

Lecture vs. Discussion – How to be a Shepherd

There are many teaching styles and methods to present spiritual truths: Jesus utilized parables; Ezekiel incorporated drama; Paul delivered powerful apologetics-based sermons. Lecture and discussion-based teaching are the two primary presentation methods we use in modern teaching. Jesus often used the discussion-based method, teaching His disciples deep spiritual truths by asking questions and inviting comments.

Before the Rapture, most Sunday morning church services emphasized the lecture-based teaching model. Often a pastor would present a message from the pulpit. This presentation style allowed pastors to present an abundance of information in a limited amount of time. However, the communication flow is one-way and does not lend itself to dialogue or questions.

In the post-rapture world, particularly during the last half of the Tribulation period, it will be important for believers to meet in small groups and quickly grow in spiritual maturity. Rapid spiritual growth is key to being a strong witness and withstanding the constant demonic activity associated with this period of history.

Teaching times that invite discussion and questions facilitates rapid learning. Learn these eight Best Practices for leading dynamic discussion-based teaching presentations.

1) Know that smaller groups (less than 10, perhaps) create an environment more conducive for discussion

Too many people mean some will not have time to share and increases the potential for straying off subject. A larger group might be too visible especially if the meeting schedule is a fixed date and time. Try to mix up the day of the week, the time of the day, and the location if at all possible. Always try to be discrete.

2) Set ground rules

Make sure all know the general expectations. These may include: no negative comments, there are no bad questions, be brief, stay on point. You may need to prompt participants to stay on topic. You, the facilitator, may limit discussion or comments to ensure key teaching points are communicated without interruption. Be attentive while people are sharing. Don't interrupt. Periodically reiterate these guidelines.

3) Remind participants of the goal

Participants know that the friendships formed in this group can last a lifetime, but the goal is for the group to disband at some point so that class members can start a new group. The goal is multiplication so that more can be reached and disciplined for the glory of Christ.

4) Have goals in mind for each meeting

Direct and limit discussion, so the theme or focus of the class remains clear; however, be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading. Allow for teaching points to be skipped or tabled for later if an unexpected discussion arises that seems important. The objective is to keep the class focused and discussion centered on the general theme.

5) Gently identify and correct theological errors

There is much misinformation in the world. Well-intentioned individuals with strong personalities may unwittingly share information that is not correct. This may be done in a forceful way that can leave seekers of truth and new believers confused or in doubt. For example, someone may say, "I know I'm saved and going to heaven because I was baptized as an infant." That statement is not correct. The leader's goal is to correct the mistake gently but firmly while still encouraging further discussion. Saying, "You're wrong." is easy, but accusing. Correcting in love is more challenging but possible. Instead, try something like, "Yes, some have indeed taught salvation is linked to baptism, and that infants who are baptized are saved. However, Scripture is clear that salvation is not linked to any of our 'works' or anything we do, including being baptized. Rather, salvation is an expression of God's grace. Let's look at what Ephesians 2:8-10 says about this." [read text] Leaders' note: Nowhere in Scripture are infants baptized, and baptism always follows a reasoned belief and a thoughtful confession of Jesus as Lord [read Rom. 10:9-10].

6) Facilitate discussion and participation

Try inviting, in advance of the meeting, specific individuals to pray, read a Scripture, share announcements, or a testimony. Provide them with written out verses and suggestions, as necessary.

7) Facilitate deep discussions and participation by asking one or two class members to review your teaching theme and key Scripture passages in advance of the meeting

Ask them to be prepared to share their reflections during the class. Here is a sample meeting outline: Pray, state the theme of the day, read a text, have several share thoughts on the Scripture, present the lesson, invite discussion, restate key applications and present a challenge for applying spiritual principles from the study. Challenge the members to reach out to the lost. Close in prayer.

8) Build leaders

Mentor potential leaders as possible. Have them occasionally share in lesson planning. Build a separate core-group (up to 3 people) who pray and study with you. Have these developing leaders lead a lesson segment, then a complete lesson with you attending, and eventually, an entire class. Encourage and offer constructive critiques as needed.

Effectively leading small discussion-based groups is not about following a formula or precise meeting outline. Effective meetings often include sharing prayer requests, reading and discussing Scripture, interpreting, and applying Scripture, fellowship, food, and singing, but those are not requirements. An effective group can be nothing more than two people reading the Bible together.

As the facilitator, you are the group's shepherd – their pastor. You are not just to teach them once or twice a week; you are to love and show concern for them 24/7. As a shepherd, you will constantly encourage, challenge, assist, exhort, warn, and spur group members toward spiritual maturity.

Always lead with love. Let Scripture be the final authority. Help your group to move toward reaching others and doing more for the Lord. When these suggestions guide your planning, and your heart is to honor and serve the Lord while discipling believers, you will be blessed.