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The “Boatloads” Bible Study: A Report on the Spiritual Growth Resulting from Participation in a Small Group Bible Study

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The “Boatloads” Bible Study:
A Report on the Spiritual Growth Resulting from Participation in a Small Group Bible Study
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SCOM 365: Communication in Christian Ministry
Honors Petition Project

Abstract

Developed in January 2018, the “Boatloads” Bible study series sought to encourage members of a college life group in Lynchburg, Virginia, to grow spiritually by studying the power of God in ten passages of Scripture involving boats. At the end of the semester, members of the life group were asked to complete an anonymous survey about their experience in the Bible study. To analyze how the “Boatloads” Bible study affected spiritual growth in the lives of its attendees, Abigail Brewer, one of the leaders of the life group, created a two-part survey with ten statements and five questions. Using a Likert scale, participants were asked to rank their level of agreement with the ten statements. In the second section, participants responded to short answer questions by sharing their thoughts regarding each prompt. After compiling the numerical data and short answer responses, Abigail Brewer analyzed the data to understand how the “Boatloads” Bible study affected spiritual growth in the lives of its attendees.

Keywords: college, faith, research, boatloads, spiritual growth, survey, Bible study.

The “Boatloads” Bible Study:

A Report on the Spiritual Growth Resulting from Participation in a Small Group Bible Study

This research study seeks to understand how a small group Bible study affects the spiritual growth of its attendees. After analyzing the data from a personal survey sent out to each member of Abigail Brewer’s college life group, results show that the “Boatloads” Bible Study impacted the spiritual growth of each member who completed the survey. According to the numerical data and the short answer responses, participants noted that they experienced growth both spiritually and relationally resulting from attending the “Boatloads” Bible study during the Spring 2018 semester at Liberty University.

History of the Life Group

In August 2016, my desire for community and rooted relationships prompted me to accept my friend’s invitation to join a college life group organized through Thomas Road Baptist Church’s college ministry, Ascent. Almost exactly one year later, I found myself once again accepting an invitation to join another life group, this time as a leader. At Ascent, college life groups are led by one male and one female. Ethan Neff and I co-lead our life group, and he and I work together to prepare weekly discussions for our life group. Over the past year we have gathered with a group of approximately twenty college-aged males and females ranging from freshmen to graduate students on Sunday nights. Our life group has studied God’s Word, served in our community, and planned additional social events throughout the past two semesters, and we look forward to continuing our gatherings in the upcoming semesters as well.

After completing a powerful study of the Book of Psalms in the Fall 2017 semester, Ethan and I launched a new series called “Boatloads.” Our life group meets in the home of a family at our church, and our host parents cook a full meal for our group each week. When we

first launched the life group, Ethan invited people to our small group by announcing that we would have “boatloads” of food at all our gatherings. Without us even realizing the gravity of the phrase, the “boatloads” adjective quickly morphed into the cultural identifier and branding of our life group. Our weekly gatherings quickly became known around the Ascent ministry for always including “boatloads” of fun, food, and fellowship.

After deliberating over what topic to study for our Spring 2018 Bible study series, Ethan and I decided to take the “boatloads” joke and develop the phrase into a semester-long theme. During the Spring 2018 semester, we studied stories in the Bible that include boats. As we prepared, we quickly realized that every time a boat is present in Scripture, God moves in a big way. Thus, the “Boatloads” Bible study was born.

Research Methods

As a student in Dr. Kramer’s SCOM 365: Communication and Christian Ministry course, I found myself fascinated by the importance of communication within the context of a small group Bible study. Therefore, I decided to conduct a research study to determine the effects of the “Boatloads” Bible study on our members’ spiritual growth. To perform this research, I developed a fifteen-question survey and submitted documentation for approval by the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University. After receiving approval, I released my survey to the members of our life group and requested their feedback involving their perceived spiritual growth resulting from their participation in the “Boatloads” Bible study over the course of the Spring 2018 semester.

All participants in my research study were required to meet a minimum attendance quota of five weeks. At the time of the survey’s release, our life group had gathered for eight out of the ten total lessons in the study. Due to the nature of the survey and the Bible study itself, the

attendance requirement is necessary to demonstrate that the "Boatloads" Bible study significantly affected the spiritual growth of each participant.

The survey is divided into two sections: numerical data and short answer response. Using a Likert scale, participants were asked to rank their degree of agreement with ten statements. After recording their selections, participants then answered five short answer questions to provide detailed feedback on the "Boatloads" Bible study. All surveys are anonymous to protect the identities of the participants, and participants had seven days to submit their responses. I received nine completed surveys to analyze for this research project.

Numerical Data

To assess the perceived spiritual growth of each participant, I created ten statements about the "Boatloads" Bible Study. After reading each statement, participants were asked to select a number ranging between 1-5 according to a Likert scale. Circling "1" meant that the participant totally disagreed with the statement; circling "5" signified that the participant totally agreed. To view the Likert scale used in the survey, refer to Table 1 on page 15 of this report. To view the ten statements, refer to Table 2 on page 16. To view the mean and standard deviation of the data for each statement, refer to Table 3 on page 17.

Statement 1

Most attendees of the "Boatloads" Bible study felt that they entered the study with a confident knowledge of the various Bible stories involving boats, for the variance between responses to Statement 1 was very low. When Ethan and I originally planned the series, we selected ten "boat" stories to study throughout the semester. We both knew that boats were mentioned all throughout Scripture, but we were surprised by how many of the stories and passages we could name offhand during our brainstorming session. After searching through

Scripture, we chose the ten stories listed in Table 4 on page 18 of this report to study for our series. Our goal was to dive deeper into familiar Bible stories that include boats so that we could view the stories and passages in a new light.

Statement 2

Knowledge and understanding must first increase before spiritual growth can occur. For this reason, I created Statement 2 to assess participants' growth in their knowledge and understanding of the passages we studied. Participants responded unanimously in their total agreement that the "Boatloads" Bible study increased their knowledge and understanding regarding the passages we studied, so there was no deviation in the data. Therefore, the foundation is laid for an increase in spiritual growth resulting from participation in the "Boatloads" Bible study. The responses to this statement provide overwhelming evidence that Ethan and I accomplished our goal of effectively teaching and communicating the various "boat" Bible stories throughout Scripture to the members of our life group each week.

Statement 3

The data recorded from Statement 3 continues to provide evidence for an increase in knowledge and understanding of the Bible stories including boats throughout Scripture. Every participant in the study marked "4" or "5" for this statement, which demonstrates that every participant agreed that he or she was challenged and encouraged to understand the passages we studied from a different perspective. Again, these results continue to affirm the foundation of increased knowledge and understanding which paves the route towards increased spiritual growth resulting from the "Boatloads" Bible study.

Statement 4

When we decided to create the "Boatloads" Bible study, Ethan and I were careful to craft

a clear purpose for the Bible study series. We wanted our life group members to know exactly what we were studying and why we chose each passage. With this agreement in mind, I crafted Statement 4 to assess how well we communicated the intent of the "Boatloads" Bible study to our life group. When responding to Statement 4, 89% of the participants marked "5," revealing that they totally agreed with the statement. However, one participant marked "1," stating that he or she totally disagreed. In this data set, the meaning of the outlier is unknown. The outlier might reveal a special case, or the outlier may be depicting a misunderstanding of the statement. Due to the disparity between responses, Statement 4 has the highest variance of 1.26. However, the overwhelming majority of participants completely agree that the intention of the "Boatloads" Bible study was effectively communicated from the very beginning of the study.

Statement 5

Ethan and I firmly believe in communicating the intent of the Bible study each time we gather together as a life group on Sunday nights. Therefore, I created Statement 5 to assess the effectiveness of our communication. 78% of participants totally agreed that the intent of the Bible study remained consistent throughout the semester; the other two participants marked "3" and "4" for this statement. Overall, the responses for Statement 5 indicate that my co-leader and I maintained clear communication of the intent of the Bible study throughout the entirety of the semester. The two outlying responses, however, reveal the importance of continually sharing the vision and purpose of a Bible study throughout the series because members may feel lost or confused if they miss several weeks or join the group in the middle of the semester. Because communication is so crucial when teaching and discussing Scripture, the responses to Statement 5 further bolster the foundation for an increase of spiritual growth resulting from participation in the "Boatloads" Bible Study.

Statement 6

As one of the leaders of this Bible study, I can recall many occasions when I wished I had spent more time in personal preparation for the weekly gathering; however, I am thankful that our group members were consistently confident in the material we presented each week. When asked if Ethan and I were consistently prepared for life group each week, all nine survey participants marked "5" for Statement 6, resulting in zero deviation between responses. If an attendee is unable to trust the leaders of a Bible study, I firmly believe his or her ability to grow spiritually will suffer. Therefore, the trusting relationship amongst our group members encourages all of us to grow spiritually as we discuss the passages each week, as evidenced by the striking responses to Statement 6.

Statement 7

I designed Statement 7 to analyze the relevancy of the "Boatloads" Bible study. Personally, I experience more spiritual growth when I can easily and directly apply the concepts and Truths I learn from Scripture to my current life circumstances. According to the data, each participant indicated that the study related in some way to his or her life. All participants either marked "4" or "5;" no participants disagreed with the statement. Therefore, the evidential support regarding Statement 7 demonstrates the relevancy of the "Boatloads" Bible study.

Statement 8

Statement 8 assesses participants' confidence in their ability to trust the Lord before beginning the "Boatloads" Bible study to determine if the Bible study helped increase their spiritual growth in this significant area. Most participants marked "4" or "5" for Statement 8, but two participants marked "3," stating that they felt neutral towards the statement. This data reveals that although participants were confident in their ability to trust God, they were also

aware that this area of spiritual growth needed attention.

Statement 9

To analyze participants' spiritual growth in trusting the Lord after attending the "Boatloads" Bible study, I created Statement 9. One of the participants who marked "3" in Statement 8 recorded a "5" for Statement 9, indicating that he or she felt that they had significantly grown in their ability to mentally and actively trust the Lord after attending the Bible study. However, the other participant who marked "3" in Statement 8 recorded a "2" for Statement 9, indicating that he or she did not feel that the "Boatloads" Bible Study helped him or her grow in his or her ability to trust God. The other seven participants either marked the same number in both Statements 8 and 9 or marked one number higher. This data set has the second highest standard deviation, which reveals that participants had varying opinions of the level that the "Boatloads" Bible study affected their ability to trust God. However, except for the one participant who marked "2," all other participants agreed that the "Boatloads" Bible study helped them grow in their ability to trust the Lord in some way.

Statement 10

Considering the variety of responses to Statement 9, the responses to Statement 10 were much more consistent. Two thirds (67%) of participants indicated that they totally agreed that the "Boatloads" Bible study encouraged attendees to step out of their comfort zones and obey God's calling for their lives. Two participants marked "4," stating that they somewhat agreed, and only one participant remained neutral on this statement. Overall, the numerical data indicates that students experienced spiritual growth resulting from attendance of the "Boatloads" Bible study during the Spring 2018 semester.

Short Answer Responses

Because spiritual growth is such an individualized, personal experience, I chose to include five short answer questions in the “Boatloads” Bible study survey. I wanted survey participants to provide their honest, detailed feedback when disclosing how the study personally affected their lives. The responses to each of the five questions were analyzed for common patterns, themes, similarities, and differences. The responses to the short answer questions reveal additional details about how the “Boatloads” Bible study affected spiritual growth and will be discussed below. To view the five short answer questions, refer to Table 5 on page 19 of this document.

Question 1

When asked his or her motivation for attending the “Boatloads” Bible study, participants’ responses all touched on two predominant themes: curiosity about the study topic and interest in the community. Seven out of nine participants (78%) noted that their decision to join the life group hinged on the friendships and inviting community within the life group. Six of out nine participants (67%) mentioned their interest in the topic. Based upon the answers regarding this first short answer question, participation in a life group can therefore be linked to the culture of the community and the nature of the Bible study series. One participant noted that he or she first attended the life group because they saw the second greatest commandment of “love thy neighbor” evidenced within the existing community. The participant also wrote that “it is so rare to be surrounded by a group of people hungry for spiritual growth, and it is a blessing to have this opportunity to challenge one another and spend time building friendships.” Specifically, this participant connected the importance of community with the desire to dive deeper in the Word of God. The responses to Question 1 provide evidential support that the “Boatloads” Bible study

affected spiritual growth in the lives of its attendees.

Question 2

I designed Question 2 to assess how the “Boatloads” Bible study specifically pushed attendees to grow spiritually. All participants stated that the study challenged them in some way, and many recorded specific examples. Two participants said that the “Boatloads” Bible study affected the growth of their hearts; one participant even wrote that his or her “heart was renewed” through attending the study. Strikingly, almost all participants mentioned some aspect of community in their response. Four participants specifically mentioned how the community of the life group challenged them through hearing different perspectives and various testimonies. In addition, four participants also noted that they grew in their ability to study Scripture. One participant wrote that the “Boatloads” Bible study challenged him or her “to get more involved and to participate more.” When concluding his or her remarks, another participant stated that “I always walk out of Boatloads amazed.” The responses from Question 2 continue to reveal that the “Boatloads” Bible study affected spiritual growth within the lives of its attendees.

Question 3

To further assess the impact of the “Boatloads” Bible study on spiritual growth, I crafted Question 3 to encourage participants to connect their spiritual growth to a specific week of the study. Interestingly, six participants recalled stories we studied at the beginning of the semester, and only two mentioned more recent passages. Three participants specifically referenced the story of Noah, and all three related his journey of building his boat to their current life circumstances. One person stated that Noah reminded him or her to step out of comfort zones, and another participant wrote that Noah’s story encouraged him or her to trust God even when his or her questions remain unanswered. The third participant revealed in his or her response that

“our discussion about Noah comforted me, brought me encouragement, and ‘put some wind in my sails’ that helped me find spiritual direction.”

Question 4

Ethan and I intentionally re-introduced the concept of the “Boatloads” Bible study at the beginning of every gathering to maintain consistency and keep all life group members on the same page throughout the entirety of the semester. For this reason, I created Question 4 to assess participants’ abilities to describe the premise of the “Boatloads” Bible study to another individual. To my surprise, the responses I received to this question varied greatly from participant to participant. Only 67% of the participants mentioned the word “boat” in their response, and no one recorded the actual tagline, “Whenever there is a boat in the Bible, God does something big,” even though we repeat this phrase weekly. One participant wrote that the “Boatloads” Bible study focused on “how God used boats and the seas to test people’s faith, guide people in the right direction, and display his glory through nature and his power over it.” Another participant focused more upon the schedule of each gathering, stating that

“each week we would read the scripture and talked about what we took away from the text and how we interpreted it. [...] We always went through some takeaway points that Ethan and Abby prepared. They also included discussion questions that were great at causing you to think, connect, and apply the ideas that you learned about!”

Even though the responses differed from the responses I anticipated receiving, participants demonstrated a general concept of the “Boatloads” Bible study. Several participants mentioned the importance of God’s involvement in every passage we studied, and each participant demonstrated a sufficient understanding of the study’s concept even though no one used our exact verbiage when explaining the premise.

Question 5

The best way to understand if a Bible study impacts the life of an attendee is if that attendee would recommend the study to someone else. When surveyed, all nine participants in the “Boatloads” Bible study survey responded that they would recommend the study to others. 78% of participants revealed that they would recommend the study series specifically because of the material we studied. One individual wrote that the study “really evokes thoughts in its participants,” and another individual stated that we “did a good job getting into the Word and studying it Biblically.” A third participant said that he or she would recommend the study because an attendee “will learn something that will blow [his or her] mind every single week.” Several participants also stated that they would recommend the study because of the community, and one individual even stated that the study “is one of the best studies [he or she has] ever been in. The insights are incredible, the leaders are genuine and friendly, and the community is incredibly welcoming.” Another participant wrote that “I would absolutely recommend Boatloads to someone else. It’s a place where one can commune with God, and God’s people. Everyone needs some encouragement, some Jesus, and some boatloads of food on a Sunday evening!” After analyzing the responses to Question 5, the answers clearly demonstrate the impact of the “Boatloads” Bible study on its attendees’ spiritual growth.

Conclusion

After reviewing the numerical data and short answer responses, I believe that there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the “Boatloads” Bible study impacted the spiritual growth of its attendees. The numerical data reveals low variation between the responses to each of the ten statements, and the short answer responses record overall themes of growth, challenge, encouragement, and community. Overall, participants most often cited the welcoming

community of believers that brought them back week after week.

In the future, I hope to conduct further research to analyze the effects of community on spiritual growth. In this research project, I noticed several responses in the short answer section that focused more upon the community aspects of the Bible study rather than the study itself. One participant even stated that “it’s hard for me to separate the study from our community that I studied with, but the “Boatloads” study is still so valuable no matter who you tackle it with.” I believe that there might be a link between the community surrounding an individual and the spiritual growth that the individual experiences over time. If we alter the culture of our life group community, we might see different results in the spiritual growth of our members. In the same way, if a life group wants to foster greater spiritual growth amongst its members, adjusting the culture of the community might be a way to initiate the desired changes.

Overall, participants revealed in their surveys that they believed they experienced personal spiritual growth after attending the “Boatloads” Bible study. Factors including relevancy of material, clarity of communication, and a welcoming community all contributed to the effectiveness of the “Boatloads” Bible study, but all participants noted a clear understanding of God’s power as depicted throughout the “boatload” of stories about boats in the Bible.

Tables

Table 1

Likert Scale

Likert Scale
<i>1 Totally Disagree 2 Somewhat Disagree 3 Neutral 4 Somewhat Agree 5 Totally Agree</i>

Table 2

Survey Statements

	Statements	
Statement 1	Before attending this study I had a thorough understanding of the various Bible stories that include boats throughout Scripture.	
Statement 2	After attending this study, I have a thorough understanding of the various Bible stories that include boats throughout Scripture.	
Statement 3	This study challenged me to examine Bible stories including boats in a different light.	
Statement 4	The intention and goal of this Bible study was explained clearly to me before the study started.	
Statement 5	The intention and goal of this Bible study remained the same throughout the duration of the study.	
Statement 6	The leaders of this Bible study came prepared each week with a thorough understanding of the passage and topic for each session.	
Statement 7	The topics and themes of this Bible study directly applied to my current life situation and my current walk with Christ.	
Statement 8	I understood how to trust the Lord in both word and deed before participating in this Bible study.	
Statement 9	This Bible study taught me how to practically deepen my trust in God, and I was able to apply the principles and action steps in the study to my life.	
Statement 10	This study encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and obey God’s call for my life.	

Table 3

Average Numerical Response

	Mean & Standard Deviation
Statement 1	3.89 ± .57
Statement 2	5 ± 0
Statement 3	4.67 ± .47
Statement 4	4.56 ± 1.26
Statement 5	4.67 ± .67
Statement 6	5 ± 0
Statement 7	4.45 ± .5
Statement 8	4.2 ± .79
Statement 9	4.45 ± .96
Statement 10	4.56 ± .68

Table 4

Selected Passages for the “Boatloads” Bible Study

	Stories & References
Week 1	Noah (Genesis 5-10)
Week 2	Baby Moses (Exodus 2-4)
Week 3	Parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14-15)
Week 4	Jonah (Jonah 1-4)
Week 5	Calling of the Disciples (Matthew 4, Mark 1, & Luke 5)
Week 6	Jesus Steps In (John 6 & Matthew 14)
Week 7	Peter Steps Out (Matthew 14)
Week 8	Paul’s Shipwreck (Acts 27-28)
Week 9	The Tongue is a Rudder (James 3)
Week 10	Our Hope is an Anchor (Hebrews 6 & 10)

Table 5

Survey Questions

	Questions	
Question 1	Why did you choose to attend the "Boatloads" Bible Study this semester?	
Question 2	How did the "Boatloads" Bible Study impact and challenge your life and your walk with Christ?	
Question 3	Which story from the "Boatloads" Bible Study most impacted your walk with Christ, and why did it significantly impact you?	
Question 4	How would you explain the premise for the "Boatloads" Bible Study to another individual?	
Question 5	Would you recommend the "Boatloads" Bible Study to someone else? Why or why not?	