't show them that God's ways are best unless we are actually experiencing the "life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:19). And the best setting for those "one anothers" to be experienced and cultivated is in a small enough group where one can know the others well enough to be able to have real people to apply them to.

Even if God hadn't told us to "go and make disciples of all nations," being part of the body of Christ ought to be so amazing that we'd want to share the good news with others. So first we need to

or discomfort so we won't wimp out. It's not only legitimate, it's also biblical to be confident of our own example and use it to ask someone to have the same attitude. Paul said, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

We need to have deep convictions about the truth that people need to learn and understand and respond to. Repentance is not only necessary, as we know from Acts 2:38 ("Repent and be baptized, every one of you..."), but it is also a good thing, as Acts 3:19 says, "Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." Without repentance there is no change and no appreciation or experience of the "good, pleasing, and perfect will" of God (Romans 12:2).

We do a disservice to anyone who is seeking God if we minimize or neglect the need for godly sorrow. 2 Corinthians 7:8-11 reveals the wisdom of allowing someone to feel the pain of conviction about sin in order for him or her to arrive at the state of humility and repentance that God requires. He knows how much we need that in order to experience the joys of submitting to his will. Paul wrote, "Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." So even Paul had to resist the temptation to hold back from confronting the sin in their lives that needed to be repented of.

Our fears that someone may reject what seems like clearly spelled out teachings in the Bible are very understandable. Many people *do* balk at or even reject what they read. Jesus warned us that there would be few who would find the narrow road. And there's no way to know in advance who will accept and who will reject the truth in the Bible. But the only way to deal with that fear is to go through enough experiences to realize that the joy of being privileged to be used by God to show his truth to someone who accepts it far outweighs the sadness and pain felt when someone rejects it. If we remember that we are only the messengers and that the rejection is not of us personally but of the very words of God, that helps us keep it in perspective. Every rejection also serves to help us to empathize with what Jesus went through, risking our rejection. We can get a glimpse of how pleased God is for every person who makes what Jesus went through worth the pain and separation and risk (Isaiah 53:11 [footnote]: "He will see the result of the suffering of his soul and be satisfied.").

anity also because what they have seen in their own experience hasn't been attractive to them. Many whose hearts are open to Christianity or who have made some effort to go to church give up on seeking God. But if they were given the opportunity to see powerful, dynamic fellowship and biblical truth that makes a difference in the lives of real people, they would be drawn to Christ.

Many deeply convicting things can be said in a group setting that can be taken to heart by the others without the temptation to feel offended. That's one of the helpful dynamics of the Bible Talk setting. People do need to be convicted, but it's very difficult to get to that point in a one-on-one friendship. There's such temptation to fear offending a friend, and it's simply hard to get to the point of feeling free to broach the subject of a friend's relationship with God. But in the Bible Talk, from the invitation on through to an eventual one-to-one Bible study, the tone is non-confrontational and therefore non-threatening. Because comments are not aimed directly at a person, he or she can take it to heart and respond voluntarily to the truth without the usual struggle with pride and self-protectiveness that so often hinders a person from responding to God.

Bible Talk leaders need equipping for how to best prepare for the discussion, draw out comments, and keep it on point. They also need to know how to follow up on the study to discern how open-hearted visitors are and to discern when the time may be right to initiate personal studies of basic topics that will help them evaluate their own relationship with God and be born again if they have not already experienced that.

The powerful dynamic of a Bible Talk is that both members and visitors can be challenged and encouraged at the same time. Fairly bold and straightforward truth can be presented both in the lesson and in the comments that apply the lesson personally. Yet because it is clear that we are all sinners, all weak and in need of God's help and grace, we can be inspired to want to grow and change and live up to what we learn from the Bible. Visitors can be encouraged to not fear being convicted and repenting, and they have the balancing perspective of being able to see others who have already gone down the path that they need to get on, which makes it less scary.

"That You May Know..."

When someone who has been attending the Bible Talk shows openness to learning more of God's will, he or she needs to be given the opportunity to study through the foundational topics that must be understood in order to make the decision to personally believe in

Jesus and to be born again. Then the Christians in the group can initiate the idea of an individual study.

All along as a visitor is coming, having the topics of the Bible Talks to discuss further in conversations at other times gives a natural way to deepen the friendship and helps us discern how God's word is affecting him or her. It's exciting to be able to see the "living and active" word of God work on someone's heart, and when someone is humble and open, eventually it will be natural to share about the study series and ask if the person thinks it would be helpful to get together and go through those topics.

Most people have never studied through any foundational subjects for themselves, and even more rarely have they stopped to think what issues are foundational in the first place. The norm is usually that people grow up going to church and pick up bits and pieces from sermons and classes. It's like they have a bunch of puzzle pieces but they don't have any frame of reference for how the pieces fit together. Studying through these topics is so helpful for us to have confidence that we know the important things that help us make sense of the Bible. As we continue to learn more and more over time, we can build on these foundations.

I share with visitors from my own life about how I grew up going to church but didn't really know much about these topics. I even share about how I went to church and assumed I was a Christian but then realized I didn't know what it meant to be "born again," and how thankful I am that God provided someone (my husband now) to show me what the Bible says about it. I also share about my experience in high school in a singing group of kids from all the churches in the area and how it helped me see how much disagreement there is and how confused I was by that, but how that made me start to question and want to know for myself what the Bible says. That leads into being able to ask them about their own background and what they think about all the disunity. Most people aren't aware of Jesus' prayer for oneness and unity in John 17:20-23, so that often gets them thinking and questioning and seeing the need to study through some specific, basic issues.

Then, if there seems to be openness to talking about the state of their own relationship with God and about how much they've studied the Bible up to now, I ask if we could get together to study through some basic things.

The beauty and wisdom of Bible Talks is especially obvious and exciting to experience when a visitor reaches this point. And this is the point that ultimately every person needs to reach. Each person

cially within the overall context of what it means to believe in and therefore submit to Jesus' teachings, the responsibility rests with the person who is learning God's will to respond to what he or she reads.

Whenever someone balks at something in the Bible that challenges or contradicts what they have been taught or assumed, we need to realize that they are going through strong temptation to reject truth. The reason for rejecting it is always either moral or emotional and not because God's truth is hard to discern or understand and not because there are different and contradictory interpretations that are all true.

Rejection is based on morals if the person is unwilling to admit or confess sin and is trying to find some seemingly legitimate excuse for not having to repent. It's so important to not give a person any reason to think he or she can pass off God's will as, "what you say." That's why it's important to refrain from telling the person what a verse means but rather require him or her to think it through and express the meaning, helping only by asking questions if needed to help jog the thought process. These foundational topics are not difficult, but when people have not been used to reading the Bible for themselves, often they end up trying to make it more complicated than it is.

We never want to get in the way of letting the "living and active" word of God work directly on another's heart. This moral temptation to reject what the person sees for himself or herself in the Bible is also the reason it is so important to be gently bold in addressing sin not as an abstract concept but rather in specific ways as the verses in that lesson do. When someone is allowed to continue in worldly sorrow that resists being exposed and is only sorry when caught, then true repentance has not taken place and the person isn't biblically ready to be born again. Death to the old self is to be a given and we don't do a person any favors if we let them get away without facing sin in specific ways that God's word details for our good.

The emotional temptation to reject what the Bible says usually flows from the difficulty of facing the implications of having been wrong. One naturally struggles to make sense of something being learned for the first time, especially when one has thought he or she already knew a lot about God's will or thought one was a Christian but is having to consider the possibility that he or she really hadn't been born again biblically.

In both moral and emotional temptations, we can empathize with individuals as they go through it, and we need to be expressive of that. Having gone through the same process and temptation in our own conversions, we can express our understanding. But we also need to be on guard for our own temptation to want to avoid conflict

rejection, too, when someone just refuses to believe and obey the Bible).

God's word is effective at exposing hearts, for the good of each of us. As Hebrews 4:12-13 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." Ephesians 6:17 also refers to the word of God as "the sword of the Spirit." So we need not be afraid to wield it for the sake of cutting ignorance and sin out of the minds and hearts of our friends. We can empathize with their pain but also affirm the necessity from our own experiences. If we wimp out or avoid conflict or withhold truth that may be needed to help the person become convicted of their need for God and for repentance, it hurts them rather than helps.

It can't be overemphasized that in studying with others, we need to first set the example of humility, repentance, and obedience to the word of God in our own lives. And then we must remember that the most loving thing we can do for another person is to help him or her go through the same process of humbling and conviction that leads to acceptance of God's truth, repentance, and obedience even if it requires changing beliefs and leaving behind any erroneous teachings one may have been wrongly taught and wrongly believed.

It also can't be overemphasized that while there are "doctrines"—which basically means teachings—that need to be learned and believed, the study's atmosphere and focus must be aimed at the heart and not only the mind. When the heart is humble before God, then the wisdom of God's instructions about how to be born again and how to live out one's faith are able to be understood.

One of the fears commonly felt about studying the Bible with someone is that they will reject what it says. In our postmodern culture, the idea that there is clear right and wrong, clear truth that applies to everyone, is at least considered politically incorrect and at most ridiculed. Particularly regarding the meaning and purpose of baptism, which is covered in detail, there is so much disunity in Christendom about it that many people who have been baptized are reluctant to hold others to the same doctrine that they themselves have practiced. It is fearsome to think that one might have to admit having strong convictions about any specific belief. But the good news is that when someone being studied with has the opportunity to see for himself or herself what the Bible actually says about it, espe-

needs to experience the power and impact of learning and applying the Word of God to his or her own personal life. That rarely if ever happens solely through attending church services or even attending a group Bible study. The lack of that being readily available is what often results in people wrongly assuming that they are Christians even though they have never learned how to be born again. They often mistakenly think that they can *be* Christians by simply believing in Jesus and going to church (as was true for me for many years), without understanding that first one must *become* a Christian through being born again as the Bible teaches.

Most Christians have never stopped to figure out what a person would need to learn in order to make an informed decision about becoming a Christian. For me, for instance, because I already believed in Jesus and had always gone to church, and because my main question was about what it means to be born again, the only thing I studied about before my own immersion into Christ was the topic of baptism. But when I started to try to share my faith and found someone who was open to coming to a Bible Talk with me, I had to sort through what someone would need to learn or at least review to prepare for being born again. Plus, I guess I was too proud to admit to others that I didn't really know how to go about studying the Bible with someone else, and nobody offered any advice or study materials to me, so I assumed that somehow I ought to be able to figure it out myself. In hindsight I'm thankful that I did have to put the effort into it and learn by doing, because it helped me act from personal conviction and not slip into a "follow the program" mentality.

Over the years of studying with many women and at times using study guides designed by others, the topics and verses that are included in the study guide at the end of this booklet distilled out of all of my experiences good and bad. This series was put together during the period after my husband and I left a church group that had been very proactive but had crossed the line into becoming a cult. We needed to recover from the bad experiences and sort through the teachings, and it was in seeking to do as Romans 12:9 says, to "hate what is evil, cling to what is good"—to sort through what was true and what was either false teaching or human wisdom imposed wrongly—that this outline was put together. It was guided by several goals and biblical principles that I hope were applied with spiritual wisdom:

The ultimate goal the study was designed for is to help someone arrive at being "cut to the heart" as the first hearers of the gospel were in Acts 2:37, to keep the focus on the heart as well as the head, on the

need to come to repentance and submission to God's will. When that is true, then the specifics of God's will are gladly learned and obeyed ("Brothers, what shall we do?") and the New Covenant paradigm of serving God from the heart and out of gratitude for his grace and mercy becomes the foundation for a lifetime.

Another goal was to include enough but not too much, to focus only on what is needed in order to lay solid foundations for faith that will be built on after new birth. The studies lead into each other logically. They begin with a focus on the cross and faith in Jesus, which leads to the importance of hearing and obeying the Word of God, and that leads to our need for God and for Jesus' sacrifice for our sin. After that bad news, the great gift of new birth in baptism as God's solution to our sin is welcome good news. The final study is also good news, about the family of God that we are re-born into and need to be active members of for the rest of our lives.

The outline is obviously my own opinion of the balance between these considerations. It's very important for a Christian to be able to lead a study series with personal conviction, having applied the Scriptures to himself or herself first. So before attempting to study with someone else, it's helpful to go through the series in one's own devotional times. Then the empathy and enthusiasm needed in sharing these truths with someone else will naturally shine through.

The outline given here is also available as full-size sheets at PreciousPromises.wordpress.com that can be printed out in PDF format. When they are used for studying with an individual, it has proven wisest to give the person the outline for each topic at the study session rather than in advance. Then it can be used for personal review in the days afterward until the next session. Much can be discerned both by how the person responds to God's word upon first exposure and by how much follow-up review is done.

The studies are designed to help people see for themselves what the Bible says and to develop their own convictions. They are meant to be led in such a way as to help them see that they can understand and apply God's revealed truth, rather than in a way that spoon-feeds them. The leader shouldn't tell what he or she thinks the Bible says, but rather have the person read the verses and explain their meaning and their application to his or her life. The leader can guide the person through asking questions to help him or her think logically, but shouldn't resort to preaching or lengthy explanations.

The overview sheet was designed to be used to initiate an individual study. The easiest way to interest someone in studying together is for the Christian to share how helpful it has been to have studied

through some very basic topics that many churches assume everyone knows but most people never study through on their own. As I shared earlier about how I go about trying to interest someone in studying, it's important to be able to speak from personal experience. The Christian can ask the potential seeker whether he or she has ever studied through these topics, either listing them out in the discussion or actually going over them in looking over the overview sheet together. The idea is to draw someone into wanting to study them and seeing the need for and value of committing to a study series.

With this approach, though the tone is more of sharing than teacher-student, the Christian is known up-front to be leading the study for the benefit of the friend. It's common for Christians to feel insecure about asserting the lead and therefore they try to make the tone one of mutuality and equality. But that doesn't really work anyway (and is unwise and unnecessary) because he or she is known to have already studied through these things. The best balance for the sake of the person being studied with is an attitude on the part of the Christian of "one sinner to another," exuding gratitude for having had the opportunity to learn these things and wanting to turn around and share them with the friend. There is no reason a Christian should feel a lack of confidence in taking the lead—it's simply honest to assert that one knows these topics already, and it's nothing to be proud of but rather to be grateful for because of the way the truths have changed his or her life. It has a good impact on the friend being studied with to see in us a depth of knowledge and conviction but without being arrogant or preachy.

In contrast to the attitude of many religious people, we need to take to heart what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." Another guideline for our attitudes is given by Paul in 2 Timothy 2:24-26: "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." Our gentleness with boldness and honesty is the balance needed by those we study with so that they are compelled to face the truth of God's word about their lives. We want to avoid as much as possible giving them any way to make excuses by trying to blame us for the way we come across (though even Jesus couldn't avoid that—which led to his crucifixion—and we will experience