

Taming Talker Trudy ... And Other Perturbing Personalities In Your Bible Study

Those group members with trying temperaments have a unique contribution to make.

by Neal F. McBride *Discipleship Journal* Issue #43 January/February 1988

"It's frustrating, Barbara," Andy lamented, "everyone in the Bible study really likes Trudy, but she talks too much. She never gives anyone else a chance to say anything. You're the group leader, will you talk to her?"

Barbara knew Andy was right.

"Sure," Barbara replied with a bit of uncertainty in her voice, "Trudy and Bob are coming over for dinner Saturday. I'll talk with her then."

Do you have a Trudy in your Bible study group? Or is there someone else whose behavior in your meetings causes anything from minor annoyance to outright disruption?

We're all unique. Each of us brings different conscious and unconscious expectations to a Bible study group. These expectations cause us to act and react differently within the group process. An alert leader will be prepared to deal with a diversity of expectations and the resulting behavior. (See sidebar.)

Let me introduce you to Talker Trudy and several other "extreme" group members. Each of the persons you'll meet displays an excessive behavior pattern . . . behavior reflective of different expectations regarding group participation. But different personalities don't have to hinder your group. Kept under control, the varied emphases brought in by group members can actually enhance the benefits you get from group Bible study. Here's how to let differences work for you.

Talker Trudy.

Our friend Trudy could easily earn the nickname "motor-mouth." Much of what she says is worthwhile, but it often gets lost in a constant stream of words. Trudy answers every question and has an opinion on every topic. Some of her fellow group members suspect she talks just to hear herself talk.

I identify with Trudy. I'm also a talker. Yet, I'm glad that someone once took me aside and pointed out my tendency to talk too much. You may have to do the same thing if you have a Trudy in your group.

How can a Bible study group benefit from a talkative member? One idea is to have her serve as the group "summarizer." Give her the opportunity several times during the course of a study session to summarize what has taken place up to that point. This responsibility will give her the opportunity to talk, while at the same time demanding that she develop good listening skills.

Listener Larry.

Not much of a talker, Larry just wants to listen to what the others have to say. Mentally, he is actively involved. And on the rare occasion when he does speak, his comments are thoughtful and well stated. Larry wants other group members to accept his quiet participation.

A lot of people are like Larry. In fact, many of us start out as listeners until we feel accepted and comfortable with the other group members.

As a group leader, remember that good group participation doesn't always mean active verbal participation. Adults have the right to participate at a level with which they feel comfortable, remaining silent if they choose to do so. Group leaders need to provide the atmosphere and opportunity for verbal involvement without demanding it.

Since "Larrys" are good listeners, I find it beneficial to ask them to serve as group sounding boards. At the end of a discussion we turn to a "Larry" and ask him to summarize what he has heard us say. This provides valuable feedback and serves as a means of reviewing the main points of the study for that particular evening. Using Larry to provide a session review, coupled with Talker Trudy's periodic summaries, facilitates good group process. Perhaps you could use the "Larry" in your group in a similar manner.

Academic Ann.

Next meet Ann. She's an intellectual giant who takes great pleasure in "digging" into Scripture. Her expectations for group Bible study are not met unless every word in the Bible passage is carefully analyzed . . . preferably in the original language. Interpreting the passage is Ann's goal, its application is of secondary interest.

People like Ann keep groups from falling into the "sharing ignorance" trap. If properly utilized, Ann can be instrumental in helping her group understand deeper meaning in a passage than they could have from just a casual reading.

Ask your Ann to prepare beforehand a careful analysis of the passage you will be studying. Then give her ten minutes or so at the beginning of the study to present her findings. Encourage her to focus on a clearly presented interpretation of the passage and not get sidetracked examining interesting but secondary issues. Good interpretation is the correct path to valid application.

Application Alex.

"How does it apply to me?" is Alex's constant question. Alex is the opposite of Academic Ann. He wants to quickly "experience the text" and draw out the application. Unfortunately, too often Alex jumps to an application before securing a good understanding of the meaning of the passage. And at times, like all of us, Alex intellectualizes the application without actually implementing it in his own life.

Given Alex's bent toward practical application, you can channel his expectations into a more productive level of group involvement. After talking with him and helping him see the importance of both interpretation and application, designate Alex to serve as the group's "application monitor." Have him suggest several specific ways the passage can be individually and corporately applied. Allow other group members to add to his suggestions. Record the ideas. During the week, have Alex call each member and in a non-threatening fashion encourage them in their application attempts. At the subsequent meeting, ask him to co-lead the group for a brief period in which study members share the joys and battles of application.

Philosopher Phil.

Theology and philosophy are Phil's passions. He likes the group to focus on "heavy" issues. A good Bible study, according to Phil, is one that revolves around the leader lecturing on the intricacies of the passage. Group discussion is OK—if kept to a minimum—but he would rather debate philosophical issues with the leader.

Not everyone enjoys or is capable of working on an abstract level. Phil, however, thrives on complex intellectual challenges. And when asked, he has a real knack for explaining difficult concepts in plain language.

Phil can be used as a group resource in two ways. First, call on him (having given him advance notice) to explain a difficult concept or doctrine introduced in the passage you are studying. Permit him enough time to adequately clarify the issue. In some instances, when time is scarce, you may ask him to prepare a brief handout rather than speaking.

A second way to utilize Phil is to stage a debate. Begin the study with Phil defending one position and you, the group leader, another. Depending on the subject, it may be interesting to not tell the other group members what is happening until after the debate. Then, explain what was happening and proceed with the study.

Social Sidney.

Life of the party, that's Sid. He wants to "lighten up" the sessions and have some fun. Sid views the Bible study as an opportunity to be with people, a context to meet his need for social involvement—even though he may not consciously recognize the fact. It seems like Sid puts up with the actual Bible study in order to be with people he likes. His clever and witty remarks help relieve tension at times, but on other occasions they're ill-timed and disruptive.

Don't get the wrong idea, Sid isn't obnoxious. He just doesn't enjoy academically oriented activities and he views group Bible study as fitting into this category. His primary motivation for being involved in the group comes from his outgoing, social nature. If someone like Sid is in your group, why not tap his personal strengths? Ask him to plan several social get-togethers for your group. Encourage him to channel his energy into constructive activities beneficial to all.

Forced Frank.

Frank doesn't have any expectations—he would rather not even be there! If the truth be known, he attends only because he feels forced to. The pressure to attend may come from his demanding spouse, a psychological need to be accepted, some type of ulterior motive, or some other person or situation. There in body but not mind or soul, Frank just wants to be left alone.

Fortunately, not too many Franks exist. Most adults attending small group Bible studies do so of their own free will. But, on occasion a Frank will show up. Then what do you do? First, avoid forcing him to participate. Hold back on calling for his opinion or in any way putting him on the spot. Allow him to become involved at his own pace.

Second, the best way ultimately to make Frank a true group member is found outside the Bible study sessions. One or two of the others need to befriend him and seek to relate to him on a one-on-one basis. This person-to-person strategy offers far better results than a program-to-program approach.

Most likely you don't have anyone in your group who precisely fits the description of the individuals you've just met. Let's hope not! But, you may encounter other types of difficult individuals not mentioned here. Remember that my suggestions for dealing with the people I presented have been very general. Every situation, every individual will need to be treated as a unique case and handled accordingly.

Preacher Patrick.

Every Bible study is Patrick's pulpit. He eagerly anticipates each meeting. Long hours are spent preparing. And while not the official group leader, frequently dominates the discussion (if he can out-talk Talker Trudy).

Pat is well-meaning, but gets on the other members' nerves. He wants to shield his friends from the agony he experienced in his tempestuous past. Unfortunately, his strong admonitions tend to go a bit overboard.

Given time and the proper training, individuals like Pat can become excellent group leaders. Pat first needs to be made aware of his overzealous attitude and actions. Next, he should be offered the opportunity to participate in group leadership training while serving under the guidance of an experienced leader. When he has developed the needed skills, encourage him to assume the leadership of his own Bible study.

Counselor Carol and Counselee Clara.

Carol sees the Bible study sessions through the eyes of a counselor. She tends to "psychologize" every topic, every discussion. Group members are often treated like clients who are in desperate need of her counsel.

Rather than wanting to help group members, Carol's sister, Clara, yearns to have the group meet her emotional needs. She wants the Bible study to serve as a therapy session. Clara desperately hopes the group will study biblical passages related to one of her many problems.

Carol and Clara present quite a challenge. Carol's case is the more hopeful, if she can be helped to see that her expectations for the group are not appropriate. Her behavior suggests that she may possess the spiritual gifts of helps or exhortation. If this is the case, after talking with her, help her find a ministry where she can exercise her gifts. This needed outlet will satisfy her God-given inclinations and should facilitate her "normal" involvement in the Bible study.

Clara's continuing participation in the Bible study is questionable when her problems go beyond life's normal struggles. She may need professional help. The group should not be put in the position of having to deal with or solve her problems. She needs to be referred to a trained individual capable of giving her the assistance she needs. But don't abandon her. The Bible study members should support her through the process.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

But wait—can you see *yourself* in any of the people described here? It's easy to fault other people's expectations and group behavior. However, you can't criticize others when your own participation skills leave much to be desired. So, what can you do to become a competent Bible study group member?

First, *develop the right attitude*. Spend ample time in prayer asking God to give you an excitement for realizing the benefits inherent in small group Bible studies. Seek to gain a "heavenly perspective"—a healthy attitude toward the people, process, and potential. Pray, pray, pray!

Second, *come prepared to participate*. If you're the leader, give sufficient time to preparing both the content and format of the study. If you're a group member, study the passage beforehand and come prepared to make relevant contributions.

Third, *be patient with yourself and the other group members*. Even though all of your group members may be Christians, they may not be skilled in studying Scripture or in working in groups. All good things take time, productive group studies are no exception.

Finally, *continually remain sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit* in helping your group understand and apply Scripture to your individual and corporate lives. Remaining open to His guidance isn't an option, it is a necessity if we are to truly benefit from studying God's Word.

A HAPPY ENDING

Early Saturday evening, Barbara, Trudy, and their husbands had gathered for dinner. The men were outside tending the barbecue. It was an opportune time for Barbara and Trudy to talk.

Barbara brought up the topic of their Bible study group and expressed how thankful she was for the good relationships that existed among the members. Trudy was in hearty agreement.

"Trudy," Barbara continued, "our Bible study group is really glad to have you as a member. We appreciate your insight and ability to help us understand Scripture. However, do you realize your enthusiastic participation is blocking other group members' ability to take part . . . because you do most of the talking?"

"No, I didn't realize I was hogging the discussions," Trudy responded, a bit startled. "But now that you mention it . . . you're right, I do talk a lot. Thanks for your honesty. I'll watch it in the future."

And the Bible study group lived happily ever after (with only an infrequent reminder to Trudy).