

Introduction

This handbook accompanies Sovereign World Trust's *Mark's Gospel Study Workbook* based on Michael Eaton's volume in the *Preaching Through the Bible* series. It provides guidance and help for those leading a study group through this course. It is particularly written for those new to the role of study group leader or this course. It is not necessary for members of the group to have access to this book unless they wish to take others through the course. Neither is it necessary to have a copy of Michael Eaton's book because its chapters are incorporated.

This handbook is divided into five sections.

- Some reflections on the **character and manner of a leader**.
- Suggestions for possible ways to **use the leaders' manual in conjunction with the study workbook in a group context**.
- Guidance on practical aspects of leading a **study group**.
- **'Real' learning and the use of questions to stimulate reflection**.
- Responses and comments on the **for Further Thought and Discussion** questions in the workbook. This is the longest section.

A. The character and manner of a group leader

The objective of this study course is to help people grow in faith and understanding to prepare for leadership responsibility. We can learn a certain amount about leadership from reading and study. But we also learn by observation, seeing others in action. This is very much how the disciples learned from Jesus. They listened and watched. So part of the role of a group leader is to model good leadership in relation to the study group. He or she is a visual aid. It is worth pondering this because leaders of organisations do not always lead in the **Jesus-way**.

A group leader is **not the boss**. He or she is not someone who controls by giving orders or continually putting people right. Leading does, of course, mean making firm and clear decisions with the expectation that people will follow without arguing or disputing. But leaders should be kind and gentle and take account of people's needs and feelings especially in relation to practical matters. Leaders who consult are likely to be more successful than those who do not. People are generally willing to follow when they have been listened to respectfully.

A group leader is **not the teacher**. He or she is a **coordinator** rather than a **know-it-all**. If an issue comes up in relation to the content and the leader does not have an answer, there is no shame in saying so and then afterwards taking steps to find out. It is also the case that some things are a matter of personal judgement and opinion rather than matters of right and wrong.

Sometimes comments made by members of the group do need correction or balancing. This should always be done with **kindness** and **respect**. As far as possible it is good to affirm what people say, even if it is not a complete response. Better to build on someone's comment than to crush it and replace it

with another.

One of the challenges of leading a study group is that it gives people an invitation to say things that might not be true or helpful. We do want people to think for themselves and a study group should be a safe environment to explore ideas. In relation to this course, differences of opinion are more likely to occur in the **For Further Thought and Discussion** questions than in the more straightforward comprehension questions. So what should we do when people make a contribution which is plainly wrong or incomplete? One way to help is to **ask a question** based on what they have said which causes them to rethink what they have said. For example, the leader might ask, “How would that apply to...?” or “What about a situation when...?” Such gentle challenges can lead people to think more deeply, change their minds and thereby grow in understanding.

If something comes up in a study session which is clearly seriously unhelpful, then rather than get into a confrontation involving the whole group, it would probably be better to say something along the lines of “This is an important point. I think it would be better to talk about that afterwards, rather than get into a long discussion now...” Having done that it would be good to feed-back to the whole group with a clear statement on another occasion so that they appreciate this was not just an evasion of the issue.

It is unrealistic to expect everyone to always see things the same way. Even Paul and Peter had their disagreements. Matters of principle tend to be the exception. At the end of the day, in many areas there is room for a variety of opinions, each of which may work positively in different situations. Paul’s words in *Ephesians 4:3* are relevant here and they certainly imply that **effort** is required.

The main take-away point of this section is that the manner in which you lead a group is, in itself, an opportunity to **demonstrate and model good leadership**.

B. Using the leaders’ manual and study books

There is no single right way to use this material that fits all situations. Here are a couple of suggestions to provide the basic idea. *They are not meant to be a prescription or a formula.* When you lead your group, you will certainly want to adapt to your own circumstances. It is likely that as the weeks go by these sessions will change.

Format 1, where members have *not worked through the questions beforehand*. In this situation the majority of the time will be spent working through the more basic *know-understand-apply* -questions:

1. Welcome and introductory prayer.
2. Ice breaker (if you choose to have one). See section C1 below.
3. Read relevant passage from Mark.
4. Read the Michael Eaton chapter (unless all the group have done this beforehand).
5. Consider the questions in turn and invite members of the group to respond in turn – the answers are in the back of the workbook.
6. Choose one or two questions from the **For Further Thought and Discussion** section (or invite group members to choose) and invite members to respond. Refer to the comments from this

handbook to help you respond and guide the discussion. It is entirely possible to follow on with a second session on these questions if there is clearly an appetite to do so and the discussion is worthwhile.

7. Bring discussion to a close, possibly inviting each participant to share what has struck them or been useful; *their take away point*.

8. Close in prayer – possibly invite one of the group to do this.

Format 2, where members *have read the chapter and worked through the questions beforehand and have made notes in their workbook*. In this situation, the majority of the time will be spent on the higher level *analyse-synthesise-evaluate* questions:

1. Welcome and introductory prayer.

2. Ice breaker (if you choose to have one).

3. Read relevant passage from Mark.

4. Ask an open question, or go round the group in turn, inviting participants to draw attention to anything in the passage that they found noteworthy, surprising, new, puzzling or meaningful. Spend as much time as is necessary and helpful on this. But if you sense that the group is ready to move on to the higher level questions then do so. An alternative would be to invite comments and reflections on Section A and then B etc. Only move on if you are confident that the group has digested the main points of the Mark passage and Michael Eaton's exposition.

5. Work through the higher level questions in the **For Further Thought and Discussion** section and invite members to respond. Use the comments from this leaders' book to help you respond and guide the discussion.

These two formats represent the opposite ends of a spectrum. The balance between the two sets of questions will depend on whether the group members have worked through the chapter beforehand. This, in turn, will depend on other factors such as the time and opportunity available, age and maturity (to mention just two). Some groups may never move on to the higher level questions. That's fine. They could do so in the future. The needs of people who have been Christians for a longer time will be better met by being very selective with the basic questions and moving on sooner.

C. Leading small study groups

No two groups are the same. So there isn't a simple formula that will fit every situation. So what follows are some principles, suggestions and ideas.

The role of a leader or facilitator is hugely important to the success of the group. So perhaps the first thing to say is that it should be approached thoughtfully and prayerfully. It is also good to reflect after each session and to consider what went well and what could be improved. It's a skill to be developed.

1. Some practical considerations

Groups vary in size and the participants will have different personalities, experiences and abilities. In a social setting such as this, there may be some who would prefer to sit back and listen (to be taught) and others who enjoy talking and expressing their opinions. Others may be full of questions!

Trying to balance everyone's needs may be tricky if the group is large. So the principle here would be to aim to **allow everyone to contribute and benefit**. If, as time goes on, you feel that is not true for particular participants then you will need to take appropriate action. That might mean deliberately drawing people in to the conversations by directing questions to them by name or by taking turns. One possibility, probably a last resort, would be to form two smaller groups. But the general principle is that everyone should benefit and everyone should have the opportunity to contribute without anyone dominating. For someone not used to leading a group, six participants is a good number to start with. If the participants know each other **interaction and participation** will probably be easy and natural. But if the participants do not know each other, it can be helpful to start with an ice breaker. This could be something about themselves, their favourite pastime or place, someone who has influenced or inspired them, something funny that happened in their life. The aim would be to help people to feel comfortable with each other. Timid people really find small groups quite threatening. People who are not hugely confident or more introverted find it quite hard to speak up in front of others, especially if they don't know them. So one of the roles of a group leader is to bring everyone into the conversation and establish a relaxed and easy atmosphere.

It is good to set clear expectations about **starting and finishing times** so that people know what to expect. Some cultures are more relaxed about time than others and it is not always easy to arrive on time. In that case it could be agreed to meet at half past four **for** five, for example with welcome refreshments. But the understanding would be that the study part would begin on the hour. Latecomers should not be made to feel awkward if there is a good reason, but consistent late arrival could be disruptive and unhelpful. It is the leader's responsibility to establish a pattern that works for everyone.

Seating arrangements. A study group session is more of a conversation than a lecture, talk or sermon. The choice of room may determine seating arrangements. A room set out with chairs in a row, formally, as in a church or classroom, does not lend itself easily to this type of interaction. Sitting around a table or tables put together works better and, at the same time, makes it possible to make notes. This type of arrangement conveys a business-like message. It has the great advantage that all participants can make eye-contact with each other so that the person who is speaking can read the expressions of the listeners. Sitting around a table also makes it possible for participants to speak in turn.

The study group leader acts as a *chairperson*. It may seem obvious but the principle of one person speaking at a time should be established and respected. If someone interrupts, the leader should gently direct that person to allow the speaker to finish. If someone is bursting to say something, they should indicate this to the leader who will bring them in to the discussion. If it is not possible to sit round a table, then a circle of chairs is, perhaps, the next best thing. If the meeting is held at a person's home, then it may be necessary to sit on the floor – in which case cushions would probably be appreciated. In some situations, sitting under the shade of a tree outdoors might work really well. It is part of a leader's responsibility to make sure that people are as comfortable as possible.

Eating together is an important part of fellowship when God's people meet with each other. Jesus did a lot of His teaching in this way, spending time with people in their homes. So did Martin Luther, the reformation leader. Sharing food is a great way to make people feel relaxed. It is probably better to have the formal study group session first and to follow up with eating. It may well be that the

conversation will continue from the study, but the emphasis will more likely be on fellowship and friendship, enjoying each other's company. Again it is the leader's responsibility to see that practical arrangements are made. If it's a 'bring and share' there may need to be a discussion to work out who brings what. In some contexts eating may not be appropriate.

Taking turns to lead the sessions. Sometimes it is good and appropriate to take turns to lead the sessions. The group leader does not always need to be the session leader. In a situation when all the participants are peers and in many ways on the same level (such as members of the same school class), it is good to let everyone have a turn. For the duration of the session everyone will defer to the session leader. It may be that the group leader wishes to give someone the experience of leading in order to stimulate their personal development. The very act of being given some responsibility can help someone grow as a Christian. In such cases, the group leader would certainly express appreciation but may also offer constructive feedback on what went well and what could be done differently. If the group is a mixed group then giving one of the women, 'sisters', an opportunity to lead would send out a strong signal that they are valued. Our world is a lot less patriarchal than in times past and our women should be helped to flourish for the benefit of all. Sharing the lead is helpful for the group leader too. To coordinate and lead all sessions, being thoroughly prepared and managing practical arrangements, is hard work! One of the pictures of the church is the body of Christ, with different members each playing a part. This is also a good way for people to try out and test their gifting, and how new leaders develop their skills and become recognised.

The **format** of group sessions has been discussed in section B.

D. 'Real' learning and the use of questions to stimulate reflection - Bloom's Taxonomy

This section discusses the rationale behind the way the study book is structured and the type of questions used.

Back in the late 1950s and 60s Benjamin Bloom, an American educationalist, devised a hierarchy (an ordered list) of different types of questions, which bears his name. Of course, Bloom's Taxonomy is not in the Bible, so we can't claim it is '**God-breathed**' (2 Timothy 3:16), but many teachers have found it to be very helpful and useful when planning lessons and educational objectives.

Bloom's hierarchy works from the most basic to the most advanced questions.

The first three levels are:

1. Knowledge (or Recall)

These are the most basic type of questions. Take the sentence 'Jesus learned the **Torah** when He was a boy,' followed by the question, "What did Jesus learn when He was a boy?" Almost anyone would give the answer, "the **Torah**."

But, if another follow-up question is asked, "What is the **Torah**?" – some people who gave the correct answer might say "I don't actually know." So although their answer was correct, little real learning had taken place. There needs to be further explanation that the word Torah refers to the first 5 books of the

Jewish Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Now the person has some real understanding of what Jesus learned about God as a child.

So knowledge / recall questions are a good place to start. We can be deceived into thinking that real learning has taken place if we don't check. For this reason there is a glossary at the back of the workbook. Incidentally, suggestions for words to be included in the glossary are welcomed by the publisher.

How can we recognise a knowledge question? They often start with the words *what, when* and *who*. They often contain verbs such as *tell, list, state, find* or *name*.

Some of the questions in the workbook ask the reader to fill in the blanks. Sometimes the initial letters of the words are given to help. These are knowledge / recall questions. Obviously for some people they are very easy, perhaps too easy. But for some people, perhaps those who have not had a great deal of formal education, they are both encouraging and reassuring. They send out a message 'Yes you can do this!'

2. Comprehension

The next level up is comprehension questions. To comprehend is to understand. A follow-up question to that given above might be "What is the **Torah**?" By asking it we can check whether the person giving the answer has not merely repeated the word Torah but actually understands it.

So comprehension questions ask for a response in the person's *own words* or *the recognition that different words carry the same meaning*.

Some of the questions in the workbook are **True or False** questions. These invite the reader to think about the statement to see if the possible answer agrees with what Mark or Michael Eaton have written. The reader has to mark these statements with a T for true or an F for false. One of the values of such questions is that they force people to look carefully at the text. It is very easy to read quickly and misinterpret what has been written.

True or False questions also provide an opportunity for making a teaching point in the form of a *contrast*. "When news came that Jairus' daughter had died, Jesus did not change His mind and give up!"

Questions based on Bloom's levels 1 and 2 feature prominently in the first sections of the workbook.

3. Application

Once we know that the information is understood, we can move up to Bloom's next level with questions that invite the reader to apply the knowledge in some way. This is, of course, what we want. Jesus did not tell the *Parable of the Sower* merely to interest or inform people, He wanted them to use His teaching to make a difference. In that case to make a conscious effort to think about what they had heard and keep it in mind so that they would live fruitful lives.

Application questions in a study group build a bridge into everyday life. Various types of connection are:

- a. Reflection on a previous experience. "Can you think of a time when...?" This gives encouragement to see how God has worked in the person's life.

- b. A hypothetical situation. “Suppose you were in a situation when....” This encourages the group to use their imagination to envisage something that might happen in the future. Thinking it through in advance will enable them to be better prepared. In a group situation people will have different perspectives and it may well be that aspects are mentioned that had not occurred to others. God wants us to use our imaginations to expand our minds.
- c. A real life situation when somebody did or said something or a group of people who face particular challenges. An imaginative entering into the experience of others is very important. We tend to look at life through the lenses of our own experiences which are, of course, narrow and limited. It is so easy to be judgemental about others when we do not fully appreciate all the complexities of their lives.
- d. It may be that a member of the group comes up with an application question relating to their own life experience. It may be about a situation that wasn’t handled very well. It may be about a situation when the person did not know what to do. It is quite possible that the group may be able to shed some light and give insight.

Application questions are asked in the **For Further Discussion and Reflection** section. Whereas questions at the first two levels are *closed* (that is they have a single answer), application questions are ‘open’ and have a wide range of possible answers. Comments in section E of this book give some preliminary thoughts to steer group leaders in the right direction but they are by no means exhaustive.

4. Analysis.

Bloom’s fourth level in his hierarchy is more stretching still. It requires us to think below the surface. The Bible is not simply a recipe book of instructions to copy in a mechanical fashion. Our world is different from the world of the New Testament and we need to think about the underlying principles and the specific situations that Jesus was responding to so that we can respond appropriately.

When Jesus spoke to the rich young ruler, telling him to sell his possessions, give to the poor and follow Him, as recorded by both *Matthew (19:16-22)* and *Luke (18:18-30)*, we should not suppose that this is a general command for every follower of Jesus. But that does not mean that this scripture has nothing to say to us all. It takes some careful (and prayerful) thought and *analysis* to learn what that is. As with application questions, analysis questions are ‘open’ and are found in the *For Further Discussion and Reflection* section.

The majority of the questions in the workbook are of the first three types, which are particularly relevant to an expository approach to scripture.

5. Synthesis.

Whereas analysis means taking something apart to see and understand what it means, synthesis is the opposite - *putting things together*. In our case that means seeing how it fits in with other parts of the Bible.

When preachers and teachers take a topic as their theme, they will very often use a synthetic approach. To understand the Bible’s teaching on *the love of God*, for example, will involve thinking about God’s

love for us and our love for God. In thinking about the former, it is very likely that the preacher will bring in John 3:16, God's love for the world. But there are other verses in John that show that Jesus and the Father have a special love for committed and obedient disciples. Paul talks in Romans 5:5 about the love of God being poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. It is a huge and magnificent theme.

There are not so many synthetic questions in the study book which is pitched at a fairly basic and introductory level. Michael Eaton did produce a series of three books titled *The Whole Counsel of God* which has the synthetic approach of a systematic theology. These, and other books like them draw on God's truth from the whole Bible and indeed beyond into the church's history. These are of more use and interest to those who have had the opportunity to study wider and deeper.

6. Evaluation

This was Bloom's highest level and is mostly outside the scope of this book which is focussed on the story of Jesus as told by Mark. But many pastoral situations do involve making judgements about practical situations. This will involve weighing up various considerations and options. Life is complicated, so the serious Bible student and conscientious leader will want to press-on and use his or her Bible-understanding to help people make good decisions and choices by drawing on scriptural truth.

E. Comments on the *For Further Thought and Discussion* questions

These comments are preliminary pointers, not exhaustive responses. But we hope that they will be helpful and keep you and your group on track.

Think of them as an aid to digestion!

There are some QR codes which you can use to access related resources on the Internet. **Sovereign World Trust** has a resources website which is under constant development and expansion.

The workbooks themselves are not *set in stone*. They will be refined and shaped in the light of feedback from users. The publisher is very open to incorporating suggestions for other questions from users of the book. These can be easily added into later editions and reprints.

If you wish to make comments then please email: info@sovereignworldtrust.org.uk.

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