

...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...

Ephesians 4:2

The small group experience can be a real encouragement to the faith of group members as they take ownership of their walk with The Lord. This is a great thing. But because we're human, we bring our own intricacies to the mix, and those intricacies are multiplied by the number of people in the group, and how we interact with the material and each other. Most often, this adds a lovely flavor to the group experience, but from time to time you may come face to face with awkward situations that test your abilities to lead. It's ok - there isn't a leader out there that hasn't experienced the awkward moment. This sheet offers five examples, and some strategies for working your way through them.

2 quick points to keep in mind at all times

- More important than your feelings of awkwardness is your job as the leader to foster the health of the group experience for everyone in the group, including the one making it awkward. A gentle answer will teach the whole group.
- You are the leader, and people view you that way. Group members are learning from you with each interaction you have in each situation, awkward or not.

handling



moments

Situation #1 - Someone's comments veer way off topic

Example: "Speaking of Jesus's crucifixion week, what do you think about Christians practicing Lent? I mean, I have so many friends who do, and I just don't know what I think about it. Who here gives up something for Lent?"

- You can affirm their desire and their curiosity.
- You can model that Bible study should be a safe place to bring your questions.
- You can say...
 - "You know, I don't think you are the only one who has questions about that topic. I know our goal in our study is to think biblically about all of life, so why don't we open things up to some questions after we're done with this evening's topic."
 - "Good questions often lead to new lines of inquiry. For the purposes of this lesson however, I'm going to ask that we finish the topic before moving into a topic [restate the original question]."

Situation #2 - Someone uses personal experience to justify a theological point

Example: "I had an actively gay pastor when I was a teenager, and he was a wonderful person who taught me so much about the Bible. I don't understand how we can say that active homosexuals shouldn't be pastors!"

- Affirm them without affirming the idea - "Thank you for sharing that experience with us."
- Acknowledge their experience - "It sounds like this experience was helpful in your spiritual formation."
- If you can, relate - "I've had circumstances like this in my own life."
- Speak truth in love - "No matter how compelling our experience is, effectiveness and sincerity can never be the authority for what we do; that authority is found in..."
- Point them to God's character - "I'm grateful that the Lord in his sovereign wisdom and kindness directs our spiritual formation for our good."
- Point them to Scripture - "We must remember that we don't get to base our obedience on our experience but have to always base it on the Word of God."

Depending on the level of your relationship with the individual/group you may not need to go through each item.

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Situation #3 - Someone makes a dogmatic statement about something that may be a gray area

Example: "I can't understand all these people getting tattoos these days. Christians should never get tattoos!"

Some things to gently point out...

- Our salvation is based not on what we do, but in whom we put our faith
- What we do falls under the daily progress of salvation,
- we're all at different points along that process
- Let's work to point the gospel at our own hearts,
- this will help us avoid making broad, generalizations or judgments of others."

Occasionally it might do to engage the actual comment if you think it would be helpful for the group. You might say something along the lines of...

- "You seem to feel very strongly about this topic. My guess is that there is a story behind your words. I look forward to hearing more about your story and getting to know you better."

Situation #4 - Someone makes comments too frequently or speaks for too long, taking up a huge amount of the discussion time.

If the problem is habitual, try...

- sitting next to the person.
- If the talker is to your left, begin the next conversation by looking to your right and saying, "You know, Megan, I would love to hear your thoughts on this question."
- remind the whole group that we want to hear from everyone:

You can say something like...

- "If we haven't heard much from you, please speak up! And if you've already answered several questions, hold off on a few so that everyone has a chance to speak."

You can also try

- Telling the group that they should each plan on answering a certain number of questions each week, hopefully encouraging the quieter ones to speak up and the overtalkers to hold back.

If the problem persists, have a private conversation and..

- explain that, while I value her participation, she is preventing others from participating,
- ask them to help you leave space for quieter ones to participate.

Situation #5 - Someone directly challenges or questions your teaching in the middle of the session.

- Such Challenges may be used to discredit the teacher or to show what the challenger thinks they know
- It may be effective to
 - not allow the person to put you on the spot with unrelated questions
 - turn the question back to them
- You could say...
 - "You seem to have something you would like to contribute to this topic."
 - This answer gives the person the space to be heard and gives you the final word to make any necessary corrections before moving on with your lesson.
 - "I appreciate how you are seeking to interact with the text. Maybe we could get together afterward to sit down and work it through together."
- Remember...
 - A posture of humility is important and humility might be the most important lesson your group learns that day.
 - If you are in the wrong because you have misspoken or misquoted a verse, you can own it publicly. A humble, winsome response will help create an environment where errors can be corrected and group members can truly be disciplined.

Some final things to remember

- You are the leader...
 - So don't feel awkward or shy about leading
 - Step in with gentle firmness where you need to, and do so with the confidence that says, "it is my place to do this, so here I am doing it."
- Do your best to keep short accounts...
 - between you and group members
 - between other group members

This will help retain group members and it will help avoid festering
- If an offense happens because a judgmental or critical comment is directed at a group member, then the leader should seek the peace by offering to bring people together to seek understanding and reconciliation.
- I am here to help if you need it.

Much of the information in this article is taken from, "How to Handle Awkward Moments in Bible Study", found on thegospelcoalition.org. The article was co-written by Megan Hill, Courtney Doctor, Vanessa Hawkins, Karen Hodge