

Unleash
THE WORD

STUDYING THE BIBLE
IN SMALL GROUPS

KAREN SOOLE

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction	1
1: Should we give up on small-group Bible studies?.....	5
2: Is there a 'right answer'?.....	13
3: Approaching God's Word.....	25
4: Models of Bible studies.....	39
5: The 'big question' model.....	47
6: Meditating on God's Word	63
7: Nuts and bolts	73
Epilogue.....	87
Appendix 1: Five 'big question' Bible studies in Mark.....	89
Appendix 2: Eight 'big question' Bible studies in 1 Samuel.....	95
Notes	107

Introduction

When I was a child my parents and grandparents would juggle babysitting duties between them so that they could go to their midweek Bible study. From my perspective it seemed to be a very solemn and serious thing that they were doing. My grandfather, a French polisher by trade, wore a large stained apron during the day but would change into his suit for the occasion, and my grandmother exchanged her 'pinny' for a hat and gloves. When I joined them in my teens I knew better than to wear my usual attire of jeans and reluctantly put on a pencil skirt. I entered a hall with rows of chairs and quiet, attentive people. The minister preached much as he would do on a Sunday and then several older men prayed long prayers. I sat there as an observer and most definitely not as a participator. When I think back to those days it seems a world away from most expressions of church now.

Today the formality of the old-style midweek Bible study has been overturned and a new freedom discovered. In the last forty years small-group ministry has proliferated in a whole range of expressions. Some meet in churches but others meet in homes, in universities, in workplaces, in coffee shops, in fact anywhere. But it is not the geography or venue that is significant; the biggest change has been the style of leadership. When a church has a small-group ministry, it has members who are small-group leaders; it is no longer

UNLEASH THE WORD

one man, the vicar or minister, who teaches every Bible study that happens in the church.

This exciting evolution has enabled many to develop a ministry in their communities as they open up and read the Bible with others. I know of people whose first experience of ministry was teaching small-group Bible study and from that they grew in conviction that they should go into full-time ministry. One London church describes its small-group work as the engine room of their church. These groups bring Christians together to discuss God's Word, learning how to read it well, working out what it means and praying through its implications – all within the umbrella of supportive relationships. Over the years, small-group ministry with unbelievers has also exploded with such courses as Christianity Explored and Alpha becoming nationwide.

Yet this explosion in small groups is not without problems. Some groups try hard to lead Bible studies but veer towards sharing reflections and fail to really get to grips with the Bible passage. In the past the Bible was always taught by a pastor who had been set apart for the task of preaching and studied God's Word with care. I know that there were exceptions to this but in most evangelical churches the handling of God's Word was treated with seriousness. Now there is an attitude that encourages people to 'have a go' and that 'everyone should lead', so people take it in turns to lead their groups. This can be a great opportunity for people to develop their teaching gifts but many lead Bible studies aware that they do not really understand the passage themselves without any help or guidance.

Our world has changed a great deal since the 1970s. We are in the age of new technology: an age where every type of media

INTRODUCTION

use *except* reading has increased in the last ten years.¹ Many of us are unused to reading or what I call *really reading*. Consequently we have given up on spending much time reading and meditating on Scripture when we are together. Instead, with a concern to be 'current' or 'relevant', we may construct our meetings around clips from YouTube or become reliant on bought-in courses that can be watched on DVD. Sometimes it seems we have returned to the old model of Bible study that I grew up with – one authority figure telling a group what the Bible says, although now that figure is not the pastor of the local church but international voices from the web. Home-group leaders without strong foundations in the Word are vulnerable in such a set-up. While there is fantastic material available, there are a lot of false doctrines and ideas out there.

We want to achieve so much in our small groups. Lots of churches want them to be missional communities: the small groups in the church provide not only fellowship, Bible teaching and pastoral care but also focus on outreach in the community and evangelism. All these things are very good but (to use an old English idiom) we must not throw the baby out with the bath water. God's Word must remain central in all that we do because it is the foundation of our fellowship, the wisdom for our pastoral care and the message we have to share with others.

I am passionately committed to small-group ministry as a means of building up believers in the knowledge and love of the Lord; supporting and encouraging each other in the gospel; and training us to better handle Scripture. I believe we are at a critical time: a time when we have never had better access to God's Word yet spend less and less time reading it; a time when new expressions of church are growing with enthusiasm and yet within them the

UNLEASH THE WORD

gospel message is unproclaimed; a time when young people who have grown up in our churches have no background knowledge of the Old Testament and struggle to articulate what Jesus achieved on the cross.

This book has been written to help anyone who has responsibility for leading a small-group Bible study, whether it is a group for teenagers, students, women, men, old or young. My aim is to give you a vision for your task, to help equip you to read God's Word and finally to give you confidence to lead others in Bible study. I hope this will also encourage you to open up the Bible and read it one-to-one in a variety of settings. I have hesitated in the past to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) because I know the best way to learn to lead Bible studies in groups is at the coalface by doing them. I have made plenty of errors if not every mistake over the years, which has led me to keep on thinking how to do the studies better. But some have asked me if I could put this thinking in a book and so this is an attempt to communicate something that really needs working out in practice. If it leads to others taking the Bible seriously and helps them communicate it to others, I will by God's grace rejoice. Let us recapture serious Bible reading for our generation and listen to His Word.