

## **Avoiding Discussion Pitfalls by Spence Shelton**

One of the greatest assets of small groups are their discussion times. They can be challenging, however, because discussions are entirely different animals than lectures or sermons. Everyone involved in a small group for any length of time can probably relate to these two common pitfalls (with cheesy titles) that a small group discussion can fall into:

### **Lectureville**

In lectureville, one person (usually the designated group leader) simply talks on the subject of the evening for 30 or 45 minutes. Maybe there is a Q & A at the end, but regardless the “discussion” is completely one sided. The problem here is that small groups are not designed to function like a lecture hall. They are designed as environments where people can interact with scripture and learn how it applies to their lives.

So why do groups fall into this pit? Sometimes it’s because the leader has a bunch of stuff he or she really wants to tell the group (which isn’t a bad desire) or because the group members have not opened their mouths when the leader tried a discussion format. As a group leader, I know I get discouraged when no one talks, so to avoid those silences I just talk more. This is a pitfall nonetheless, and one that both the group members and the group leader have to help the group avoid.

### **Opinion Land**

Opinion land is honestly where I have a tendency to fall many times. In opinion land, a small group leader tosses out a question like, “What does this passage mean?” Every group member then proceeds to give their opinion about the meaning. The rest of the group gives an obligatory head nod that silently says, “I’m not really following you and probably don’t agree, but hey that’s what you think.”

The problem here is that meaning comes from what the author intended, not from what we read into it. So a discussion that affirms, even through silence, that differing opinions are okay, isn’t a healthy discussion. On the other hand, a discussion that involves people bouncing opinions off one another in an attempt to reach the authorial intent can be quite productive. The point here is that we shouldn’t settle in opinion land when the truth is at stake!

### **Facilitation: the Key to Good Discussion**

In order to avoid lectureville and opinion land, the fine art of discussion facilitation is needed. If the small group leader facilitates the discussion, what occurs during the meeting is a guided investigation into how scriptural

truths apply to daily life. To use a college analogy, a group leader is more like a lab instructor or a TA than a lecturing professor. He or she makes sure the group has their minds and hands in the text, and is encouraging them to observe everything about it. He or she challenges them to consider the meaning and implication of what they are observing. Always be careful to watch out for detours to opinion land!

Then, like any good TA, the leader provides clarification and meaning of the text and connects the text to the larger picture of scripture (avoid roads to lectureville!). Is it helpful then for these facilitators to be gifted teachers? Sure it is. Is it necessary? Not at all. That's what the lecturing professor (pastor) is there for. The only necessary qualification for group leaders is a willingness to encourage and pray for their group members on a regular basis. While your TA probably didn't regularly pray for you, I trust you get the point.

Now, you may be self-analyzing right now. Don't do that for too long. Learning the art of facilitation comes with both time and training. A helpful way to get out of one of these pitfalls, or to find out if you are even in one, is to ask a fellow group member or your small group's pastor for feedback. Another set of eyes giving you an honest, grace-motivated evaluation of how you are doing is extremely valuable for you as a small group leader.