

Meat For The Hungry

The Importance of
Home and Small-Group Bible Studies

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People Are Hungry For The Word Of God

Over the years people have given me unsolicited comments about a sincere, eager desire for actual Home Bible Studies. There is a hunger for the Word!

God's Word is the fundamental basis and foundation for Christian growth. It is often described as food.

- "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" -- Jeremiah 15:16
- "...nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed" -- 1 Timothy 4:6
- Jesus said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" -- Matthew 4:4 (Deuteronomy 8:3)
- "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" -- 1 Peter 2:2
- "the word of God... works in you" -- 1 Thessalonians 2:13
- "the word... is able to build you up" -- Acts 20:32
- "For the word of God is living and powerful" -- Hebrews 4:12
- 1 Corinthians 3:1-2
- Hebrews 5:12-14
- Psalm 119:103

The importance of God's Word cannot be overemphasized.

"You have magnified Your word above all Your name." -- Psalm 138:2

It is to be taken very seriously and very literally. Treating the Scriptures allegorically is extremely dangerous: you can then get it to say anything you want! God says what He means, and means what He says!

"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach..." -- Ezra 7:10

"prepared" = be stable, established, firm, fixed, set up, ready, secure

"seek" = to resort to, to frequent a place, to follow (for pursuit or search), to consult, to enquire of, to investigate; to practice, study, follow, seek with application; to seek with care

This was a conscious effort, an act of his will. He chose to make himself available to the Lord, His work, and His calling.

The Significance Of Home And Small-Group Bible Studies

What would happen if our church building burned down? What would happen if we could no longer meet due to persecution? Where would we meet? How would we fellowship? Small-group or Home Bible Studies are the answer: Home Bible Studies are "persecution-proof."

Home churches were very common and the norm in the early years of the church (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 20:20; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 5:14; Philemon 1:2).

I would encourage everyone to be involved in some sort of Small-Group or Home Bible Study. Compared to a weekly corporate church gathering, it can provide a more intense and personalized study of God's Word. Both are important; one is not intended to be a replacement for the other.

It helps us get a balanced diet. It's a midweek spiritual boost, an encouragement to study the Word, and helps us maintain our focus on Him during the week while we fellowship with other Christians around God's Word and prayer. Networking with a smaller group of believers can be very edifying (and very enjoyable!), and may even become necessary if the true believers are persecuted and driven underground in this country.

Home and Small-Group Bible Studies also allow believers to exercise and develop their spiritual gifts, such as teaching, preaching, and leadership. It is never enough for churches to be producing just disciples or followers: we must produce the next generation of leaders! Leaders must reproduce themselves: leaders must strive to produce and lead leaders.

- the concept of mentorship is clearly seen in the Bible
 - Moses and Joshua
 - Eli and Samuel
 - Jesus and His disciples
 - Paul and Timothy
- four generations of leaders are seen in 2 Timothy 2:2
- Titus was told to "appoint elders" -- Titus 1:5
- "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." -- Deuteronomy 6:6-7

We Must Be Called, And We Must Be Genuine

Being a leader of a Home Bible Study should be a natural outgrowth of our own normal, personal, and daily Bible study, otherwise it's hypocrisy. We cannot lead anyone where we haven't already been ourselves.

Even more importantly, we must be called to this ministry; otherwise we're doing it out of our own will and for our own glory (Jeremiah 9:23-24; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Galatians 5:26; Philippians 2:3; James 3:14).

Our Study came from what was already in place in my life. I was willing, and am still willing to commit 1 to 2 hours a day for my own personal daily Bible study and preparation for our Home Bible Study. Although I watched very little TV, my choice to follow God's calling meant that I now had to watch even less. Looking back, I can say quite honestly that, when you're serving the Lord things of this world become much less important (Colossians 3:1-2; Matthew 6:19-20; Romans 8:6).

Looking back, it has been extremely rewarding for myself personally, and I hope the Holy Spirit has ministered to the others just as well (Romans 1:12; Hebrews 10:24; Proverbs 27:17).

A Home Bible Study involves dedication and a commitment to the Lord. It can be viewed as a tiny, independent church: lives will be changed and growth will be affected more easily due to its more intense, informal, small-group nature; it must be taken very seriously. A ministry such as this is an awesome privilege, but it's also a sobering responsibility and not to be taken lightly (James 3:1; Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:1-2; Ezekiel 34; Psalm 78:72; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-3).

Are we qualified?! There are some sobering checklists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 that we might want to consider. (But remember, no one is perfect!)

What We All Should Be Doing

1. Get Into The Word

The Apostle Paul told Timothy, "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" -- 1 Timothy 4:13

"give attention to" = devote yourself to; be absorbed in

"reading" = public reading and expounding of the Word

- Nehemiah 8:1-12
 - "Now all the people gathered together as one man... and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses..."
 - "So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading..."
 - "And all the people went their way to... rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them."
- Jesus' example: Luke 4:16-27
- Apollos' example: Acts 18:28
- emphasizes expositional study of the Word
 - you can do too many topical studies
 - you can read and study too many books about the Bible instead of the Bible itself
 - expositional versus homiletic study
- Deuteronomy 6:6-9
- Joshua 1:8

"exhortation" = encouragement

- we're to edify one another
- "Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another." -- Romans 14:19
- "Whenever you come together... let all things be done for edification." -- 1 Corinthians 14:26
- "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." -- Ephesians 4:29

"doctrine"

- doctrine is the difference between eternal life and eternal death!
- true doctrine never changes!
- "sound (healthy) doctrine" was emphasized by the Apostle Paul to the leaders he was writing
 - "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine..." -- 2 Timothy 4:2-3
 - "...that is contrary to sound doctrine" -- 1 Timothy 1:10
 - "that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" -- Titus 1:9
 - "speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine" -- Titus 2:1
 - "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." -- 2 Timothy 3:16-17
- the Apostle Paul also emphasized "sound words" (1 Timothy 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:13), "sound speech" (Titus 2:8), and to be "sound in faith" (Titus 1:13; 2:2).

2. Get Into The Word And Hurry Up About It!

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." -- 2 Timothy 2:15

"be diligent" = to make effort, to exert one's self, endeavor, give diligence; to use speed, be prompt or earnest; to hasten, make haste

- this speaks of urgency

"rightly dividing" = to cut straight, dissect correctly, expound correctly, accurately handling, to teach the truth directly and correctly

- this speaks of accuracy
- the most dangerous teaching and preaching may be that which is only partly true

How well do we know God's Word? Can we say that we're always accurate with it? Can we be trusted with it? If not, then we have a lot of work to do! What are we waiting for?!

We're to get serious with the Word of God, and not to delay about it. This applies to all of us, not just to pastors, elders, and other "official" ministers!

How Does Error Enter A Fellowship?

How does a false teacher work? How does a cult begin?

1. Start with the truth
 - everyone wants to be right
 - a perception of truth often attracts people
2. Gain a following
 - popular, vocal, charismatic leader
 - they speak good things; they're smiling all the time
 - rally around a favorite idea; they come up with some new, fresh, interesting ideas
3. Start to veer off a little
 - maybe they claim to have a "new revelation"
 - after awhile they're all way off-course!
 - they trusted him because he started so correctly: they were deceived
 - they were deceived because their doctrine wasn't sound!

This is frequently due to ignorance and a lack of knowledge of the Word of God. An example is Apollos: Acts 18:24-28.

The Apostle Paul warned leaders about false doctrine, false teaching, and error in their fellowships:

- 1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7; 4:1-3, 7
- 2 Timothy 2:14-18, 23, 25-26
- Titus 1:9-16; 3:9-11

Satan preys on ignorance. Critics and false teachers will proclaim falsehoods, not expecting that you will verify their statements. An example of this type of deception is found in John 7:52 where critics of Jesus challenged His validity because He was from Galilee: "They answered and said to him, 'Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.'"

The truth is that two well-known prophets did come from Galilee: Nahum and Jonah!

We are to verify all teachings in the light of Scripture, and only Scripture.

"These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." -- Acts 17:11

The Holy Spirit Will Help Us Understand The Word

The Word of God and the Holy Spirit must not be separated

- the Bible without the Holy Spirit is just another book
- "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit" -- 1 Thessalonians 1:5
- "...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" -- Ephesians 6:17
- "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." -- 2 Peter 1:20-21

The Holy Spirit is needed to explain and teach us the Scriptures

- "You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them" -- Nehemiah 9:20
- "the Holy Spirit... will teach you all things" -- John 14:26
- "when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth" -- John 16:13
- "the same anointing teaches you concerning all things" -- 1 John 2:27
- "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches... the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." -- 1 Corinthians 2:13-14

Enemies of the Holy Spirit's leading and teaching:

- structure, regimentation, lack of flexibility, ossification
- gimmicks, techniques, and human devices
- concentrating on the organization instead of the organism
- lack of preparation: we must be willing to invest time

Expositional Versus Homiletic Study

Expositional = explanation of the text; setting forth the meaning

Nehemiah 8:8

2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16-17

Homiletic = application; admonition of morals

Simply put, it's teaching versus preaching. I don't ignore the homiletics; I allow the practical applications to radiate from the text as it will. You can't apply anything if you don't know what to apply.

Why is Expositional Study of primary importance?

1. We must have sound doctrine; we must be "established"
 - we must know what we believe and why we believe it
 - we must build a foundation, and build it on the truth
 - true doctrine doesn't change
 - "we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" -- Ephesians 4:14
 - "do not be carried about with different and strange doctrines, for it is good for the heart to be established..." - Hebrews 13:9
 - "established" = stabilized, have a good footing, have a good foundation
 - speaks of having a stable foundation
 - "so that He may establish your hearts" -- 1 Thessalonians 3:13
 - "establish" = to turn resolutely in a certain direction; to make stable, place firmly, set fast, fix; to strengthen, make firm; to render constant, confirm one's mind
 - speaks of heading in the right direction
 - "the Lord... will establish you" -- 2 Thessalonians 3:3

- "...establish you in every good word" -- 2 Thessalonians 2:17
 - 1 Thessalonians 3:2
 - James 5:8
 - ("We shouldn't be saying, 'Go! Go! Go!', but asking, 'Where? Where? Where?'" -- Red Green)
 - "hold fast to the Lord your God" -- Joshua 23:8
 - "they hurried... forgot His works... did not wait for His counsel" -- Psalm 106:13
 - certainty of purpose: 1 Corinthians 9:26
 - Colossians 2:6-8
 - Ephesians 3:16-19
 - "enticing unstable souls" -- 2 Peter 2:14
 - "mists driven by a storm" -- 2 Peter 2:17
 - no deep roots, as in the parable of the sower: Matthew 13:5-6, 20-21; Mark 4:5-6, 16-17; Luke 8:6, 13
 - "you cannot serve two masters..." -- Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13
 - "mammon" is a Chaldean word, speaks of idolatry
 - "do not turn aside from following the Lord... do not go after futile things" -- 1 Samuel 12:20-21
 - notice that there are only 2 choices: following the Lord, and going after futile things; there is nothing in-between
 - if we try to be in-between, Jesus has something sobering to say to us: "I will vomit you out of My mouth" -- Revelation 3:15-16
 - we can't please the Lord by being a "mugwump": our "mug" on one side of the fence, and our "wump" on the other
2. We must be able to recognize false doctrines
- the Word of God is the absolute authority to refute all contradictory doctrines
 - purpose of "sound doctrine": Titus 1:9
 - "to exhort" = instruct or teach; encourage, strengthen; comfort; admonish
 - "convict those who contradict" = refute, correct; convict
 - "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine..." -- 2 Timothy 3:16-17
 - "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine" -- 2 Timothy 4:3-4
 - "from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things" -- Acts 20:30
 - "there will be false teachers among you, who secretly will bring in destructive heresies" -- 2 Peter 2:1
 - "...deceitful workers transforming themselves into apostles" -- 2 Corinthians 11:13-15
 - "...their message will spread like cancer" -- 2 Timothy 2:17
 - "...creep into households" -- 2 Timothy 3:6
 - "...certain men have crept in unnoticed" -- Jude 1:4
 - "false brothers... slipped in" -- Galatians 2:4
 - a demon-possessed girl tried to infiltrate Paul and Silas' team in Philippi: Acts 16:16-19
 - false teachings and doctrines may often be inadvertent, coming from people speaking out of ignorance
 - we can't recognize things that are false if we don't know what is true and genuine

So, You Wanna Be A Home Or Small-Group Bible Study Leader?!

Here's a summary:

1. Determine your calling
 - do it only if you're being called to do it
 - do not do it for your own glory; don't let pride get in the way
 - examine yourself, perhaps in the light of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1
 - you're starting a small church
 - but remember, no one is perfect
 - should be a natural outgrowth of your own personal daily Bible Study and relationship with the Lord; should be related to your own devotional life
 - be willing to question whether a present Group should even continue
 - if you're being called, then step out in faith
 - He will provide the people, resources, and guidance
2. Be flexible to the Holy Spirit
 - there is no "one model fits all"; there are no "get rich quick" schemes that work
 - do not look to gimmicks, techniques, and human devices
 - exalt the Lord, not any particular church
 - the principle of "new wine in new wineskins": allow the Lord to do a new and fresh work in you
 - seek a balanced diet
 - each of us have our own "spheres of influence" to be a minister and witness to
 - accept the Lord's will as to direction and to those in attendance
 - be willing to be the clay; don't try to be a potter
3. Be available to be used
 - be willing to make a commitment: daily for preparation, weekly to meet
 - be willing to invest time, a lot of uninterrupted time
 - but don't let this take place of your own personal time with the Lord
 - be ready and willing to pray and fast over each member of the Group
 - things of this world will become much less important... if you let go of them!
4. Emphasize deliberate, methodical, expository study of the Bible
 - "the whole counsel of God": Acts 20:27
 - "c-2-c" = "cover-to-cover"
 - not just the easy parts; not just your favorite passages
 - verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter, book-by-book: eat the elephant one bite at a time!
 - immerse yourself in the Word of God
 - the Old Testament must not be neglected!
 - "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning" -- Romans 15:4
 - "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition" -- 1 Corinthians 10:11
 - you can do too many topical studies
 - some topical studies are helpful and very necessary
 - excessive topical studies encourage the incomplete study of the Word
 - introduces biases
 - does not teach and demonstrate the integrated nature of God's Word
 - expository studies have a better long-term value than topical studies
 - topical studies just focus on specific doctrines or problem areas
 - you can read and study too many books about the Bible instead of the Bible itself
 - introduces biases
 - allows an avenue by which "strange fire" can enter
 - let the Word speak for itself; let the Bible be its own interpreter (put it to the test!)
 - learn and teach truths as only the Word of God can teach and present them (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

How Our Home Bible Study Got Started

Why and how we were called together

1. I prepared myself (Ezra 7:10) (this was the 1st half of the process)
 - turned the TV off, a hideous idol and time waster
 - an idol is anything that takes the place of our time with the Lord: Exodus 20:3; 1 Corinthians 10:14; Colossians 3:5; 1 John 5:21
 - we become like the gods we worship: Psalms 115:8; 135:18
 - my wife and I committed to a regular study of the Word together
 - expositional study
 - verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter, book-by-book: eating the elephant one bite at a time
 - immerse myself in the Word of God
 - examining and understanding what the Holy Spirit wrote
 - prepared myself to be trusted with the Word
 - 2 Timothy 2:15
 - 1 Timothy 1:11
 - Titus 1:3
 - 1 Thessalonians 2:4
 - Galatians 2:7
2. offered myself to be used (a couple of years later)
 - if you're serious, this can be the scary part!
 - I reacted to the Spirit's leading that I wanted to be used "somehow" regarding the Word
 - I did not limit God
 - I did not target anything in specific
 - avoiding the "Dead Sea Syndrome": all input with no output
 - the Lord needs willing workers
 - "Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few.'" -- Matthew 7:37 (Luke 10:2)
3. waited and listened
 - I did not actively seek out something to do; I did not publish or advertise my desire; I did this silently
 - almost the very next day someone said that they hoped I'd start a Home Bible Study someday
 - (this is an example of very clear leading of the Lord!)
4. Lord's resources: He had gone ahead, He was already planting the seeds (this was the 2nd half of the process)
 - He put into someone's heart the desire for a Home Bible Study; someone else was being sensitive to the Lord's "still, small voice." (But how did that person know that it was to be me to lead it?!)
 - specific individuals were already being lined up; they were willing and eager to attend (and they still are!)
 - from a new Christian (a recovering Catholic), to those well-aged, and everything in between
 - He had already planted in my head what book we would study first (the book of Jude)
 - in just over a week we met for the first time (February 6, 2002)
 - the calling has clearly been for expositional teaching, not just homiletic study

How I Prepare For Our Weekly Study

No one model or technique fits all! This is just what I do; your mileage may vary. What you are called to do may be significantly different.

1. Be willing to commit time, a lot of uninterrupted time
 - this step applies to all the following steps!
 - I'm not spending time, I'm investing it!
2. Immerse myself in the Word of God
 - take time to understand the flavor of the passage
 - sit and listen to the Word and the Holy Spirit as they speak
 - allow myself to be taught (the major barrier to learning the truth is thinking that you already have it)
3. Read and/or listen to trustworthy teachings, if available
 - there are tremendous amounts of reference materials available in books, on tapes and CDs, and over the Internet
 - take notes
 - be willing to disagree on the authority of God's Word (Acts 17:11; use Scripture and Scripture only!)
 - be very careful of denominational slants and lack of literal interpretations
 - "Eat the meat, but be sure to spit out the bones!"
 - I often do not consult a lot of different commentaries, but will for certain difficult passages
4. Start typing up notes to hand out (this usually takes me the most time)
 - envision each of the Group members and how they may react
 - tailor it to the needs of each Group member
 - customize and personalize the lesson
 - find parallel passages, patterns, and related Scripture cross-references
 - documenting my studies, even if I wasn't going to hand them out is very important to me
5. Print out and proofread
 - do a mental dry run
 - envision each of the Group members and how they may react
 - check all Scripture references for accuracy
 - make adjustments and corrections
 - "whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men" -- Colossians 3:23
6. Print final copies

What We've Studied

- Jude -- 7 weeks
- James -- 6 weeks
- Hosea -- 6 weeks
- Acts -- 16 weeks
- Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Malachi (the Post-Exile Books) -- 10 weeks
- 1 and 2 Thessalonians -- 8 weeks
- Zechariah (to finish up the Post-Exile Study) -- 11 weeks
- Leadership Training Manuals (1, 2 Timothy, and Titus) -- 15 weeks
- Numbers -- 9 weeks
- Ecclesiastes -- 6 weeks
- Matthew -- 32 weeks
- Jeremiah -- 19 weeks
- Daniel -- 12 weeks
- Hebrews -- 12 weeks
- Mark -- 18 weeks
- 1 and 2 Peter, our present study (as of October 2006)

Which Version Of The Bible?

After doing some research I decided to standardize on the New King James Version. There are many versions that are easy reading, but they're not very literal and accurate to the original texts (such as the New International Version).

Study Aids

Following is just a partial list of the reference materials that I use very often.

The Study and Reference Bibles I use most often:

- MacArthur Study Bible
- Thompson Chain Reference Study Bible
- Maxwell Leadership Bible
- Nelson Study Bible

The following is available FREE from <http://www.e-sword.net>

- many versions of the Bible
- Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries
- King James Concordance (All the original Hebrew and Greek words arranged by the numbering system from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible)
- Thayer's Greek Definitions
- Brown-Driver-Briggs' Hebrew Definitions
- R.A. Torrey's New Topical Textbook
- W.E. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words
- M.G. Easton's Illustrated Bible Dictionary
- Smith's Bible Dictionary
- International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, James Orr, General Editor
- Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge
- Vincent's Word Studies
- Word Pictures In The New Testament by Archibald Thomas Robertson
- The People's New Testament (1891) by B. W. Johnson

I also rely heavily on the material from Koinonia House, <http://www.khouse.org>

Our Home Bible Study Charter:

1. To be available to those within our primary "spheres of influence"
 - offering ourselves to anyone who needs or wants to continue in the Word during the week
 - open-ended commitment; no turning back (Luke 9:62)
2. Independent of any particular church or fellowship
 - new wine in new wineskins; not new wine in old wineskins (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-38)
 - exalt the Lord, not any particular church or fellowship
3. Quantity and longevity are not measures of success, or of the Lord's leading
 - He will bring those He wants, and for as long as He wants (Acts 2:47)
4. Emphasis on teaching instead of preaching
 - "the whole counsel of God" -- Acts 20:20, 27
 - Nehemiah 8:8
 - 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16
5. Hebrews 10:23-25
 - continue to hold firmly to the hope
 - continue to stimulate one another to love and good works
 - continue to meet together
6. Praying for each other
 - Romans 1:8-9
 - 1 Corinthians 1:4
 - Ephesians 1:15-16
 - Philippians 1:3-4
 - Colossians 1:3-4, 9
 - 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3; 2:13; 5:25
 - Philemon 1:4-7
 - Hebrews 13:18
 - James 5:16

"Because of laziness the building decays, and through idleness of hands the house leaks." -- Ecclesiastes 10:18