

How to Avoid Bible Study Pitfalls

The small-group setting for Bible study allows freedom to ask questions and explore topics in detail—an option not usually available in a lecture format. But there are potential pitfalls in such a personalized approach to Scripture. The wise leader learns to watch for common mishandlings of Scripture, such as:

1. **Ignored Context.** I have seen tithing envelopes with part of 1 Corinthians 16:2 printed on them: “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income.” A reading of 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 shows that Paul is not referring to tithing but to a special collection to help needy believers in Jerusalem. In order to understand a verse properly, we must take into account the context of the surrounding verses and chapters, the book in which the verse appears, the original audience to whom the verse is addressed, and the overall teaching of the Bible.

2. **Missing Pieces.** The teachings of the Bible are not organized under topical headings. In order to understand what Scripture teaches on a certain subject, we must gather all the relevant passages and consider them together, just as all pieces of a puzzle must be assembled to view the complete picture. Often people will seize upon one verse—for example, that we can ask anything in Jesus’ name and God will grant it (John. 16:24)—while ignoring the passage that states God will not grant a request made with wrong motives (James. 4:3). Misuse of Scripture can occur when we hang our convictions on a single verse without looking

for additional pieces of the puzzle.

3. **Perilous Parables.** Confusion may result when we try to assign meanings to every detail of a parable. Jesus' parables most often conveyed one central truth. Look for that truth, and don't miss the forest for the trees.

4. **Clash of Symbols.** Don't assume that a certain symbol means the same thing everywhere it appears in the Bible. The same symbol can mean different things in different contexts. Both Satan and Jesus are called lions, for example. Go back to the context for a clear understanding of how a symbol is used in the passage you are studying.

5. **Stolen Promises.** Christians often indiscriminately snatch verses from the Bible and lay claim to them. While we can learn from all of Scripture and make application to our lives, not every promise was given to us. When reading promises in Scripture, ask yourself questions such as: In what circumstances was the promise given? To whom was it given? What meaning did this promise hold for the original audience? Is it a general promise or a specific one for a unique situation? What conditions are attached to the promise?

6. **Insider Info.** You may have someone in your Bible study who claims special insight. God chose human language to convey His truth. That means we need to follow the normal usage of language to understand it. There are no secret shortcuts. The words of life are available to everyone.

Adapted from "How to Avoid Bible Study Pitfalls" by John Green
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