

# Facilitator Training Manual

## Welcome to the world of Bible Clusters.

This is a very simple method of Bible exploration for groups. As a facilitator, you will have the task of gathering and leading the group—but you’re not a teacher. Your job is to help the rest of the group encounter God through their reading and talking about the Bible, not to give them the answers.

These pages will give you the basic information you need to gather and facilitate a Bible Cluster. You can find a shorter, animated version of this material at [www.BibleClusters.org](http://www.BibleClusters.org).

## Part 1:

### WHAT YOUR BIBLE CLUSTER IS . . . AND ISN'T.

*People getting together to read the Bible and talk about it.*

That’s what a Bible Cluster is. Don’t make it more complicated than that. It could be sponsored by a church, but it doesn’t have to be. Maybe it’s just you inviting three or four friends to join you each Wednesday for lunch and Bible reading.

**What’s the goal?** To help people encounter God in the words of Scripture. You’re not trying to indoctrinate them into a particular theology. You’re just getting them connected to God through his Word.

**What’s on the agenda?** Read. Talk. Pray. It’s that simple. You’ll read a portion of Scripture—maybe a few verses—and then talk about it. As a facilitator, you’ll ask some questions, basic questions about people’s reactions, and they will respond. Then you’ll read the next chunk of Scripture and talk about that, and so on. As your time nears an end, you’ll pray about what you’ve been reading.

See? It’s simple. But it’s not easy. And that’s why we need you. The role of Facilitator is crucial.

Some people in your group may want to preach to the others. They may want to judge those they disagree with. They’ll bring up theories they heard in Sunday school. Some may even quote words from the original Hebrew or Greek (which just makes everyone else feel dumb). Others will go off on long, long tangents, way off topic.

Your job is to **keep them on track**.

A Bible Cluster is also a **safe place**, and you need to keep it that way. As the group talks about a Bible passage, people can say what they think, *whatever* they think. There’s no such thing as a dumb question. Nobody gets looked down on. It’s a safe place to discuss dynamic ideas.

In all of this, you serve as a **guide, not a teacher**. You’ll nudge the conversation along.

You can gently steer people in helpful directions, but you're not dispensing information. You're not giving them "5 Applications for this Bible Verse All Beginning with the Letter Q."

There's a place for that kind of teaching—in church classes and Bible studies—but not in Bible Clusters. Remember: you're a guide, not a teacher. Your primary goal is to help people encounter God through his Word.

And here's something that might surprise you: Bible Clusters are **not just for religious people**. In fact, this might be a great place for someone to read the Bible for the first time. Maybe they were brought up in a different religion, or no religion at all, but they're curious. *What is that book that people talk about? The one in hotel rooms. What's inside of it?* Lots of people wonder that.

So don't just invite religious folks to this party. Reach out to co-workers and neighbors. You might be surprised at who says yes. They might never get up the nerve to enter a church, but if they know you and trust you, maybe they'll come to a Bible Cluster—if only to look into a book they've always wondered about.

Is God calling you to this ministry?

It's a ministry of invitation. Welcoming people to a safe environment. Reading, talking, and praying with them. Helping them to meet God in the Scriptures.

## Part 2: READ

When your Bible Cluster comes together, it's great to take a few minutes to say hi and catch up. The relationships within the group are important, but don't let the initial greetings take too much time away from the main task at hand. Get down to business, and *read*.

But how? And who? And what version?

First, it's important to read the Bible **out loud**. Many people learn more through *hearing* it, than just reading.

### Who should read out loud?

For the first few sessions—you. Some people get very self-conscious about reading in public. Since you want the Bible Cluster to be a safe place, be careful not to coerce people into reading. When you're pretty sure that someone feels comfortable reading out loud, you could ask that person. Better yet, ask, "Would anyone else like to read?"

Do NOT "go around the circle," reading a verse apiece. That might seem easy for you, but that person at the end is thinking, "Oh, no, it's going to be my turn soon!" They aren't thinking about what others are reading because they're so terrified of taking their turn.

So be cool about this. Find the people who like to read, and ask them. Give the others permission to “just listen.” (NOTE: As others share the reading, you might still need to offer gentle help with pronunciation of names or uncommon words.)

## What passages of the Bible should you read and talk about?

The Bible Cluster website has a list of recommended passages, which you can download and print out. But don't just take our word for it. Think and pray about what Scriptures would be best for your group.

Don't feel any pressure to get through a whole chapter in one meeting. It is often better that you don't. If you rush through a chapter, you'll be tempted to cut short some good conversation. It's typical for a group to work through 2-3 paragraphs, maybe 8-12 verses, in a one-hour meeting. But there's no specific goal to achieve. If God has a lot to tell you about one verse, you could spend the whole hour on that. You can also ask the group to read the *rest* of the chapter on their own, between Cluster sessions. That keeps them in the Word during the week, in a passage they already know something about. So it's actually a good idea *not* to finish a chapter.

## Should you read the whole passage first, before talking about it?

The key is to read bite-sized portions and then talk about them, but it sometimes helps to get the big picture, too. So, in some cases, you might read through a longer passage and then come back and *re-read* a few verses at a time. In between the readings of those short sections—that's when discussion happens. We highly recommend that the group first reads a group of verses for context before discussion begins. Verse-by-verse discussion always works better when the group has first heard the broader context read.

How many verses to read also depends on the type of Scripture you're reading. If there's a story involved, break it into “scenes.” If you're in a New Testament letter, break it into points the author is making. This will take some preparation, finding the best places to break up the reading. (And some Bible publishers help you by already putting subheadings in the text.)

## Should everyone read from the same Bible version?

Maybe. Experienced readers might have their own favorite Bible, and the different translations sometimes offer different shades of meaning, which the group can learn from. But if people are new to the Bible, it can be confusing to hear different wordings of the same passage. It would help them to be able to follow along word for word. Consider printing out the text for the day, or getting everyone to download a Bible app, so they can read from the same version on their phones.

Encourage people to read from their own Bibles *between* Bible Cluster meetings, so if they're used to using a particular version at home, it makes sense to use that in the Cluster as well.

Be careful about “study Bibles,” though. Sometimes people rely on the marginal notes to tell them what a passage means, and that keeps them from doing their own thinking. Some study Bibles can be helpful,

but it's best to encourage the group to do their own thinking first and use the notes as a later addition—not as the definitive word on what the text means.

## Should you move around to different Scripture passages in the same meeting?

As a rule, no. When you do that, you're setting yourself up as a Bible teacher, weaving together different verses to set forth a particular idea. No matter how good that idea is, it's not what the Bible Cluster is about. Here, we want people to hear God's voice for themselves and to discover the power of the Scriptures in their own lives—not by decoding some strange treasure map, but by recognizing God's voice in a particular passage.

Just help them to read the Scripture in front of them, and encounter God there.

## Part 3: TALK

Read. Talk. Pray. It seems easy enough to read the Scripture together, but when you get to talking about it, what will you say?

You'll be tempted to teach. You'll feel the urge to tell the group what *you* think the passage means.

Don't do that. Once you give your opinion, it might be hard for others to share their own thoughts. They might assume that you have the "right" answer, and they'll stop listening for what the Lord is telling them.

Your main role as facilitator of a Bible Cluster is to **ask questions**.

### Three Big Questions

There are three very basic questions you can ask. To some extent, you can mold these to the particular passage, but there's nothing wrong with just repeating these words. Your group will get to know these questions, and they might even start using them when they're reading the Bible on their own.

#### 1. What strikes you?

You're asking for their initial reactions. Are there any surprises, any "aha" moments? Are there interesting ideas, words or characters?

#### 2. What does the passage say?

Here you're going for the basic meaning. What's the point? If it's a story, what's the moral? Another way to phrase this question is "What is God saying?"

### 3. How does the passage impact you?

So what? How do these ideas get into your life? How will a group member's thoughts or behavior change after encounter God in this passage?

Some groups want to rush to the third question, immediately applying the text, but it's helpful to ask all three questions. That way, you get to know the passage first, before jumping to conclusions.

Of course, those aren't the only questions you'll ask. In the course of conversation, you'll offer a number of *thinking* questions, *feeling* questions, and *clarifying* questions. In general avoid *yes-no* questions. Fight the urge to say, "Here's what I think about this passage." Always turn it around to "What do you think?" Often a conversation bounces from one type of question to another rather than holding to a strict order.

### Three Best Practices

Businesses often establish "best practices"—ways of doing what they do in the most effective manner. The same is true of Bible Clusters. Here are a few methods to keep in mind.

#### 1. Keep your eye on the text.

Conversations meander, but it's your job to make sure the discussion stays focused on the text—not on the story, not on individuals, but on the text. You will learn to say countless times, "But what does the text say?"

#### 2. Listen actively by repeating, reflecting, and rephrasing.

*Repeating* clarifies what people said. It does not mean you agree, but it shows people you heard them. (It's also one of the best ways to stop a runaway talker. It's normally impolite to interrupt, but not if you're repeating something they just said.)

*Reflecting* advances the thought.

*Rephrasing* makes sure everyone else understands.

#### 3. Keep the boat between the buoys.

Any conversation has to drift a little. If people are thinking creatively (and you definitely want that), you'll get some tangents, some pet peeves, some off-the-wall ideas. That's normal. But you are "steering" this discussion, and you want to keep it headed in the right direction. This doesn't mean you squelch all creativity—on the contrary. (In fact, people may feel *more* comfortable presenting a "crazy" idea if they trust you to keep the discussion on track.)

Good steering is not easy, but you'll learn as you go.

# Bible Clusters

One key feature of Bible Clusters is *safety*. People need to feel comfortable sharing their ideas, without being embarrassed or demeaned. Many already feel insecure about their Bible knowledge, so it's especially important to affirm them as they study it for themselves. So you want to take care in how you steer this conversation. Treat people with kindness even if you have to redirect the discussion.

And remember that you're also keeping people safe *from each other*. No one wants Clarence to turn the parable of the talents into a sales presentation for the latest multi-level marketing scheme. You do the whole group a favor when you keep them on track.

## Part 4: PRAY

Read. Talk. And then Pray. Of course you know how to pray.

But the prayer in a Bible Cluster is different from other small-group praying. Since this gathering is all about encountering God in Scripture, it makes sense for us to let Scripture guide our prayers. Just as the Bible Cluster is not a Bible study, so the Bible Cluster has prayer, but is not a prayer meeting.

### What should you pray about?

This is not a prayer-request time. Don't go around the circle and ask about people's needs. (There's nothing wrong with that. On many other occasions it would be a great thing to do, but we want to keep the Cluster's focus on the Bible.) Keep your ending prayer short (about 1 minute or less).

So consider what you've been learning from Scripture. Talk with God about your reactions to what you've read. If you've been reading John 3, for instance, you might pray . . .

*Lord, it amazes me that you could love the world so much that you would give your only Son.  
Thank you for this phenomenal gift.*

You might even quote Scripture back to him.

*Lord, you say that you did not send your Son to condemn the world, but to save it. Show us how we can take that approach in our daily lives.*

This may be a new method for some, but once people get used to it, they may find new energy in it. That's why the facilitator is usually the one closing in prayer. You are modeling for others how to talk with God.

And of course there may be an urgent need that you feel the group *has* to pray about. But even then, see if you can see the need in light of the Bible passage.

*Lord, we were just reading about how the Spirit is like the wind, and we're not always sure where it's coming from or where it's going. In the same way, we don't know what's going on with Elsie's health, but we trust that your Spirit is with her, comforting her, healing her.*

## Who should pray?

It's probably best for you as the facilitator to do the praying in the first few sessions. But as others understand this Scripture-praying model, you can invite anyone in the group to join you in voicing a prayer. It's important to keep the focus. This is not primarily a prayer group. You will not have the time to take prayer requests. Your primary goal as the facilitator is to model—in a short, simple prayer—what it is like to talk with God.

Never pressure anyone. Praying in public can be even more terrifying than reading in public. And be careful about the subtle pressure of “going around the circle.” Even if people are given the opportunity to “pass,” they might worry that passing makes them seem less spiritual. Be aware of these pressures and do all you can to keep the group safe for everyone.

## Other considerations

Be aware of the time constraints of the meeting. If you've promised to be done in an hour, don't let prayer exceed that.

Avoid anything resembling gossip or a judgmental spirit. Keep the focus on how God encounters *us* in Scripture.

Set the tone of a group conversation with God by modeling how to pray.

Bible Clusters are not “prayer light.” Most of your prayer responsibility as a Facilitator comes before and after the meeting. Your purpose *IN* the meeting is to model prayer for the others in a simple, straight-forward way.

## Part 5:

# STARTING YOUR BIBLE CLUSTER

Now that you know what happens in a Bible Cluster, it's time to think about how to get it started.

## Step 1: Seed it with Prayer

This has to be a God thing from the very start. From *before* the start. Pray about the details, the decisions you'll make about when and where. But mostly, pray for the *people*.

Pray for the people you'll invite, even before you invite them. In your conversation with God, think about those who might come to this group, and what God might do in their lives?

Pray for yourself, too, as the facilitator. What are the opportunities, weaknesses, and challenges you face? Gather others to pray for you, and ask them to keep praying for you as the Cluster continues. Prayer is the single most important factor in the success of your Bible Cluster ministry.

## Step 2: Cultivate it.

Plan for the Who, Where, and When.

### Who will help you in this project?

You might want to ask a friend to co-facilitate with you. This partner might help you invite more people, might fill in if you get sick, and might even help keep the discussion on track.

### Where will your Bible Cluster meet?

Look for a place that will comfortably hold the group you anticipate, a place that's easy for them to get to and rather free from distractions.

Keep in mind that people need to feel safe when they talk. Consider how the Cluster members will feel about the meeting space. Make sure if you meet in a public place like a restaurant or coffee shop that you are not tying up a table. Ask the management for permission before you use their place regularly.

### When will your Bible Cluster meet?

Start with times that you and your co-facilitator can commit to, and then try to fit other people's schedules. Once you pick a time, try not to change it.

### How often will you meet?

Weekly is good, but bi-weekly can sometimes work. A monthly meeting does not normally promote the commitment or engagement you want from group members. *How long will a meeting last?* We recommend about an hour, but no more than an hour and a half, including greetings and conversations before or after the Cluster. But whatever length you decide on—it's your role as Facilitator to guard the clock tenaciously! Cluster members silently expect you to honor their time.

All of these intricate decisions should be bathed in prayer. *God* is in the details, so be sure to offer those details up to him.

## Part 6:

## GATHERING YOUR PEOPLE

### Who will be in your Bible Cluster?

The process starts long before the first meeting, with **prayer**. Ask God to guide you to invite the right people. And ask God to open their hearts.

## Who are the people you might invite?

Maybe not the first people you think of. Start with your personal network:

- Friends
- Co-workers
- Neighbors
- Workout buddies

They don't need to have any church experience. Maybe they're not even Christian. But there is some awareness in them that makes them search for God. Are they struggling somehow? Are they interested in reading the Bible? Those are the key issues. You may be surprised at who says yes to your invitation.

## How many people should be in a Bible Cluster?

A group of 4 or 5 can work well, if they're active participants. *(In a small group like that, it's hard for someone to "hide out" and just watch.)*

A group of 6-10 is ideal, especially for newcomers to the Bible. *(They can speak up if they want to, but they don't have to.)*

Beyond 10, it's hard to involve everyone in meaningful ways. *(Consider starting a second group.)*

But these are just suggestions. The Lord may guide more people or fewer people to you.

## How can you invite people?

Start by telling them what it is: *Just a group of people reading the Bible and talking about it.*

And frankly, you may also need to tell them what a Bible Cluster is NOT.

- No preaching or teaching
- No heavy theology
- No pressure
- Not a church, class, or cult
- No sales pitch, no money involved

Also be clear on where and when the meetings will be—and if you've decided it will take just an hour, say so.

You might say something like: *If you've ever wondered what's inside the Bible, or wondered how to know God, here's an easy way to find out.*

If they say yes, it will probably be for two reasons

## 1. God tugging at their hearts

## 2. They trust you

You don't need to be a sales rep. Don't make some fancy pitch. Just be you. And offer them a chance to hear God through reading the Bible in a safe space with other people who are learning, just like them.

This invitation process starts long before the first meeting, with prayer. Ask God to guide you to invite the right people. Ask God to open their hearts.

## Part 7:

# YOUR FIRST MEETING

How can you prepare for your initial Bible Cluster meeting?

First and foremost—**PRAY**. Bathe every part of this operation in prayer. Pray for the people you expect to come. Pray for yourself and your co-leader. Most of all, dedicate this time to God. This is *his* event.

How else can you prepare?

- *Read through the passage you'll be talking about.*
- *And read through it again.*

Get comfortable with any hard-to-pronounce names. If there are hard-to-understand words or ideas, think about how you can explain them simply. Remember, you're a guide, not a teacher, but you can clear away some obstacles to good conversation.

- *Review the details.*
  - Is your meeting place still available?
  - Is there access to water? Coffee? Rest rooms?
  - Is there a Wifi password needed for people to access the Bible text on their computer or phone?
  - Do you have extra Bibles available, or a print-out of the passage?
- *Remind the participants—by email, text, or phone—of . . .*
  - when the meeting is
  - where it will be
  - and how to get there

In every email, remind the participants of the purpose of the meeting—to get to know God through reading his Word.

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- Make sure you have watched the Read, Talk, and Pray training videos to prepare for the heart of the meeting. (Or you could read those sections in this document.) If you watched or read these some time ago, it would be helpful to do so again.
- And then it's a good idea to *pray some more*.

## Starting the Meeting

After you've done all that preparation, it's time to start. There may be a *casual time of conversation* before things officially get rolling. This is a very good thing. Let it happen. You want people to get to know each other.

As you begin, *welcome everyone*.

And then *pray*. This time it's just you voicing a simple prayer, connecting with God from the start.

Then *establish your ground rules*.

- Everyone matters to God, so all are welcome in love.  
People can be themselves.
- This is a place of safety for all.  
No one will be judged for their honest responses.  
And there's no such thing as a dumb question.
- Active discussion is welcome; debating or fighting is not.
- It's okay to say, "I don't know" (even for the leader).
- This is not a class. You are not the teacher. Everyone is exploring together.

As you get going, you can briefly explain the Read-Talk-Pray model, but they'll get the hang of it pretty quickly.

And congratulations! Your first Bible Cluster has begun.

## Part 8: WRAPPING UP

So you've had your first Bible Cluster meeting. You have read, talked, and prayed together.

You ended on time (that's very important) and sent them on their way.

What then?

Between meetings, it's important to connect with each Cluster member. Email, or call, or text them, and thank them for coming. *Remind them when and where the next meeting is.*

Also encourage them to read the Bible on their own. You probably covered just a few verses in your Cluster meeting. Urge them to read the rest of the chapter.

*And make sure they download the **Bible Cluster app** at [www.BibleClusters.org](http://www.BibleClusters.org). That will make it even easier for them to stay current with the reading.*

You might also want to ask them how they felt about the last meeting. (They'll probably just say nice things, but if they offer a criticism, that's even more helpful. Thank them for it.)

In between meetings, *keep praying*—on your own and with your co-leader. Specifically pray for each person there, and also for those who didn't show up.

Then it's time to start your preparations for the next meeting.

### The Course of a Cluster

Don't be discouraged if things are bumpy at first. It may take a few sessions for the Bible Cluster to hit its stride. People might still be getting comfortable with each other . . . and with the format.

Is it OK to add other members to your Cluster along the way? Yes, but remember to pray for them even before they come.

Bible Clusters may go on indefinitely, but often they reach a critical point after 9-12 months. People move away, or their schedules change. Some people may just stop coming. Others might transition into a more traditional Bible study. Bible Clusters are usually the first step in helping people encounter God through the Bible. Once they come to faith in Jesus, or when they begin to mature in faith, they require other help that comes within the faith community of the church.

If this happens to your group, don't feel guilty; it's pretty normal. But you might want to consider three different options.

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- 1. You could let the group come to a close until another one starts.**
  - Choose a certain date as a farewell session. Maybe throw a party.
  - Celebrate the great things that have happened in the group.
  - And also make sure each member has a path to further growth.
- 2. Or maybe you could direct people into other ministries offered through the church.**
  - Is there a church small group or Bible study they could join?
- 3. Or maybe the Cluster can reproduce.**
  - Maybe you and your co-leader could each start a new Bible Cluster.
  - Maybe some current Cluster members are ready to become co-leaders.

In any case—even if this Bible Cluster ends or changes, you can trust that God will keep speaking to the hearts of those who have come.