

Discussion Group Facilitator's Guide

Introduction

Thank you for choosing to be an Explore God Discussion Group Facilitator!

These notes are intended to help you be the most effective Discussion Group Facilitator you can be. Please read them thoroughly and use them to help you prepare for each group gathering.

Explore God Distinctives

Explore God Discussion Groups are designed to embrace the following distinctives:

Invite Questions

Explore God is an initiative to create safe environments where people can seek credible answers to challenging spiritual questions. We embrace and celebrate question-askers.

Create Conversation

Since this is a discussion (not a class), Explore God wants everyone to bring all of their thoughts and questions to the table, not just the parts they think are socially acceptable. And because we're bound to have lots of opinions represented, that means we'll often have to embrace tension in order to encourage conversation rather than end it.

Promote Experiential Learning

The Explore God material attempts to stimulate various learning styles: left and right brain, rational and emotional, factual and metaphorical. We try to engage people's imaginations, as well as provide logical evidence. In this way, we hope to awaken and satisfy a wide-ranging audience of people.

Inspire Self-Discovery

Explore God's approach is to whet people's appetite for seeking credible answers to challenging spiritual questions. We likely will not provide exhaustive answers to every question. Rather, we'll offer "breadcrumbs" and point to additional resources that encourage self-discovery.

Facilitator Overview

Explore God Discussion Group Facilitators are charged with facilitating Groups whose participants bring with them a wide variety of spiritual backgrounds and perspectives.

For that reason, the best Facilitators are people who connect well with a diverse audience and do not exclude or alienate anyone because of their worldview or belief system.

Facilitator Guidelines

Leading an Explore God Discussion Group is a lot easier than you might think. The keys to being a great Facilitator are simple. If you can be hospitable, play a video, facilitate good discussion, listen, and point to resources, you can be successful.

Be Hospitable

Create a warm and welcoming space for your Discussion Group Participants. You don't have to go overboard, just be able to host people and offer a few snacks or refreshments.

Q :: Can I place another's needs before my own to ensure that they feel comfortable, safe, and welcome?

Play a Video

Media is a key component of Explore God Discussion Groups. If you can push the play button, you're already on your way to becoming a great Facilitator.

Q :: Do I have the technical capabilities to play two videos for my Group Participants each week?

Facilitate Good Conversation

The goal of every Discussion Group meeting is to create open and meaningful conversation. Asking good questions and listening well is a key ingredient to great conversation. For each session, we've provided sample questions to help you in facilitating great conversation.

Q :: Can I facilitate conversation around each session's topic? Can I encourage others to participate and be engaged?

Listen and Point to Resources

You don't have to have all the answers. There are many Explore God resources available to assist you in leading your group. You just have to be a good listener and point people to the right resources.

Q :: Am I willing to learn from what's available and be prepared to share with my Group Participants?

Facilitator Expectations

It's not difficult to be an effective Discussion Group Facilitator. However, it does require a balance between good people skills, good facilitation skills, a commitment to learn, and a prayerful willingness to let God work in people's lives.

The following are a few expectations of Explore God Discussion Group Facilitators:

- Contact all of your Group Participants a few weeks before launch to provide details on group meetings.
- Be prepared to facilitate a 7-session Discussion Group (i.e. Watch the videos and read through the discussion questions beforehand, in order to personalize your group experience).
- Follow up with Participants after each session and be available to them as a resource.

Facilitator Values

A Discussion Group Facilitator's responsibility is to create a safe environment where group members can seek credible answers to challenging spiritual questions. Notice that this does not say that Discussion Group Participants will necessarily find answers to every question they have.

Rather, the Discussion Group Facilitator's responsibility is to create a safe environment for people to ask these spiritual questions and seek sound answers. Some or all

of those questions might be satisfied. But it is not the goal nor expectation of the Discussion Group Facilitator to answer every one.

Humility

Discussion Group Facilitators recognize they are not responsible for changing anyone's life or faith. They simply create the environment.

The best Facilitators recognize they are no better than their Group Participants. In fact, the most compelling Facilitators, in a spirit of humility and charity, consider others better than themselves, no matter their opinions on faith. They demonstrate a keen and sincere interest in each Group Participant, asking great questions, following up on issues important to them, and making time for personal interactions.

Effective Discussion Group Facilitators will not be shy about sharing their struggles, doubts, fears, and failures. While this vulnerability might be uncomfortable at first, it clearly establishes a tone of authenticity and honesty required for true spiritual growth. None of us has it all figured out.

Spiritual Growth

Since the process of spiritual growth often takes a long time—sometimes a lifetime—Explore God celebrates when anyone takes a step forward in their faith journey. This could range from regular group attendance, to actual participation, to reading the Bible or praying for the first time. Or, it might be overcoming a significant obstacle to trusting God, or finding a sufficient answer to a question that's plagued them.

Of course, the variety of these steps makes celebration difficult and success nearly impossible to measure. Yet that's the beauty and challenge of a highly personalized environment. The goal is to promote healthy spiritual conversations and invite each person to take positive steps in exploring God.

Biblical Authority

At Explore God, we believe the Bible is like a biography of humanity: where we came from, how we got here, and where we're going. And of course, we believe it's the story of God's fundamental role in that biography, as the creator, sustainer, and restorer of life.

At the same time, however, Explore God Discussion Group Facilitators should be sensitive to their

group's perception of the Bible. If its authority is discounted, present it simply as a historical document and build credibility from there. Similarly, Facilitators should not resort to proof-texting, which is the practice of lifting biblical stories or verses out of context in order to validate unrelated points or agendas. Discussion Groups that lead to healthy conversations about the Scriptures are ultimately fulfilling the mission of creating a safe environment where group members can seek credible answers to challenging spiritual questions.

In other words, we believe God's story and our story, as found in the Bible, should provide the foundation for each group discussion in a non-forceful, nonthreatening manner.

Group Gatherings

Group Participants

The easiest way to describe the ideal Explore God Discussion Group Participant is "a spiritual seeker." In other words, anyone with spiritual questions is welcome to participate.

As we've mentioned, we want to create a safe environment where group members can seek credible answers to challenging spiritual questions.

The ideal size for an Explore God Discussion Group is approximately 5-10 participants. If your group exceeds 10 members, you may wish to split into two separate groups - making sure each group has a balanced number of Christians and spiritual seekers.

Group Conversations

Explore God Facilitators are facilitators of good conversation. You will not be lecturing or teaching your group, but encouraging members to discuss what they are learning.

To the best of your ability, be prepared for questions and theological discussions. Plan to share your own reflections, beliefs, and questions, but limit your input. Stimulate others to share, listen attentively when they speak, and be affirming whenever you can.

Specific aspects of each session and group meeting are provided below. However, one skill for creating a conversational environment bears mentioning now: asking good questions. Good questions force people to think about truth as well as their own personal experiences.

Use the questions provided in the Facilitator's Notes below, but feel free to follow up with other questions that pertain to your group's circumstances. Here are a few tips for asking good questions:

- Ask open-ended questions, not those that can be answered with a simple yes or no.
- Ask questions that evoke feelings, thoughts, and insights.
- Ask questions that do not have just one right answer.
- Ask questions that require personal examples.
- Ask questions that stimulate people to apply what they are learning.

Don't simply answer group members' questions. Respond by promoting participation from the whole group and asking follow-up questions. Be authentic and admit your own struggles with difficult questions. Encourage self-discovery by allowing the group members to arrive at conclusions themselves. When in doubt, invite the group to continue studying the issue together, using many of the online resources at ExploreGod.com.

Group Meeting Location

The setting of your group is vital for creating a warm environment. Consider these tips:

- Meet in a location that matches the group's size. It's better to be slightly confined than dwarfed by a large room.
- Make sure to arrange chairs in a circle. Avoid rows or any layout that feels like a classroom.
- Provide snacks and drinks. Don't go overboard; a simple tray of cookies, a bowl of fruit, and a carafe of coffee go a long way.
- Be early, turn off your cell phone during your meeting, and stay late. The best interaction with group members often takes place before or after the group meeting.

Your group's meeting place can play a big role in the facilitation of conversation and the overall effectiveness of your group. Your meeting place might be someone's home, a coffee shop, conference room, or a quiet restaurant (wherever you can watch a TV or computer).

Regardless of where you meet, ensure that the environment is comfortable and provides a safe atmosphere for others to be open and authentic while discussing their questions and thoughts about God.

Discussion Group Session Outline (60-minute example, adaptable to your needs)

Below, you'll find an overview of each group meeting. Each week is divided into four main sections:

Social Time (10 min.)

Relaxed time when the group can catch up and reconnect without an agenda. This is a great time to have snacks and drinks available.

Watch & Discuss Video 1: *Pulse of the World* (10 min.)

- Read the Introduction.
- Watch *Pulse of the World*.
- Discuss questions related to *Pulse of the World*.

Watch & Discuss Video 2: *The Curiosity Collective* (25-30 min.)

- Read the introduction to the video.
- Watch *The Curiosity Collective*.
- Discuss questions related to *The Curiosity Collective*.

Wrap-Up and Follow-Up Resources (10 min.)

- Read or summarize the Wrap-Up section to the group.
- Remind Participants that you will send them an e-mail with links to optional "Follow-Up Resources" content they may be interested in looking at this week.
- Thank everyone for attending and tell them you look forward to seeing them next week.

These guidelines are provided for your benefit. You might need to adjust or customize them to your group.

Additional Resources at ExploreGod.com

ExploreGod.com has hundreds of articles and films that address common questions people ask about God. After completing this 7-week series, you may find it beneficial to continue your group's discussion. Any video on the site can be used in a group discussion format.

ExploreGod.com is designed to be a resource for life. We also have an active social media presence. You can find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Vimeo, Google+, and YouTube. We encourage you and your Group Participants to follow Explore God on these platforms. By following us, you can join the conversation and be notified of new films and articles as they are published.

—The Explore God Team

1 Does Life Have a Purpose?

Social Time

Take ten minutes for the group to get acquainted over snacks and refreshments. Then, after gathering everyone into a comfortable circle, share something like the following Introduction.

Introduction

This Explore God Discussion Group is an opportunity for all of us to consider what we think about lots of spiritual issues. Watch the first video called “The Pulse of the World” on purpose and then discuss it. Each week, after a few minutes of social time, we’ll gather like this to watch two short films. And then we’ll take some time to discuss them, poke holes in them, agree, and disagree. There’s nothing for you to prepare each week, and you can participate at whatever level you feel comfortable. That’s one great thing about this group—it’s a discussion. It’s about exploration. I’m not here to convince anyone about anything. I’m on the journey just like you. The reality is that none of us has it all figured out. We all have questions and we can probably learn something from everyone. I would like to ask that each of us be respectful of each other’s view. We’re not here to debate or argue. We’re not here to fight. We’re not here to bite, kick, scratch, and spit. We’re here to foster great conversation around arguably some of the most important questions we all have. Does anyone have any questions?

Video 1 - *Pulse of the World: Purpose*

This video is a 2.5-minute survey of many people’s responses to this question.

Questions for Discussion

- Did you identify with anyone’s expressed views in the film? If so, who and what resonated with you?
- Are you surprised to learn that 85 percent of people are clear about the meaning and purpose of their life (64 percent strongly agree and 21 percent somewhat agree)? Why or why not?

Video 2 - *The Curiosity Collective: Does Life Have a Purpose?*

This is a 10-minute collection of subject matter experts discussing the question “Does life have a purpose?” It displays the various questions, struggles, and perspectives of these individuals regarding this week’s topic. See what they have to say and discuss it.

Questions for Discussion

After watching the video, choose from this list of questions to facilitate discussion or ask some of your own. There’s no need to limit your discussion to these questions or to feel pressured to cover all of them in the time you have.

- In what ways can you identify with any of the stories in *The Curiosity Collective*? What did you find intriguing or compelling?
- In the video, Lysa observed, “If I could just discover the right thing, a better job, financial blessing, the right person to love me, the right kids with the right accolades, then I’d feel satisfied.” In what things have you sought satisfaction? Did it satisfy?
- Can you share both a time when life seemed like a random series of events and a time when it seemed like there was an intentional plan unfolding?
- In what ways might someone’s view of eternity affect their sense of meaning and purpose?
- If you believe we all have a purpose, what role does God play in that—if any?

Wrap-Up

Thoughts to Share with the Group

To the best of your ability, summarize the main points of your group's discussion. Or, if you are more comfortable, use the text below as a launching pad for concluding the session.

When life seems to make little sense, it's easy to fall prey to the "It's meaningless!" trap. Indeed, the book of Ecclesiastes, an Old Testament book, is built around these very words. In stark contrast stands the book of Job, in which the lead character exclaims, "Though [God] slay me, yet I will hope in him." In other words, hard experiences in life can jade us to any sense of purpose. Rather than looking at life through the lens of our experience, another option is to look for some sense of truth outside ourselves.

Follow-Up Resources

As you wrap up this session, share or summarize these bullets:

- Acknowledge that with a topic as big as this, there is no way to answer the question comprehensively.
- Inform the group that you'll be sending some follow-up resources so people can continue to explore God.
- Thank people for joining the discussion, and invite them to stick around if they want to continue the conversation.

Explore More on Purpose

The following resources are designed for deeper exploration of the topics of purpose and the meaning of life. If you are doing this series offline, you can e-mail these resources to your group after the session. Simply copy this section and paste it into an e-mail.

Videos

- How Do You Find Purpose in Life?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/how-do-you-find-purpose-in-life-video>)
- The Pursuit of Purpose
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/the-pursuit-of-purpose-video>)

Articles

- What Is My Purpose?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/what-is-my-purpose>)
- Does Life Have a Purpose?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/does-life-have-a-purpose>)

Recommended Books

- *The Life You've Always Wanted* – John Ortberg
(<http://amzn.to/146rVyc>)
- *The Purpose Driven Life* – Rick Warren
(<http://amzn.to/1dkFD92>)

Additional Content on Purpose

- <http://www.exploreGod.com/meaning-and-purpose>

Scripture Focus

Jesus states in Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Discovering our purpose is one of the most important endeavors in life. If what Jesus says is true, if we simply ask, seek, and knock, God will meet us wherever we are and address our heart's desire.

Based on our group's conversation, how does this thought impact you? If it's true that "each of us has a pretty unique story to play" in the world, what's your role? If you keep a journal, take some time to note your responses there.

2 Is There a God?

Social Time

Take ten minutes for the group to catch up and reconnect over snacks and refreshments. Then, after gathering everyone into a comfortable circle, share something like the following Introduction.

Introduction

Dostoevsky said, “Without God, everything is permitted.” Thus, knowing the answer to today’s question helps us know how to live: in submission to God or to ourselves only.

A. W. Tozer famously quipped, “What comes to mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

So, with that, let’s look at how others answered this important question in the first video called “Pulse of the World” on God.

Video 1 - *Pulse of the World: God*

This video is a 2.5-minute survey of many people’s responses to this question.

Questions for Discussion

- Did you identify with anyone’s expressed views in the film? If so, who and what resonated with you?
- To what do you attribute the 11 percent decline in the belief in God over the past twenty years?

Video 2 - *The Curiosity Collective: Is There a God?*

This is a 10-minute collection of subject matter experts discussing the question “Is there a God?” It displays the various questions, struggles, and perspectives of these individuals regarding this week’s topic. See what they have to say and discuss it.

Questions for Discussion

After watching the video, choose from this list of questions to facilitate discussion or ask some of your own. There’s no need to limit your discussion to these questions or to feel pressured to cover all of them in the time you have.

- In what ways can you identify with any of the stories in *The Curiosity Collective*? What did you find intriguing or compelling?
- What makes it easy to believe in God? What makes it hard to believe in God?
- What role—if any—did God play in your family when you were growing up? How does your upbringing impact your beliefs now?
- In the video, Andy shares that he’s convinced God exists because of “cosmological constants” and their impact on life. What has convinced you that God either does or does not exist?
- What do you think of Corey’s suggestion, “If there is a God, I can’t prove him, nor can I disprove him with science”?
- What do you think could convince you to change your current stance on God’s existence—be that belief or unbelief?

Wrap-Up

Thoughts to Share with the Group

To the best of your ability, summarize the main points of your group's discussion. Or, if you are more comfortable, use the text below as a launching pad for concluding the session.

Most of us "hope there's something else out there." And the thoughts people have about God are as diverse as the people who've thought them. Most have attributed their life to some form of god or Supreme Being. And as we saw and discussed, there is ample evidence supporting this. Yet, it seems, for us to be confident that there is a God, he/she/it must "reveal himself to us in a way that makes sense."

Psalm 19:1 states, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." In other words, if there is a God, all people have seen and/or experienced him, though they might not have known it, or attributed that experience to God. This week, keep an open mind and consider how the creation around you might speak of God and his plans.

Follow-Up Resources

As you wrap up this session, share or summarize these bullets:

- Acknowledge that with a topic as big as this, there is no way to answer the question comprehensively.
- Inform the group that you'll be sending some follow-up resources so people can continue to explore God.
- Thank people for joining the discussion, and invite them to stick around if they want to continue the conversation.

Explore More on God

The following resources are designed for deeper exploration of the topic of God's existence. If you are doing this series offline, you can e-mail these resources to your group after the session. Simply copy this section and paste it into an e-mail.

Videos

- Evidence of God
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/evidence-of-god-video>)
- Are We Created?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/are-we-created-video>)

Articles

- Is God Real?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/is-god-real>)
- Is God Personal?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/is-god-a-personal-god>)

Daily Stream of Inspiration

- Top 50 Questions about God
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/top-50-questions>)

Recommended Books

- *The Reason for God* – Tim Keller
(<http://amzn.to/182feqr>)
- *Rumors of Another World* – Philip Yancey
(<http://amzn.to/146skk8>)

Additional Content on God

- <http://www.exploreGod.com/god>

Scripture Focus

Psalm 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." In other words, creation reflects its creator. If God exists, all people have seen and experienced God, though they might not have known it or attributed that experience to God.

In what ways have you experienced (or not experienced) God's presence through creation? How did those experiences affect your belief (or disbelief) in God? If you keep a journal, take some time to note your responses there.

3 Why Does God Allow Pain & Suffering?

Social Time

Take ten minutes for the group to catch up and reconnect over snacks and refreshments. Then, after gathering everyone into a comfortable circle, share something like the following Introduction.

Introduction

Why does God allow pain and suffering? This is a very common question and is possibly the most difficult to answer. It is undoubtedly one of the most significant obstacles for many people who are questioning whether God exists or whether they should trust him. So if this has been a hard question for you, know that you're not alone. Watch what others say in the first video called "Pulse of the World" on pain and suffering and then discuss it.

Video 1 - *Pulse of the World: Pain & Suffering*

This video is a 2.5-minute survey of many people's responses to this question.

Questions for Discussion

- Did you identify with anyone's expressed views in the film? If so, who and what resonated with you?
- Was it surprising to learn that the top question people would ask God is "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?" What would be some of the questions you'd ask God?

Video 2 - *The Curiosity Collective: Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?*

This is a 10-minute collection of subject matter experts discussing the question "Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?" It displays the various questions, struggles, and perspectives of these individuals regarding this week's topic. See what they have to say and discuss it.

Questions for Discussion

- In what ways can you identify with any of the stories in *The Curiosity Collective*? What did you find intriguing or compelling?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how difficult is it for you to reconcile the existence of both suffering and God? (1=easy; 10=impossible) Why?
- One of the Pulse speakers noted, "Some of the best lessons I've learned in life . . . came from very painful times." In what ways might good come from bad? Do you have any experience with this?
- If there's a God, why do you think he allows evil in the world?
- In the video, what did you think of James's suggestion that God "understands our suffering... [and] is seeking to heal it"?

Wrap-Up

Thoughts to Share with the Group

The Problem of Evil states that an all-powerful and perfectly good god would not allow evil to exist in the world. Responses to this argument vary within Christianity and other faiths. Maybe it's a test of our faith. Or perhaps God is simply unable to change our circumstances.

Romans 8:18 says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." In this passage, the Apostle Paul suggests that something good always comes of something bad. Indeed, a few verses later he affirms that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him." Scripture proposes that, despite the painful circumstances in which we often find ourselves, God can somehow use them for his and our good.

Follow-Up Resources

As you wrap up this session, share or summarize these bullets:

- Acknowledge that with a topic as big as this, there is no way to answer the question comprehensively.
- Inform the group that you'll be sending some follow-up resources so people can continue to explore God.
- Thank people for joining the discussion, and invite them to stick around if they want to continue the conversation.

Explore More on Pain and Suffering

The following resources are designed for deeper exploration of the topic of pain and suffering. If you are doing this series offline, you can e-mail these resources to your group after the session. Simply copy this section and paste it into an e-mail.

Videos

- What Is the Source of Pain and Suffering?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/what-is-the-source-of-pain-and-suffering-video>)
- Why Does a Good God Allow Pain and Suffering?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/why-does-a-good-god-allow-pain-and-suffering-video>)

Articles

- Why Is There Pain and Suffering?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/why-is-there-pain-and-suffering>)
- Does God Care When I Hurt?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/does-god-care-when-i-hurt>)

Recommended Books

- *The Problem of Pain* – C. S. Lewis
(<http://amzn.to/182ftBE>)
- *Evil and the Justice of God* – N. T. Wright
(<http://amzn.to/1dkGk23>)

Additional Content on Pain and Suffering

- <http://www.exploreGod.com/pain-and-suffering>

Scripture Focus

In Romans 8:18, Paul says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

In what ways might your pain and suffering reveal something good and beautiful in the world one day? If you keep a journal, take some time to note your responses there.

4 *Is Christianity Too Narrow in Our Culture?*

Social Time

Take ten minutes for the group to catch up and reconnect over snacks and refreshments. Then, after gathering everyone into a comfortable circle, share something like the following Introduction.

Introduction

Christianity is seen by some as a narrow and mostly irrelevant belief system in our culture. Why? The Christian Church at one point in history was sought out for knowledge of reality. The Church was taken seriously by the wider culture. In many circles, that is no longer true. Let's see how some people responded to today's question. Is Christianity too narrow in our culture?

Video 1 - *Pulse of the World: Christianity & Culture*

This video is a 2.5-minute survey of many people's responses to this question.

Questions for Discussion

- Did you identify with anyone's expressed views in the film? If so, who and what resonated with you?
- What do you think about the statistic that "nearly half of all US adults believe it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because they all teach the same lessons"?

Video 2 - *The Curiosity Collective: Is Christianity Too Narrow In Our Culture?*

This is a 10-minute collection of subject matter experts discussing the question "Is Christianity Too Narrow in Our Culture?" It displays the various questions, struggles, and perspectives of these individuals regarding this week's topic. See what they have to say and then discuss it.

Questions for Discussion

- In what ways can you identify with any of the stories in *The Curiosity Collective*? What did you find intriguing or compelling?
- Does the media represent Christianity accurately? Do Christians represent Christianity accurately?
- In the video, Corey suggests, "When people say that all religions are the same, that sounds really humble and tolerant." Why does he go on to say that those claims are actually exclusive?
- How have people used religion for good? For bad?
- What are some examples in which most people believe that narrow ideas are good?
- What exclusive claims do you hold? Do you allow yourself to be vulnerable when discussing your views with others?

Wrap-Up

Thoughts to Share with the Group

To the best of your ability, summarize the main points of your group's discussion. Or, if you are more comfortable, use the text below as a launching pad for concluding the session.

Many people would insist that it's intolerant or "ignorant to say that Christianity is the only right religion." But, in the end, it might be best to admit that we're all exclusivists. All of us make exclusive claims about most things—religion included. Yet the challenge seems to be finding a tone of gentleness in the midst of conversation and even disagreement.

In Jeremiah 29:4–11, God calls his people to be present in their city in a way that enables it to flourish, while remaining focused on God. "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." In other words, the God of the Bible commands his people to be gracious and charitable toward all people—including those who do not share the same faith. Is it possible to have an honest yet graceful dialog about important matters like faith?

Follow-Up Resources

As you wrap up this session, share or summarize these bullets:

- Acknowledge that with a topic as big as this, there is no way to answer the question comprehensively.
- Inform the group that you'll be sending some follow-up resources so people can continue to explore God.
- Thank people for joining the discussion, and invite them to stick around if they want to continue the conversation.

Explore More on Christianity and Culture

The following resources are designed for deeper exploration of the topic of Christianity and culture. If you are doing this series offline, you can e-mail these resources to your group after the session. Simply copy this section and paste it into an e-mail.

Videos

- Do Christians Represent Christ?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/do-christians-represent-christ-video>)
- Who Did Jesus Claim to Be?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/video-who-did-jesus-claim-to-be>)

Articles

- What Is Christianity?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/what-is-christianity>)
- Is Truth Relative?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/is-truth-relative>)

Recommended Books

- *Mud and the Masterpiece* – John Burke
(<http://amzn.to/19KY9Dv>)
- *But Don't All Religions Lead to God?*
– Michael Green
(<http://amzn.to/19Xclrd>)

Additional Content on Christianity and Culture

- <http://www.exploreGod.com/christianity>
- <http://www.exploreGod.com/culture>

Scripture Focus

In Jeremiah 29:4–11, God calls his people to be present in their city in a way that enables it to flourish, while remaining focused on God. "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7).

What are some practical ways you can seek the peace and prosperity of your city? How might these actions contribute to the common good in the world? If you keep a journal, take some time to note your responses there.

5 *Is Jesus Really God?*

Social Time

Take ten minutes for the group to catch up and reconnect over snacks and refreshments. Then, after gathering everyone into a comfortable circle, share something like the following Introduction.

Introduction

Is Jesus really God? The implications of this question are clearly enormous. Every aspect of society would be impacted by the confirmation that Jesus was literally God in the flesh. Also, if Jesus were God, then his words take on much greater meaning. They're more than simply wise words of an influential prophet or philosopher. On the other hand, if he's not God, then the entire Christian faith is undermined. As Paul said, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead (i.e. do something that only God could do), your faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 5:14). Watch the "Pulse of the World" on Jesus video and then discuss it.

Video 1 - *Pulse of the World: Jesus*

This video is a 2.5-minute survey of many people's responses to this question.

Questions for Discussion

- Did you identify with anyone's expressed views in the film? If so, who and what resonated with you?
- Does it seem consistent with your experience that "67 percent of US adults . . . have a personal relationship with Jesus"? Why or why not?

Video 2 - *The Curiosity Collective: Is Jesus Really God?*

This is a 10-minute collection of subject matter experts discussing the question "Is Jesus really God?" It displays the various questions, struggles, and perspectives of these individuals regarding this week's topic. See what they have to say and then discuss it.

Questions for Discussion

- In what ways can you identify with any of the stories in *The Curiosity Collective*? What did you find intriguing or compelling?
- Was Jesus a historical figure, in your opinion? Why or why not?
- What did Leonce mean when he said, "Religion says 'I do, therefore I'm loved.' Jesus says, 'You're loved, therefore you do'"?
- Christians believe that sin separates humanity from God. Yet Jesus, through his death, bridges that gap. Why do you think Jesus had to die in order to accomplish this?
- In the video, Bryan says "[Jesus] was resurrected—rose up from the dead—with over five hundred witnesses. They saw him and, based on that encounter, were willing to die in order to testify as to what they saw." What do you think about his claim?
- What do you think about Jesus' claim to be God?

Wrap-Up

Thoughts to Share with the Group

To the best of your ability, summarize the main points of your group's discussion. Or, if you are more comfortable, use the text below as a launching pad for concluding the session.

It's fashionable to suggest that Jesus was a good teacher, a man with an important message of love, and that's all. He wasn't God; that's impossible. However, the problem with that perspective is that he claimed to be God. (In John 10:30, Jesus said, "I and the Father are one.") Consequently, in C. S. Lewis's words, he was either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. Also, assuming the accounts are correct that he lived, he also predicted his death and resurrection. Then, hundreds of witnesses claimed he fulfilled that prediction and indeed rose from the dead. What do we do with that?

You may be curious about what Christians believe about Jesus. To explain that, let me start here: It probably wouldn't shock anyone if I declared that things are not as they should be. And no matter how hard we might try to change that reality, the world continues on in its brokenness. Lying, cheating, stealing, envy, greed, anxiety . . . well, you get the picture. It's a mess. The Bible, which we'll discuss next week, says that this mess was created when humanity chose to go their own way and live outside God's generous parameters. And we've been reaping the consequences since.

Unfortunately, no amount of kissing up is going to make up for our waywardness. Our relationship with God has been so fractured that only he can repair it. And yet he does.

Simply put, in order to right the wrongs of the world, God entered his creation in the person of Jesus Christ. "The Bible says that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. He bore the burden of our shortcomings for us. And then he rose from the grave to defeat the power of sin, brokenness, and death in the world. This was done so that when we abandon our own efforts—which always fall short—and simply accept Jesus as our Savior and Lord, our relationship with God is restored. And we, like Jesus, are given a new life in order to become all that God made us to be."¹

This is the gospel; this is the good news. God loves each of us so much that he gave us the gift of his son. And if we believe in him, we receive the gift of eternal life.

God loves; God gave; we believe; we receive.²

As you wrap up this session, share or summarize these bullets:

- Acknowledge that with a topic as big as this, there is no way to answer the question comprehensively.
- Inform the group that you'll be sending some follow-up resources so people can continue to explore God.
- Thank people for joining the discussion, and invite them to stick around if they want to continue the conversation.

Explore More on Jesus

The following resources are designed for deeper exploration into each session's topic. If you are doing this series offline, you can email these to the group after each session for further exploration. Simply copy this section and paste it into an email.

Videos

- How Is Jesus Different?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/video-how-is-jesus-different>)
- Can You Like Jesus But Hate Religion?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/can-you-like-jesus-but-hate-religion-video>)

Articles

- The Historical Jesus
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/the-historical-jesus>)
- Who Is Jesus?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/who-is-jesus>)

Additional Content on Jesus

- <http://www.exploreGod.com/jesus>

Daily Stream of Inspiration

- Jesus said What?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/jesus-said-what>)

Recommended Books

- *Jesus Among Other Gods* – Ravi Zaccharias
(<http://amzn.to/19Xd4hh>)
- *Simply Jesus* – N.T. Wright
(<http://amzn.to/13X1pwe>)

Scripture Focus

In Mark 8:29, Jesus asks Peter a heavy question. "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Based on the evidence you've heard, who do you say Jesus is? If you keep a journal, take some time to note your responses to these questions there.

Follow-Up Resources

¹ Norton Herbst, "What is the Gospel?" *ExploreGod.com*, <http://www.exploreGod.com/what-is-the-gospel>

² Summarized from Andy Stanley's sermon: *Go Fish, Part Five* - Muddy Water

6 Is The Bible Reliable?

Social Time

Take ten minutes for the group to catch up and reconnect over snacks and refreshments. Then, after gathering everyone into a comfortable circle, share something like the following Introduction.

Introduction

The reliability of the Bible is being challenged on multiple fronts. At this point in history, an intelligent and thorough conversation about the reliability of Scripture is essential. Jews and Christians hinge their faith squarely on the words of the Bible. Therefore, if the Bible is not reliable, the implications for these faiths are significant. On the other hand, if the Bible is a reliable record of historical events (not to mention theological principles), then the entire world must consider God's plan as recorded in it. Watch the first video called "Pulse of the World" on the Bible and then discuss it.

Video 1 - *Pulse of the World: Bible*

This video is a 2.5-minute survey of many people's responses to this question.

Questions for Discussion

- Did you identify with anyone's expressed views in the film? If so, who and what resonated with you?
- What does it mean that "80 percent of Americans identify the Bible as sacred literature yet only 43 percent of Christians firmly believe the Bible is accurate in all of the principles it teaches"?

Video 2 - *The Curiosity Collective: Is The Bible Reliable?*

This is a 10-minute collection of subject matter experts discussing the question "Is the Bible reliable?" It displays the various questions, struggles, and perspectives of these individuals regarding this week's topic. See what they have to say and discuss it.

Questions for Discussion

- In what ways can you identify with any of the stories in *The Curiosity Collective*? What did you find intriguing or compelling?
- What are a few of the various sources of truth that people consider?
- If someone asked you to describe the story of the Bible, what would you say?
- Do you think it's possible that a book could be inspired by God? Why or why not?
- As quoted in the film, how might it be possible that the Bible is "the true human story that underlies our experience and our existence"?
- How relevant is the Bible to your everyday life?
- What might make you inclined to rely on the Bible as a source of truth or guidance in your life?

Wrap-Up

Thoughts to Share with the Group

To the best of your ability, summarize the main points of your group's discussion. Or, if you are more comfortable, use the text below as a launching pad for concluding the session.

The Bible is understood in a variety of ways: a book of myths, a violent story about an evil god, a book of wisdom about life, the living Word of God, a legal document that prescribes every area of life. But it's more than that. It also claims to be God-breathed. And through fulfilled prophecy, it has shown itself to be something beyond just human creation—indeed, perhaps even supernatural.

Isaiah 40:8 says, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." In other words, this writer seems to think that there is something special about this book—that it will outlast nature. Another passage states unequivocally that the Bible is "God-breathed." If any of this is true, then clearly the Bible is worth our sincere consideration.

Follow-Up Resources

As you wrap up this session, share or summarize these bullets:

- Acknowledge that with a topic as big as this, there is no way to answer the question comprehensively.
- Inform the group that you'll be sending some follow-up resources so people can continue to explore God.
- Thank people for joining the discussion, and invite them to stick around if they want to continue the conversation.

Explore More on the Bible

The following resources are designed for deeper exploration into each session's topic. If you are doing this series offline, you can email these to the group after each session for further exploration. Simply copy this section and paste it into an email.

Videos

- What Is the Bible?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/video-what-is-the-bible>)
- Is the Bible Relevant?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/is-the-bible-relevant-video>)

Articles

- Can I Trust the Bible?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/can-i-trust-the-bible>)
- Is the Bible Reliable?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/is-the-bible-reliable>)

Additional Content on the Bible

- <http://www.exploreGod.com/bible>

Daily Stream of Inspiration

- The 40 Most Popular Bible Verses
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/40-most-popular-bible-verses>)

Recommended Books

- *Historical Reliability of the Gospels* - Craig Blomberg
(<http://amzn.to/146tzQk>)
- *Yes or No?: Straight Answers to Tough Questions About Christianity* - Peter Kreeft
(<http://amzn.to/146tGv4>)

Scripture Focus

Isaiah 40:8 says, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."

In what ways might the Bible be "offering a better story, a story to help make sense of our crazy human existence"? If you keep a journal, take some time to note your responses to these questions there.



Can I Know God Personally?

Social Time

Take ten minutes for the group to catch up and reconnect over snacks and refreshments. Then, after gathering everyone into a comfortable circle, share something like the following Introduction.

Introduction

Sixty million people in the United States feel significantly lonely. As humans, we crave relationships. Why is that? The Bible teaches that we were created for relationship with God and with one another. On one hand, it's easy to know *about* God. But it's a whole other thing to *know* God. Watch the "Pulse of the World" video on knowing God and then discuss it.

Video 1 - *Pulse of the World: Knowing God*

This video is a 2.5-minute survey of many people's responses to this question.

Questions for Discussion

- Did you identify with anyone's expressed views in the film? If so, who and what resonated with you?
- Is it surprising that 75 percent of adults desire a close relationship with God? Why or why not?

Video 2 - *The Curiosity Collective: Can I Know God Personally?*

This is a 10-minute collection of subject matter experts discussing the question "Can I know God personally?" It displays the various questions, struggles, and perspectives of these individuals regarding this week's topic. See what they have to say and then discuss it.

Questions for Discussion

- In what ways can you identify with any of the stories in *The Curiosity Collective*? What did you find intriguing or compelling?
- Why might someone resist knowing God personally?
- Propaganda stated that "sin . . . has broken that covenant with [God]." What do you think he meant by that?
- In the video, Pete said, "[Jesus] made it possible for our sins to be removed because his blood was spotless; he was a perfect sacrifice for us." How could Jesus be perfect? What are the implications of that?
- How might one develop a personal relationship with God?
- In Matthew 7:7, the Bible says that if we seek, we will find; and if we knock, the door will be opened. What might this mean?

Wrap-Up

Thoughts to Share with the Group

To the best of your ability, summarize the main points of your group's discussion. Or, if you are more comfortable, use the text below as a launching pad for concluding the session.

The relational nature of humans points to the creator's desire to be in relationship with us. Yet, most people recognize a flaw, some sense of brokenness in our relationship with God. "The problem is not that we're bad; it's that we're dead!" one speaker noted. So what gives? Scripture describes a God who passionately pursues the people he created and makes it possible to fix our broken relationship. In the gospel of Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." In other words, God takes us, in all our brokenness, and offers to make us whole forever.

Follow-Up Resources

As you wrap up this session, share or summarize these bullets:

- Acknowledge that with a topic as big as this, there is no way to answer the question comprehensively.
- Inform the group that you'll be sending some follow-up resources so people can continue to explore God.
- Since it's the last formal Group Discussion, invite people to share responses to a few parting questions:
 - How have you grown in your spiritual journey over the past seven sessions?
 - How have others in the group affected you?

Some Notes:

Set the tone by sharing first. Be sure to include ways that your faith has been challenged, ignited, or stretched. You might thank members of the group for specific ways they have encouraged you. Remember to model using as few words as possible so as to maximize their impact and allow plenty of time for others to share.

You may want to refer to (or even print out copies of) the Explore God article titled "How Can I Know God?" (www.exploreGod.com/how-can-i-know-god) to review the basics of the gospel with your group.

Finally, it may be good to plan a social gathering after the group has finished. This is a great way to honor and continue to explore God.

Explore More on Knowing God

The following resources are designed for deeper exploration into each session's topic. If you are doing this series offline, you can email these to the group after each session for further exploration. Simply copy this section and paste it into an email.

Videos

- How Can We Know God?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/how-can-we-know-god-video>)
- Does God Speak to Us?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/does-god-speak-to-us-video>)

Articles

- How Can I Know God?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/how-can-i-know-god>)
- What Is the Gospel?
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/what-is-the-gospel>)

Additional Content on the Knowing God

- <http://www.exploreGod.com/knowing-god>

Recommended Books

- *Knowing God* - J. I. Packer
(<http://amzn.to/17d4UPO>)
- *Mere Christianity* - C.S. Lewis
(<http://amzn.to/13X200A>)

Daily Stream of Inspiration

- 40 Inspirational Readings for New Christians
(<http://www.exploreGod.com/40-inspirational-readings-for-new-christians>)

Scripture Focus

Matthew 11:28 says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

James 4:8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." In what ways are you craving a relationship with your creator?

What steps will you take to develop that relationship? If you keep a journal, take some time to note your responses to these questions there.