Heaven Help Our Church!

Study Guide

For Classroom or Small Group Use

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-A FEW NOTES TO CLASSROOM AND SMALL GROUP LEADERS-

* The first thing you’re going to notice is that I’ve given you too many questions – more than any group I know of would want to deal with. I strongly recommend that the leader take a good look at all the questions I’ve offered for each chapter while thinking and praying about what his/her group needs most. You might want to rank the questions in order of importance with some notes in the margin – you could give them an “A” a “B” a “C” a “D” or even (but I hope not) an “F.” Then choose the questions which you think will “work” for your group, keep a few as “backup” questions to use if time allows, and disregard others entirely. Don’t be perfectionistic about this: you’ll never be able to deal with all of them, nor will you need to.
* I did not give you discussion questions for the bonus chapters. The chapters vary widely in their subject matter, so much so that I wouldn’t anticipate that every small group or class would want to study all of them. Choose the chapters (if any) that apply to your situation and use the discussion questions that are in the book – or come up with your own.
* If a question doesn’t make any sense at all I want to know about it. Contact me at churchwhisperer@gmail.com.
* Use good group leadership skills. You are responsible for the learning process. This means that you need to keep the group on track and try to guide them to see the truth without *telling* them any more than you have to. This means that like a good “native” hunting or fishing guide, you take your group members to all the right places so they can see the truth for themselves. You also steer them away from danger as often as necessary so that your group members aren’t injured in the process.
* In the Bible, learning a truth means learning to obey it so push, push, push for life application. If you come up with a “life-application” question that’s better than anything I’ve provided, send it to me!
* Regarding the subject of prayer, if you’ve read “Heaven Help Our Church!” you can guess that I’m going to say, “pray like crazy” for the folks in your group. I don’t think you can overdo prayer for your group members.
* Depending on the condition of your church and what you might be going through right now, you may need to set many (or few) guidelines regarding what can and cannot be shared in your group. A book that has so much to say about gossip should be the occasion for small groups to do lots of gossip!

-INTRODUCTION-

**Heaven Help Our Church!**

1. Start by reading the chapter in the book. If you’ve already read it, re-read it quickly or review the material which you marked up the first time through (it’s okay to mark up your book. Honest!).
2. Have you ever felt like Judy, from pages 1-2? Can you (discreetly) tell us about it?
3. Brian’s first “basic truth” (page 3, 2nd full paragraph) was that “…if you are a group of people who have repented and trusted Christ as your Savior from sin, *God REALLY loves your church.* The book cited Ephesians 5:25-30 to back up this claim. Where else does the Bible teach that God loves the church (or churches)?
4. Besides the verses/passages your group is able to come up with, can you think of some reasons *why* God would love the church?
5. How do you think God feels about church attendees when they are mired in conflict with each other? (You might want to see Hebrews 12:1-11.)
6. The second “basic truth” (page 4, 2nd paragraph) is that “…Christ wants to make your congregation vibrant, holy, powerful, glorifying to Himself and closer to Himself than it has ever been.” Share with your group verses or passages of the Bible that teach this truth:
7. Your group might enjoy reading one or more of the following passages that describe the local church *at its best.* What was so special about the churches described in the following passages?
* Acts 2:40-47 –
* Romans 15:5-7 –
* Galatians 4:12-16 –
* Colossians 1:1-8 –
* I Thessalonians chapter one –

8. Brian’s third truth is that “…revitalization really does happen. There are vibrant, joyful, powerful churches in America (and I imagine in the rest of the world) which were, at one time, almost dead and written off as hopeless by some.” Can you tell your group about a church you are aware of that experienced real revitalization?

9. Daniel Buttry, in his book *Bringing Your Church Back To Life* says that churches which have a “survival mentality” (holding on for dear life and not daring to do anything new) need a fresh new vision of God Himself. What is there about God Himself that would give you hope for the future of your congregation?

10. Brian’s fourth “basic truth” is that God cares about you and your feelings even if your behavior could stand some improvement.” What is it about God that would cause Him to care a great deal about His “naughty” children?

11. Have you ever been in a situation (or are you in one now?) where God seemed to be blessing the very people that you would think He would be punishing (like the folks on the other side of a church split)? Why do you think God might be doing this?

12. Re-read the paragraph at the bottom of page 5. Why is it unrealistic to think about our church troubles in black/white or good guy/bad guy terms?

13. If anyone in your group is struggling with malice (wanting bad things to happen to people) you might want to carefully read Romans 12:9-21 or Ephesians 4:25-5:2. Why do we sometimes feel like we have to make sure that the “bad guys” get punished? How can we – as Christians - get rid of the feelings of malice that we sometimes feel towards folks on “the other side” of a conflict?

14. The chapter’s fifth “basic truth” is that “whatever happens, God will give you the grace to do right, glorify Him and pillow your head at night with a clean conscience, whatever anybody else does.” What resources does God give us to enable us to do right and act wisely in a difficult situation? (You might want to re-read the last paragraph on page 6.)

15. Is there some behavior which you need to change right now? If so, face the truth, be brave, claim the promise of I John 1:9, thank God for His forgiveness of you and move forward in your life. “Heaven” really does want to help your church and the God of heaven wants to use *you* in the process.

-CHAPTER ONE-

**Get The Big Picture**

1. Start by reading the chapter in the book. If you’ve already read it, re-read it quickly or review the material which you marked up the first time through.
2. Page 9 has one Bible verse and two quotations. If any of these “resonated” with you, read it to the group and tell them why you found it to be striking.
3. How would *you* try to answer Judy’s question (end of the large paragraph at the top of page 10)?
4. Looking at what Brian calls the “really big picture,” what’s *really* going on – behind the scenes – when we struggle to get along as churches? (Draw upon what the book says or what you already know from Scripture.)
5. Tell why you agree or disagree with the author on the subject of “winning” the conflict in your church (pages 11 & 12, plus the full paragraph on page 18):
6. How is the small church unique (pages 12 & 13)? Do you agree or disagree? Can you tell how you’ve experienced the strengths and weaknesses of the small church?
7. Tell your group about the conflict scenario (pages 13-18) that was most striking to you. Can you think of a way or way in which the problem in this scenario might have been resolved, to God’s glory?
8. Do you see your church following one of the common conflict scenarios from this chapter? How is your situation like or unlike the scenario that best fits your congregation right now?
9. Have you ever seen a “cats of Kilkenny” situation where two groups of Christians or two Christian individuals seriously hurt each other?
10. Can you tell your group about a church which faced one of these scenarios and had a God-glorifying “happy ending”?

11. Read II Corinthians 2:1-11 as a group. What would the Apostle Paul say about the importance of handling our church problems in God’s way?

-CHAPTER TWO-

**Determine To Do Right**

1. Read or re-read the chapter before your group gets together. Why is it so important for each of us to determine before God that we are going to “do right, if the stars fall,” *before* we find ourselves “in the thick” of a difficult situation?
2. Do you think that the folks in the story at the beginning of the chapter could have

handled their problematic new pastor in a way which would have been more glorifying to God? What could they have done differently?

1. Why do you think “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) is so hard?
2. Do you agree with the author that some churches are “junk churches”? (See the top of page 22) Why or why not?
3. How is the Dr. Dan Greene definition of responsibility freeing or challenging for you? (Middle of page 22)
4. Tell your group why you agree or disagree with Brian’s list (pp. 23 & 24) of things we can’t do if we’re going to keep a clean conscience.
5. Read I Corinthians 10:31 and Philippians 1:20 as a group. Do you really believe that you can do right and glorify God no matter what you’re going through? What kind of resources does God give us so we can do right?
6. The author has a descriptive list on pages 24 and 25 of the right kind of person to seek counsel from in a time of trouble. What really “stood out” for you from this list? Can you tell your group about a time when you received help from the right kind of person?
7. Why is it so important to protect our children from our church “horror stories”?
8. For private reflection: If you are in a time of trouble in your church right now and have already done things which you regret, how should you deal with them now? Do you need to merely confess your sin and claim your forgiveness (I John 1:9) or do you need to ask someone for forgiveness?
9. In your situation, what will “doing right” look like?

12. Do you have any counselors who fit the description of pages 24 and 25 whom

you can turn to to help you through a difficult time?

-CHAPTER THREE-

**Determine To Grow**

1. Read or re-read the chapter before your group gets together. Have you ever known somebody like Granny June? Can you tell your group about her?
2. What is it about some people (like Granny June) that makes them able or willing to keep on growing in the midst of situations that cause so many people to drop out or stop growing?
3. Brian’s first suggestion is to “run to God” in your time of difficulty. If you’ve run *to* God in a time of difficulty, tell your group about it. If you’ve run *away* from God in a time of difficulty, and you are able to talk about it, tell your group about your experience, and how God brought you back to Himself.
4. The top of page 29 mentions the losses we suffer during a difficult time in a

church. Besides those listed by the author, have you suffered *other* losses you can tell your group about?

1. If you have learned how to *rejoice in the Lord* - when you can’t rejoice in anything else – tell your group *how you learned* this important lesson and how you practice rejoicing in the Lord today.
2. From page 30 (and your own life experiences), *how do we benefit* from staying in

the tumbler and *what do we lose* by jumping out of it?

1. Do you agree/disagree with the admonition (pp. 30-31) to keep serving (in your area of spiritual giftedness) even while going through a tough time in your church?
2. Do you agree with the concept, implied on the top of page 31, that Christians can shrink back in their level of spiritual maturity? Tell why or why not.
3. From the large paragraph on page 31, or from your own experience, what is the value of listening to your opponents/critics?
4. Again, from the book OR from your own experience, what is so important about forgiving those who have hurt you?
5. What does the author think about confrontation of a brother/sister in Christ to “get something off your chest”? Tell why you agree or disagree.
6. Do you agree with the statement from page 33 that “God wants us to do everything we can do to have as good a relationship as possible with as many persons as possible in our church”?
7. What does Brian say (page 33) about the degree to which (and the means by which) we can influence our feelings? Tell why you agree or disagree.
8. How does the author define/describe forgiveness? Tell why you agree or disagree.
9. What are the consequences of not forgiving (p. 34)? Can you think of others?
10. What’s the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation (p. 35) and to what degree does God hold us accountable for practicing each?

17. What suggestion from this chapter do you need to follow right now?

-CHAPTER FOUR-

**Pray Like Crazy**

1. Read or re-read the chapter. Tell your group about Pastor Dee Duke’s experience with prayer as a “last resort” to change his church.
2. How does our author view serious, heart-felt prayer for our churches? In his view, is it an obligation, an opportunity, the job of the pastor or something else altogether? Tell why you agree or disagree with his viewpoint.

3. Summarize and discuss what Brian says in pp. 39-41 about prayer:

Pray desperately –

Pray submissively –

Pray discretely –

Pray grandly –

4. List and discuss the specific requests of Jesus for the Church in John 17 (his “high

 priestly” prayer, prayed shortly before He was arrested):

1. How could the prayers of the Apostle Paul for the Philippian Christians (Philippians 1:9-11) be adapted into prayers for your church?
2. How could the specific requests of the “Lord’s prayer” (Matthew 6:9-13) be prayed for your church?
3. How could the prayer requests of the Apostle Paul be adapted into prayers for your church?
* Romans 15:30-32 –
* Ephesians 6:18-20 –
* Colossians 4:2-4 –
1. Small group leaders: You may want to have your group pray their own prayers based on items 4, 5, 6 or 7 above.
2. On a scale of 1-10, how desperate are you to see your church united, joyful and powerful, for His glory?
3. Without laying a “guilt trip” on your pastor, is there a way in which you and others might be able to increase the amount of “desperate prayer” being prayed by and for your church?

-CHAPTER FIVE-

**Understand Why Good People Do Bad Things**

1. Read or re-read the chapter. What could you/would you say to folks like the couple in the opening story - who were so turned off by the behavior of church members that they intended to stay away from “the church” forever?
2. The first reason our author cites for good people doing bad things is deliberate defiance. Do you agree or disagree with the statement (at the end of the last full paragraph on page 45) that “…a Christian…is capable of doing just about anything that the unbeliever is capable of doing, though not on an ongoing basis”? Try to support your answer with Scripture.
3. Brian lists three ways (pp. 45 & 46) in which we should respond to the deliberately defiant Christian. What are they and do you agree?
4. *What* do you think Brian meant by not being “…weak, passive or defeatist in the face of such sin” and *why* is he saying we must not respond in these ways?
5. Can you/will you tell your group about a time when you were “self-reliant and weak,” or – by the grace of God – Christ-reliant and strong?
6. Why does our author believe in the value of church fellowships/denominations and what’s the connection with being “self-reliant and weak”?
7. Do you agree with the author’s observations on page 48 about the “ability” of Christians to do bad things with bad motives, good things with bad motives, etc.? Explain your answer.
8. Re-tell in your own words the Biblical stories with which the author illustrates his belief that “good people sometimes do bad things out of cowardice, compromise or worldliness.”
9. According to the author, how does God respond to our failures (page 51) and what are the implications for how *we* should respond?
10. Have you had a time in your life when you were deeply discouraged by the bad behavior of good people? Without telling what shouldn’t be shared in your group, can you share your experience?
11. Of the four reasons cited in this chapter for bad behavior by good people, which do you think is the most common?
12. For a private response: Is there someone that God wants you to forgive in light of what you’ve learned in this chapter?

-CHAPTER SIX-

**Understand More Reasons Why Good People Do Bad Things**

1. Read or re-read the chapter. In your view, what was so destructive about “Pastor Ron’s” behavior (in the opening story)?
2. To see the immaturity of the Corinthian Christians “first-hand,” read and discuss one or more of the following passages:

I Corinthians 1:10-17 –

I Corinthians 3:1-4 –

I Corinthians 4:1-7 –

I Corinthians 5 –

I Corinthians 6 –

I Corinthians 11:17-34 –

3. In the passage or passages you read, what do you find most shocking? Is there

 some way in which some of this is *actually* *encouraging?*

4. Do you agree with Brian’s statement from page 55 that the Corinthians were responsible for their own immaturity? Does this view seem to be in agreement with the viewpoint of the Apostle Paul? What excuses would we be likely to make today for the immaturity of the Corinthians?

5. Brian talks about “confusing unity with uniformity” beginning on page 56. Why do you think we have such a hard time discerning the difference between the two and coming up with the right ways to create real unity?

6. To dig deeper into the subject of unity vs. uniformity on moral issues, your group may want to carefully read Romans 14:1 – 15:7. You can use these questions and comments along the way to help with your understanding:

* What is Paul’s first illustration of an issue on which Christians disagreed (a disputable matter) in his day? (vss. 1 & 2)
* How are the two men supposed to deal with their difference? (vss. 3 & 4)
* “And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” probably means that no Christian is going to be ruined, to have his Christian life destroyed by his participation in one of these “disputable matters.” Obviously there are things we can get involved in which can destroy our lives, but these “disputable” issues are not among them.
* What is Paul’s second illustration of an issue on which Christians disagreed in his day? (vs. 5)
* In light of vss. 22 & 23, what do you think the phrase “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (vs. 5b) means?
* Paul talks about giving thanks as we eat “to the Lord” or we don’t eat “to the Lord.” What about an activity for which we couldn’t possibly give thanks?
* What is Paul’s “point” in the vss. (9-12) about the judgment seat of Christ?
* Why might we want to refrain from doing something which we would be comfortable before God with doing? (vss. 13ff)
* Do you think that Paul would want us to give in to the *bully,* the man or woman who could not be persuaded to violate his conscience by your example, but would definitely criticize you for your participation?
* What kinds of attitudes should we have toward the genuinely weak Christian (one who is unsure of himself and apt to violate his own conscience by following your example)?
* Notice the connection between 14:1 and 15:7. Now summarize this passage.

7. Review with your group the principles at the bottom of page 57 and the top

 of page 58. Which one is new or the most meaningful to you at this time? Why?

1. Re-read the statements from the Apostle Paul from II Timothy on page 58. What would Paul say we *should* and *shouldn’t* argue about?
2. Discuss the eventual “happy ending” which resulted from the “split” between Paul and Barnabas (discussed on pp. 59 & 60):
3. What resources has God given us so that we don’t have to react sinfully?

11. You may want to discuss the questions on page 63.

-CHAPTER SEVEN-

**Understand The Challenge Of Conflict**

1. Read or re-read the chapter. How common do you think Pastor Tom’s weakness (dealing with conflict) is among pastors and board members?
2. Why is conflict such a “scary subject,” as Brian mentions on the top of page 67?
3. Here’s the definition from our chapter: “Conflict means that two or more individuals find themselves in disagreement over a course of action.” Do you agree with the author’s proposition that “conflict is an inevitable challenge, but it is not a curse”?
4. Why do you think it’s so hard to *get good at dealing with conflict*, as our author suggests we should do?
5. Brian describes his own special challenge with conflict: growing up in an environment where it simply wasn’t allowed. If you have a special challenge of your own that you are able to talk about, share this with the group.
6. What is the author’s counsel regarding people who grew up in extremely dysfunctional homes (p. 69)? Tell why you agree or disagree.

7. Why is it so hard to separate “defensiveness from legitimate outrage”? (p. 70)

1. Page 71 has a list of ways in which we can affirm the value of our opponents. Tell us about any item from the list which you found to be particularly striking.
2. Tell us about someone you know who has responded with grace to a personal attack.
3. Open the Word!
* Read through I Peter, looking for what it says about responding to persecution.
* What counsel is given in Romans 12:9-21 that can help us in dealing with conflict?
* What counsel is given in Ephesians 4:17-5:2 that can help us in dealing with conflict?
1. What does the author say (4th paragraph on p. 72) about not taking yourself so seriously?
2. Brian says that seeing “beyond our own desires to discern God’s desires” is a challenge. Why is this true? From your experience, how can we meet this challenge and sort out selfish desires from godly desires?
3. From the book (p. 74) or your own experiences, how can we overcome the difficulty of separating “presenting problems” from “real problems”?
4. Do you have any additional illustrations – besides those on pp. 74 & 75 - of “seeing timely problems with a timeless perspective”?
5. Read Acts 6:1-7 and then talk about what the passage teaches us about reaching win/win solutions.
6. You may want to discuss questions 1-3 from page 77 and/or #6 from page 78.

-CHAPTER EIGHT-

**Take Careful Action**

1. Read or re-read the chapter. Having read this chapter, what do you think could have or should have been done in the “Pastor Bob” situation on pp. 79-81?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the author’s statement (bottom of 81) that

“…there are times when it can be downright sinful to ‘just pray’ when there are prayer-anointed actions which we should be taking as well”? Explain your answer.

1. According to I Thessalonians 5:12,13 (at the beginning of the chapter) and Hebrews 13:17 (in the second full paragraph on p. 82) why is “good followership” so important?
2. Brian clearly believes that church leaders have been given a significant degree of authority which God expects them to use in protecting and leading His sheep (believers in Christ). Did any of the items from the list of duties on page 83 surprise you? Why? (You may want to read Acts 20:25-31 and/or I Peter 5:1-4 together as a group.)
3. Do you think it’s really “giving grace” to *not* do some of these things? Can you think of Scripture which supports the view that each of these is a “duty” for church leaders?
4. Which of the “top ten excuses for our gossip” have you heard most often? Which have been used by you? (The author’s definition of gossip is *saying negative things about a person which the hearer does not need to hear.*)
5. Have you used the “everlasting gossip-stopper” yet? Did it work? Practice it right now with your group!
6. The author says you should “use your God-given influence” (pp. 87 & 88) to help make your church healthier. Can you tell your group about a “normal lay person” who used his or her unofficial influence to help a troubled situation?
7. From the book, your own experience or your knowledge of Scripture, why is it so important to “listen to counsel and encourage others to do the same”?
8. What did Brian say about congregational meetings (pp. 89 & 90) that got your attention – either because you liked it or didn’t like it? Explain your answer.
9. On your own, write down an answer to question #2 on page 91 or question #6 on page 92.

-CHAPTER NINE-

**Care Enough To Confront**

1. Read or re-read the chapter. Tell the group about why the church in the opening story didn’t seem to have any highly respected potential leaders.
2. Why is “Bible-style” loving confrontation sometimes a genuinely loving thing to do? (You might need to look at the large paragraph in the middle of page 95, the two paragraphs on the top of page 96 or the verses at the beginning of the chapter.)
3. On pp. 96 & 97 Brian gives four occasions for loving confrontation. If you’re not sure about how these differ from each other, read the Scripture cited in the book and talk about this as a group.
4. What struck you most from the section on “how to do loving confrontation” (pp. 97-100)?
5. Why do you think it is problematic (results in a very poor outcome) when we claim to know our friend’s motives for his/her poor behavior? (See pp. 98 & 99)
6. How does Brian’s counsel in this section differ from the teachings on this subject you’ve heard from “secular” sources?
7. If you can do so without gossiping, tell your group about a “confrontation” you were involved in, either as the “confronter” or the person confronted. Was there a good outcome? Why or why not?
8. You may want to discuss question #4 on page 101.

9. Prayerfully work on question #5 (page 101) on your own.

-CHAPTER TEN-

**Say Good-Bye With Grace**

1. Read or re-read the chapter. From what Brian says, OR your own experiences, why do you think the whole phenomenon of church members “switching churches” is so difficult for so many of us?
2. Again, from the book OR your own experiences/observations, why do you think that some Christians find this so much harder to deal with than others?
3. From your own experience, what are the various ways we can respond when we learn that someone is leaving our church? Which of these options are good and helpful?
4. The quote from Gordon MacDonald’s *Who Stole My Church* (on page 106) is about pastors, but have *you* ever felt like these leaders who have “…given their hearts away piece by piece until one day there was nothing more left to give…”? Tell your group what this did to you. Did you get over it? How?
5. If you are now or have been a part of a very small church (under 100 on a Sunday morning), tell your group what it’s like to lose members from a congregation of that size.
6. Talk about the reasons why church members leave (from pp. 107-109). Which do you think is most common? Can you think of additional reasons why people change churches?
7. Tell why you agree or disagree with the author on the subject of trying to persuade people to not leave their churches. What has been your personal experience with someone trying to persuade you to not leave a church or your own efforts to try to dissuade someone else from leaving a church?
8. Have any of the “copying strategies” from pp. 111-112 worked for you? If so, which ones?
9. Your group may want to discuss questions 2, 3 or 4 from page 113.
10. Here’s a proposal from Brian for a healthier way to handle the comings and goings of church members: (Which do you agree or disagree with? Why?)
11. Let’s remember that we’re all in the same Church (Matthew 16:18).
12. Let’s remember that God’s glory matters most (I Corinthians 10:31).
13. Let’s remember how we feel and act when someone leaves another church and comes to ours. Do we chase them back where they came from or welcome them with open arms?
14. Let’s try to not take this personally (it’s probably not about you!).
15. Let’s understand that many people don’t really know why they leave one church and find another.
16. Let’s trust God with those who depart. He can take care of them (Romans 14:4).
17. Let’s remember that we have an unwritten contract with our members and attendees. When we change the church, they consider the contract to be null and void. (“People change, churches change, people change churches.”)
18. Let’s remember that most of us (including pastors) will change churches eventually (see I Corinthians 3:1-15).
19. Let’s remember that “It’s not a sin to change churches; it’s a sin to stay in your church with a bad attitude.” (Pastor Gus Bess)
20. Let’s learn and practice what the Bible says about leading, following, maintaining unity and resolving our conflicts, so our church “hopping” is minimized.
21. Let’s do respectful “exit interviews” with folks who are leaving so we can give them our blessing (if at all possible) and see if we can learn something as a church.
22. Let’s try to maintain Christian relationships with those who depart from our church if we possibly can.
23. Let’s encourage young believers to resolve relationship issues instead of fleeing to another congregation (this is assuming that mature Christians don’t do this!).
24. Let’s make sure our church is focused on growing by winning non Christians to Christ – actually making disciples, as in Matthew 28:18-20 – instead of growing our church by attracting people from other churches.

-CHAPTER ELEVEN-

**Have A Happy Ending**

1. Read or re-read the chapter. Was there anything in Superintendent Bergstrom’s advice that particularly “struck” you? Did it make you think of anything that *you* need to do, as soon as possible, to bring some peace or healing to your church or your heart?
2. Discuss freely with your group: From what you know of the Bible and life, how much *control* does the individual church member (not a leader) have over what happens at his/her church?
3. How much *responsibility* does the individual church member (not a leader) have - before God – for what happens at his/her church?

4. Why do you think the author included the “not-so-happy ending”?

1. Discuss some or all of the questions on page 121.

6. Read Psalm 37 in its entirety with your group or as “homework.” Look for and

discuss as many answers to the following question as possible: What does the Psalmist (David) say that applies to Christians in troubled churches?