

Connection-Group Orientation: Leading Small-Group Discussion



Norman Rockwell,
"The Homecoming Marine"

Outline

- **Small groups are central**
- **The art of leading discussion**
- **Making thought-provoking discussion questions**
- **Resources for discussion leaders**

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Spiritual growth occurs *in community*

- “What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, **each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.**” (1 Cor 14:26)
- “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; **teach and admonish one another in all wisdom**; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Col 3:16)
- “I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and **able to instruct one another.**” (Rom 15:14)

Spiritual growth occurs in many ways

- The Holy Spirit works in many ways to bring about growth :
 - Prayer (in its many forms)
 - Fellowship and interaction with other believers
 - Suffering (not something we generally seek!)
 - Worship
 - Ministry—serving others
 - Bible study
- Small groups are the (only?) venue where prayer, in-depth Bible study and fellowship come together

Q:What is your history with small groups?

Spiritual growth requires studying the Word of God

- ‘Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, **“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”** (John 8:31-32)
- “Like newborn babes, **long for the pure milk of the word**, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Pet 2:2)
- “Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. **For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.** For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But **solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.**” (Heb 5:11-14)

Small-group Bible study is a crucial means of spiritual growth

- Sunday mornings are the time for **worship**; *koinonia* night, coffee hour, etc. are for **fellowship**; small groups are for **in-depth Bible study** with other believers
- The pastor can encourage and motivate and inspire and even lead on Sunday mornings, but the sermon format isn't intended for wrestling with the material in the way we do in group discussion (exception: lectures, retreats)
- Personal study is important but the Bible also describes growth in *community*
 - “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another” (Prov 27:17)
- *When we don't do this we risk developing blind spots and being deceived by the surrounding culture*

Q: In those times when you haven't been in a small group, have you noticed the difference?

Use of small groups goes back to the very beginning of church history

- Jesus and his disciples formed a small group
- The first-century church met in homes, so the church in each city consisted of a network of small groups (house churches) which would periodically gather in larger groups in the larger homes of the rich
- Post-Constantine, the church had its own buildings, and small groups diminished until the Reformation
- Small groups were integral to Wesley's "method"
- In the 60s, David Cho, pastor of the Yoida Full Gospel Church in South Korea used small groups to manage its rapid growth, which reached over 40,000 small groups by the 1990s. (There are other examples from Colombia and El Salvador.)
- In the 60s and 70s parachurch movements like IVCF, Navigators, Campus Crusade, etc., used small groups as a central means of discipleship and spiritual growth
- In the 80s the North-American small-group movement began, both to allow greater engagement in big churches (notably Willow Creek) and to foster depth and growth in smaller churches (with more participation in some denominations than others)

Do they work?*

- Small groups have been shown to
 - **Increase subjective measures** like closeness to God, love for others, capacity for forgiving others, ability to share one's faith, answers to prayer, and experience of the Bible as personally meaningful
 - **Increase objective measures:** small group participants report they experience of healing in relationships; work with the group to help needy members and needy people outside the group; become more interested in social justice
 - Small groups tend to increase sense of belonging leading to greater financial giving
 - Small groups have less of a gender gap than church attendance
- BUT:**
- Small groups tend to draw people who are already church members
 - In at least one survey, small group members were no more likely to demonstrate knowledge of Bible facts**

**Small groups have great potential but aren't magic;
They need to be structured and led intelligently to fulfill their potential**

*Bill Donahue and Charles Gowler, *Christian Ed. Journ. Series 3, 11*, p. 199 (2014)

**Wuthnow, R. (1994), "Sharing the Journey: Support groups and America's new quest for community", pp. 242-5

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A sample small-group meeting

- 🕒 • Gather and open with **prayer** (2 min.)—invite the Holy Spirit to work in your midst!
- 🕒 • The leader describes the passage at hand to **set the stage** (5 min.)
- 🕒 • The group **reads the passage** together (5 min.)
- 🕒 • The leader asks questions leading to **group discussion** (60 min.)
- 🕒 • The leader **recaps** the main points learned in the discussion (2 min.)
- 🕒 • The group discusses **prayer** requests and prays together (20 min.)
- 🕒 • The group sticks around to **fellowship** and catch up (30 min.)

[Total pre-fellowship time: ~1 ½ hours]

A good discussion begins by setting the mood

- You should be familiar enough with the passage to be able to describe its flow with your eyes closed
- Begin by introducing the passage: describe its cultural setting and context, and its place passage within the rest of the book
- Example: Philippians 1:3-11, where Paul introduces his letter with blessing and exhortation
 - What is Paul's context? *He's in jail in Rome*
 - Who is he writing to? *A church in a remote Roman colony filled with retired soldiers, on a major east-west highway*
 - What's their relationship? *They are very close; he owes them a debt for their generosity to him in prison*
- Spend a few minutes motivating study of the passage
 - *This passage is important because if you read between the lines the opening tells you volumes about their relationship with Paul—and with God*

If you aren't excited about the passage, why should they be?

Q: How do you find your attitude as a leader affects the group?

Respond to comments with an open, inquisitive atmosphere

- When someone answers a question, listen **attentively**
- Respond (when you think it's necessary) by **summarizing** and affirming their **key points** and relating them to the passage
- If the response is problematic (i.e. shows misunderstanding or poor doctrine)
 - gently ask a follow-up question to draw the discussion further
 - Invite others to respond so the *group* addresses the problems
- **Don't lecture!** Provide a context for learning and direct discussion, minimizing your profile in it
- Sometimes this will mean they don't come away with *your* answers; that's okay!
- **Promote balance:** Invite participation by those who might feel reticent, while keeping others from dominating

Successes and missteps in this area can have long-term effects

- If one individual dominates the discussion, others may not become as invested (and it's worse if *you* are that person!)
- But if you come down too hard on someone, it can drive them away or make them want to undermine the community
 - *Example:* I had one person in a small group who liked to always question the *value* of the discussions, suggesting that we were being too introspective, that the Bible shouldn't even be read the way we were reading it, etc. During one particularly difficult discussion I responded fairly but very abruptly, offending him. It's taken quite some time to repair that rift and draw him back in

Q:What challenges have you experienced in group dynamics?

Small groups can have many emphases

- **Types** of small groups:
 - Fellowship groups (like a men's morning prayer group)
 - Support groups (cancer survivors, single moms, etc.)
 - Bible study
 - Book study
 - Groups by age and gender (men's, young adult, singles, etc.)
 - Etc.
- All still have the basic components (**study, prayer, fellowship**) but each has a different emphasis
- If you remove any of these components you can still have a valuable group, but the **primary goal** changes; e.g.:
 - Choir
 - Council
 - Cadets/GEMS
 - Knitting
- Small groups, in all their forms, aim to provide ***spiritual growth in community***

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You can use prepared discussion questions or make your own

- Pre-made discussion questions save time!
- BUT, if you make your own,
 - ***You can make them with your particular group in mind***
 - You are forced to study the passage...
 - ...and can share what you've learned with the group as appropriate
- Pre-made discussion questions must be general and so may tend to feel remote and not go in-depth

Q:What makes it appealing or daunting to you to make up your own discussion questions?

Hold scripture up against scripture

- Example: Jesus “goes public” in his home-town synagogue and reads from the scroll of Isaiah
 - Read Isaiah 61:1-2 in *its* context: a prophecy of liberation for the Jews in exile—but also with Messianic echoes
- The background leads to a natural question:
 - **Q: What did Isaiah’s prophecy mean to his audience—and what associations would that mean for those listening to Jesus?**
 - *Understanding what the passage meant to its first audience is always the first task*
 - Reading this helps us see how Jesus was breaking out of the mold of healer and local celebrity and moving toward *Messiah*
- And the subtler question:
 - **Q: What phase from Isaiah 61:2 does Jesus deliberately leave out?** (“the day of vengeance of our God”!) **Why did he do that?**

Use background information to illuminate the passage

- Example: *Jesus' healing of the Gentile centurion's slave* (Luke 7)
 - The centurion was rich, had donated money to build a synagogue
 - At first this sounds like an act of humble generosity...
 - ...but it put the Jews into a patron-client relationship, a power dynamic grounded in *inequality* which benefitted them but obliged them to pay him respect and do him favors
 - The centurion was drawing on this privilege in asking Jesus to heal his slave
- With this background you can better read Jesus' response, leading to some obvious questions:
 - **Q: What clues from the passage tell you if Jesus was working within this system or not?** (Jesus' response is to march toward the centurion's house, forcing confrontation with the centurion, and revealing the centurion's faith)
 - **Q: Where can patron-client relationships be found in modern church contexts, whether local or national? Are they unhealthy, or at odds with the ethics of the kingdom?**

Quote third parties to promote discussion

- Example: In the parable of the good Samaritan, the Levite passes by the victim, avoiding ritual impurity
- In doing so he was elevating purity law above mercy
- Tony Campolo is famous for this quote:

I have three things I'd like to say today. First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Second, most of you don't give a sh*t. What's worse is that you're more upset with the fact that I said sh*t than the fact that 30,000 kids died last night.

- **Q:What do we do (or avoid) in trying to be pure? What laws do we elevate above mercy?**
- A good quote is more than a straw man and forces us to decide what we think

Multiple-choice questions help everyone to participate and can break the ice

- Example: Job's three friends represent the wisdom of Proverbs: good things happen to good people, bad things to bad people
- Readers vilify his friends as simplistic and thoughtless...but even Job believes this (and we all tend to, too)
- **Question: Do you believe that God**
 - a) Punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous *in this life*
 - b) Doesn't *intervene* to bring about justice in this life (except through natural consequences)
 - c) God *used to* intervene, in the days of the Old Covenant, but doesn't any more
 - d) God intervenes, but since we never know with certainty when, we *should live as if he didn't*
- *Then ask about the implications!* If they answer (a), then ask for examples from their lives; if (b) then ask about the many verses where God *does* intervene; if (c) ask how they explain all the places in Acts where God intervenes, etc.

Be creative!

- Example: The word “blessed” is key to understanding the beatitudes
- But the English word “blessed” (also translated “happy”) doesn’t really capture what’s meant by the Greek *makarios*. Does it mean we are “blessed” because we are “poor in spirit” or does that reflect our blessedness? How can we “who mourn” be happy?
- **Question: If you only had these phrases and verses to go on, and no prior knowledge, what words would you use to translate *makarios*?**
 - “*Makarios* that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns” (Mt 24:46)
 - “*Makarios* is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished” (Lk 1:45)
 - “*Makarios* are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. *Makarios* are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Lk 6:21)
 - “*Makarios* are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29)
 - “*Makarios* are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Mt 16:17)
 - “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be *makarios*” (Lk 14:13)
 - (...plus the beatitudes of Matthew 5, of course)

Some discussion-question *Dos* and *Don'ts*

Don't!

- Force “word search” questions which require hunting through the passage but don't illuminate it
- Leap straight to application; nothing's learned if the group doesn't dive into the passage first
- Focus too much on points which are peripheral to the passage

Do!

- Ask questions which get at their personal experience
- Push the envelope occasionally to challenge your group! Scripture *should* make us uncomfortable
- Avoid questions for which the answer's trivial
 - This will depend on the audience! For younger Christians, *do* ask why salvation-by-grace in Romans appears to contradict James' faith without works is dead; for older Christians you can focus on the implications and go deeper
- Make sure you can answer the questions you ask!

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Covenants help draw members and promote participation

- A typical small-group covenant: an agreement among members to attend for 6-12 meetings
- This may also include an agreement to do outside work (e.g. CBS)
- The finite number of meetings may make it less threatening to join the group
- The covenant also tends to increase participation, since people want to be true to their word
- A possible down-side: it may also make it easier for folks to drop out at the end of the covenant period

Q:What experience do you have with group covenants?

Resources for Bible study

- **Commentaries:** *The IVP New Bible Commentary* (Don Carson et al.)—the best one-volume commentary around!
- *The New Testament Commentary Survey* by Don Carson (surveys all the commentaries for each NT book—very helpful!
- For **general background**, these volumes from IVP are unmatched:
 - The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*
 - The Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*
 - The Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Developments*
- For a number of **in-depth Bible studies** and resources:
 - www.pas.rochester.edu/~tim/study/study.html
- For **questions to prime the pump** when studying a passage, see this list, sorted by passage type, culled from *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Fee & Stuart:
 - <http://www.pas.rochester.edu/~tim/study/inductive.pdf>