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To my wife, Karen,
and my children,
Brett and Heather.

INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

You are looking for a way to help Christians become better disciples, and you believe that a small group format may be the best approach for producing this kind of growth in your church or fellowship. So where do you go? Here!

This is a book for those who wish to develop small groups and train leaders. Within this book is a course that is comprehensive, but at the same time open-ended and flexible enough for you to adapt to the needs of your fellowship. It is equally applicable whether you are initiating a small group ministry and working with brand-new leaders, or providing ongoing training for experienced leaders in an established program.

What Is a Small Group?

A small group is an intentional gathering of three to twelve people who commit themselves to work together to become better disciples of Jesus Christ. The key words in this definition are emphases of this book—commitment, working together and discipleship.

Within the broad context of this definition, small groups assume a variety of formats and focuses. There may be prayer circles, Bible studies, mission fellowships, sharing and caring groups, evangelistic teams, church ministry committees, new member classes, house churches, covenant groups, as well as a number of other groups. All are good examples of small groups to the extent that they are marked by a commitment to share the process of growth as disciples.
The Key to Effective Ministry
Churches too often start small groups without having first thought through the fundamental issues of this ministry. Perhaps your church is currently in the midst of an ineffective small group program and does not know how it got there or how to get out. This book will help you answer important questions which will enable you to develop an effective small group ministry.

This book is not only helpful to individuals working with small groups, but can also be adapted as a thirteen-week training course complete with chapters, a special leader’s guide, a resource section which will help you think through the “how tos” of ministry, and Bible studies that can either be integrated into the course or used in a small group setting at a later time. At least one person—a pastor or lay person with good leadership qualities and small group experience—will direct the course. This person will facilitate the learning process using the leader’s notes which completely lay out the sessions, including suggestions for weekly homework assignments, small group activities, and meeting guidelines. You can use the total package, or you may want to adapt these materials to fit your situation.

There are two primary ways in which this book can be adapted as a training manual. The first is that you can take a group of trainees through the complete thirteen-week course before turning them loose to lead groups. The second is equally viable—taking trainees through the first four chapters, which include most of the issues necessary to lead a group. At that point the trainees begin leading their own groups, coming back for monthly follow-up times so that they can continue through the rest of the book in a more leisurely way.

Principles Behind This Book
This is not a “how-to” book on small group ministry. In some chapters you will not see small groups mentioned until toward the end of the chapter. The “how-to” of small group ministry has been combined with the more important principles that underlie each aspect of ministry (the “why” of small group ministry).

You will see three words, and their related concepts, from beginning to end. They are:

- Discipleship. The purpose of small groups is to make disciples. This is in obedience to Christ’s command in Matthew 28:18–20, that the church should make disciples.
- Leadership. Disciples are not made unless there are disciplermakers who can help them learn and apply the Christian life. Therefore, leadership is essential to small group ministry. The goal of this book is to help equip effective leaders who can make disciples through small groups. So while the goal of small group ministry is discipleship, the foundation for small group ministry is leadership.
- Community. People can only learn and grow in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. That atmosphere is Christian community. Community is not one aspect of group life, it is the very structure within which the group operates. A healthy community will produce healthy disciples.

Therefore, the goal of small group ministry is discipleship; the foundation is leadership, and the structure of small group ministry is community.

While individuals can work through this material on their own, the benefits from this book will be enhanced when studied alongside other leaders-in-training. The chapters, leader’s
guide and other sections are designed so that leaders-in-training can learn a few positive principles and receive a few good ideas while practicing them in a small group.

Leaders-in-training will only get from this book and its training course what they put into it. It is not meant to be an easy course (being a leader is not easy!). Daily work may be required, but if you put in the disciplined time that is needed you will greatly benefit.

This book will not automatically “create” a good leader. Leading a small group takes time, self-evaluation, humility and persistence. Those who choose to read this book and/or go through the training course must first make a commitment to “pay the price” of leadership.

This book is also beneficial for those not interested in being small group leaders. Informed small group members make good small group ministry much more effective.

A Final Word
Whether you are an experienced facilitator of small groups or a first-time leader, welcome! You are about to enter the process of making disciples for Jesus Christ. My ultimate goal in preparing this book is that, as the gospel is preached and disciples are made, Jesus will receive the honor and obedience that is due him, and his kingdom will be extended to the ends of the earth. Small groups can play an important part in that process, so let’s get started!

MAKING DISCIPLES THROUGH SMALL GROUPS

Bob, you sure are doing a great job on those pancakes,” said Sue, as she looked up from her own pancake griddle. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you eventually opened up your own restaurant!”

Sue had noticed that Bob was trying his hardest, with sweat pouring down his face and an apron liberally spattered with pancake mix. She wanted to encourage him to keep going.

“But my pancakes look nothing like yours,” moaned Bob. “Just look, yours are so golden brown and mine are either overcooked or undercooked.”

This was Bob’s first attempt at cooking pancakes, and he had chosen the annual “Keep Our City Clean” day to learn. Sue was the one who had invited him because she thought it might
give him an opportunity to feel needed. She knew Bob as a shy, quiet man who didn’t like to be in the spotlight. Cooking pancakes was an ideal way to involve him without giving too much of a push.

She had set him up at his griddle, helped him through the disaster of the first few batches, and watched him improve as he became more comfortable in his new role. By the end of the morning he had loosened up and was even talking about cooking next year. As he felt useful, his confidence grew, and he even took the initiative to meet people. He was able to become a pancake chef and a friend because Sue had taken it upon herself to walk with him through the uncomfortable moments. It’s always easier to try new things with a friend at your side.

If we need encouragement to get through a pancake breakfast, consider how much more we need people who can guide us through our Christian lives! Learning to live as a child of God in our culture is a formidable challenge. Many people feel uncertain, others overwhelmed. It seems that there are many people who can teach others to flip pancakes or play sports. Is it not even more vital that there are people who can show others how to live the Christian life?

**Make Disciples**

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’” (Mt 28:16–20).

Imagine that you are one of the eleven disciples who has met him on the mountain. Three years ago you received the call to follow Christ, and you left your family, friends and livelihood to do so. You have been fascinated by this man who can heal the sick, raise the dead, and preach with an authority that draws multitudes to hear him.

You have lived with him, trying desperately to understand One so different from everyone that you have known before. You were present on the night he was taken by the mob to his crucifixion, and you had run. Three days later, while you were still in hiding, you had heard that he had risen, and you were terrified and relieved at the same time. You have seen him a number of times since his resurrection, and now as you meet him on the mountain you somehow feel that he is preparing you for yet another good-by.

You have met Jesus on the mountain to receive your final instructions. In these last words of Jesus—which you will reflect on many times in the coming days—you receive your formal “commissioning.” There is no mistaking that Jesus is giving a command that is to be followed. As his disciple, you are to respond in obedience.

But what is he telling you?

Some of the things that you will ponder include his claim to all authority, and his command to make disciples of *all nations*. (“What, Lord? Gentiles too?”). And what does he mean by “the completion of the age”? You can be excused for wondering about these ideas because 2000 years later the church will still be trying to grasp their meaning.

However, there is one thing Jesus tells you that is crystal clear. It is his command to “make disciples.” As one of his disciples, you know very well what he means.
Jesus’ Method of Making Disciples

In Jesus’ first-century world disciples were usually the students of a particular teacher, apprentices who learned all that their master could teach so that they could go on to become masters themselves. In addition to teaching the Jewish law and the traditions of Moses, the rabbis (or teachers) sought to train their disciples to live out their faith as obedient followers of God.

A number of times during Jesus’ ministry he, too, was called Rabbi. Observers felt that he had met the criteria necessary to be a disciplemaker in the line of Moses. Like the Jewish rabbis, Jesus had gathered his own group of disciples and was training them.

Jesus, however, was set apart from the rabbis of his day. In Matthew 7:28–29 we read that the people were amazed after Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount because “he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

What was it that set Jesus apart from the teachers of the law? Very simply, the rabbis encouraged people to follow the teachings of others by saying, “Moses said . . .,” while Jesus taught people by saying, “I say . . .” Jesus claimed special authority from God because he was the very Son of God.

So when Jesus called the twelve disciples (and many others who followed him during his ministry), his command was different from that of other disciplemakers. His words to Simon and Andrew in Mark 1 were “Follow me.” It was a simple phrase, yet one loaded with meaning. In Christ’s call to discipleship he challenged the disciples to live with him, to learn how to live as his disciples, and to prepare others to hear the Good News.

Living with him. The call “Follow me” had a very real physical application. Jesus did not say these words and then walk away never to be seen by the disciples again. He expected them to leave what they were doing in order to physically walk after him.

For three years after this call the twelve disciples lived with him. They travelled to many different places and sought food and shelter in a host of ways. They saw Jesus in the morning when he got up and at night when he laid down. They watched him pray, heal, preach and teach. They observed Jesus in his dealings with difficult people. Through all of their experiences with him, they learned that Jesus’ lifestyle was radically different from the one they had learned from birth. They were challenged to a new life.

Learning how to be his disciple. This new life did not come easily to them. They were naturally brash, selfish and uncaring. Jesus had to teach them to be gentle, giving and compassionate. On many occasions he took the disciples aside (for example, Mt 5–7) in order to instruct them. When he told parables, he would explain the meaning to them after the crowds had departed. (The disciples were as “deaf” as the crowds when it came to understanding parables!) He asked questions of them, taught them, admonished them, prodded them to take steps of faith, nurtured them, and loved them.

Their’s was a special relationship that, for two reasons, went much deeper than the one Jesus had with the crowds that followed him for two reasons. First, Jesus committed himself to the disciples in every way. He made himself accessible to them and confided in them. He had great expectations for them and occasionally showed frustration with them. You might recall the time the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee with Jesus asleep in the boat when a great storm came. Jesus chided them for their lack of faith. Because he had committed himself to his disciples, Jesus had great expectations of them.
The second reason it was a unique relationship was that the disciples were committed to Jesus in return. Since Jesus supplied the brains and purpose for the fledgling Christian movement, the disciples were not able to add much to the process. What they did bring was a growing love for Christ and an awakening desire to be obedient and loyal in everything. They struggled with their faith, sin and weaknesses, but they wanted to be faithful. They loved Jesus and became willing to give up everything (eventually most of them even gave their lives) for this man from Galilee.

Preparing others to hear the Good News. One of the marks of good students is that they are able to do what the teacher has instructed them to do—even when the teacher is not present. Knowing this, Christ trained his disciples by encouraging them to take steps of faith on their own.

As the disciples travelled with Jesus, they were able to do some helpful things, but they spent most of their time observing the master at work. Then, Jesus sent them out two-by-two to prepare towns for his coming. They preached as they had seen Jesus preach. They sought faithful God-fearing people in the towns as Jesus had done. They healed the sick and comforted the bereaved. And they learned what ministry was all about. In being sent out from Jesus, they learned even more about how to imitate their rabbi.

The Early Church and Discipleship

The disciples learned how to think and act based on their relationship with the master disciplemaker. They in turn began to duplicate his kind of ministry after Jesus went back to heaven.

In the book of Acts much can be discovered about the history of the church. Following Christ’s ascension into heaven, the promised Holy Spirit manifests in power at Pentecost, and the disciples start carrying the Good News to all people.

It was an exciting time for the church, a period of rapid growth in spite of tremendous persecution. Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 brought three thousand new believers into the church in one day! These new believers combined with other disciples to worship in the temple each day. Just imagine the uproar their meetings must have caused in the already crowded temple courtyard! Yet their lives were so different that they were viewed favorably by others, and the church grew daily.

From the beginning the church met together in larger groups for corporate worship. But small groups also had a place in the life of the church. The apostles not only taught large groups, but they also went from house to house, visiting small groups in homes as they taught and made disciples (Acts 5:42). People met together in their homes to break bread together and to use the opportunity to encourage each other to live out their faith in ever greater obedience. There were home prayer meetings like the one held while Peter was in prison (Acts 12:12), and Paul’s letters allude to “house churches” (Rom 16:5).

Whether house churches were independent groups of believers or were part of larger churches is uncertain. It is likely, however, that small house fellowships were the building blocks of the church in each city or region. The early disciples met in groups small enough to fit into normal homes (for instance, Priscilla and Aquila were tentmakers and probably not wealthy—Acts 18:3).

The church needed the “house church” for its survival. There were periods of intense persecution for the first few centuries after Christ, so the early church was often not able to meet...
openly, nor were they allowed to purchase large buildings for gathering. They relied on the more protective environment of the home to nurture and protect the gospel in the lives of believers. Somehow (to our surprise) the church was able to multiply without large buildings, mass meetings, and a plethora of “how to” books!

In our own century we have examples of how the church can grow even during persecution. When the Communists came to power in China in the 1950s, all missionaries were expelled, and it was estimated that there were perhaps one million weak Chinese Christians. There was great concern that the church in China would be wiped out, and indeed large-scale persecution broke out.

Thirty years later in the 1980s, the doors to China started to open, and Christians were finally able to observe what had happened to the Chinese church during the 25 years that the borders were closed. Observers were surprised to discover that the church was alive and well! It is now estimated that there are somewhere between thirty and one hundred million Chinese Christians. Imagine, the church multiplied at least thirty times with few Bibles, a limited number of trained pastors, and no church buildings. Like the early church, the Chinese church relied on prayer and the “house church” for its survival and growth.

A fascinating aspect of discipleship is that Christians in the twentieth century are in the direct line that can be traced back twenty centuries to the original twelve disciples. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul illustrates the process of disciplemaking in the following way: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” Thus, all disciples of Christ have been entrusted with the gospel message which they are to continually invest in the lives of others. Rather than ending with us, the process must begin again with us, as with each new generation.

The Process of Disciplemaking

But what do we mean when we talk about “disciples”? A disciple is a committed follower of Jesus Christ who seeks to live a life marked by continued growth in understanding and obedience.

How, then, can we continue the process of making disciples in this century? The following are a few key principles for today’s disciplemakers to follow.

Disciples are made intentionally. Just as children don’t grow up without personal care, nor do they learn mathematics on their own, so disciplemaking will not occur without faithful Christians being intentional about it. The word discipleship is a catchphrase in the church today, often without meaning. As a result, some people think of disciplemaking when they think of Bible-study workbooks or adult Sunday school. What they forget is that the process of disciplemaking is a dynamic relationship between fellow Christians and their Lord, and that it is marked by continued progress.

Disciplemaking must be intentional in order for small groups to take root and grow. You cannot pay “lip service” to disciplemaking, or look at it as one aspect of ministry. It must be the goal of all of ministry that people will come to faith and then grow to maturity as Christ’s disciples. This first principle will become a reality in your church or fellowship if even just a few people take Christ’s command to make disciples seriously and start acting on that basis.

Disciples are to be like Christ. Have you ever watched a group of people, perhaps children, who are devoted to a particular celebrity and dress, talk and walk like the individual they idolize? It is only natural to emulate someone you respect and look up to. And since “disciple”
means “imitator,” disciplmakers become models to those who are learning to follow Christ. We must be careful not to duplicate ourselves. (It is very easy to cross the line from being respected to being idolized.) Instead, our task is to help develop partners in discipleship. We must strive to be able to say (paraphrasing Paul), “We first imitated the Lord and then you learned from us how to imitate the Lord” (1 Thess 1:6).

It is difficult, however, for modern Christians to picture themselves as disciples. We ask people if they are “Christians” instead of if they are “disciples,” as if you could be a Christian without being a disciple. In the early church followers of Christ were called disciples until someone in Antioch thought of the term Christian (Acts 11:26). There is nothing wrong with using the word Christian when it is properly understood because “Christian” means “belonging to Christ.” A disciple imitating Christ does belong to Christ.

But who decides what it means to be like Christ? Is there anywhere to go for answers? Yes! We can go to the textbook for discipleship, the Bible.

One of the disciplmaker's key tasks is to direct disciples to the Word of God. The Bible studies in the appendix, “Key Bible Passages,” are included specifically because growing disciples must spend time in God’s Word on a daily basis. If we want to make disciples, the Bible can show what it means to be like Christ. The Bible is the only reliable source for the knowledge to live an obedient and meaningful life. Luke wrote his Gospel “so that you can know the certainty of the things which you were taught” (Lk 1:4). John wrote “so that you may trust that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you can have life in his name” (Jn 20:31).

*Disciples are made in relationship.* From the beginning of our lives we learn by watching others and then imitating them. For example, children are encouraged to walk and talk by watching others.

Do you play tennis? If so, then how did you learn? Did you just see a racket, ball and a court and start trying out the combination until you had learned the principles of tennis? Of course not. First, you had to become aware of tennis as a reality (through observation) and then, by mimicking what you had seen, to learn clumsily how to put the racket, ball and court to good use. You probably had a teacher of sorts, someone who knew more than you. And your learning involved a process that enabled you to get better with time and practice.

As you think back over your life, you can no doubt think of many things that you learned by watching, learning and then imitating. This is how we learn to ride a bike, drive a car, and lift weights. It is also how we learn to “act cool” in high school, move up the social ladder in adulthood, and age gracefully in older years. In short, we learn about life in community.

The Christian life is exactly the same. There is no example in the Bible of a lone disciple. Even Paul, after his dramatic conversion and long stay in the desert, went to Jerusalem and associated himself with the apostles and later with the church at Antioch (Acts 9:26–30; 11:25–26). When he planted churches he always travelled in the company of others. He had a team-relationship at different times with Barnabas, Silas and Timothy. The relational, community-based model of disciplemaking had been demonstrated by Jesus and the disciples, and it provided the necessary support for Paul and the early church in the turbulent period after Pentecost.

Since we learn best in relationship, we most effectively learn to be disciples that way. But disciples produced through loving community in churches are too rare. The self-sufficient...
individualism of Western culture has seeped into the church and led to situations in which individuals are trying, often without notable success, to mature alone as disciples. Many resources—Christian books, videos, conferences, tape series—are available for these lone disciples to increase their knowledge about Jesus, but an accumulation of facts and ideas is only the beginning of Bible-based disciplemaking.

It takes a community of fellow disciples who can help each other learn to live a life transformed by the Holy Spirit. The aspect of “growing in community” is such an important concept in this book that it provides the basis for the names given to most of the chapters (“A Studying Community,” and so on). Without a community in which we can learn, practice, fail and eventually move out from as agents of change, we are left without a secure foundation. Without a foundation of community, the church will ultimately fail.

Disciples and Small Groups
In Ephesians and elsewhere the church is likened to a body, a living organism in which there are many interrelated parts that work together to make the body healthy and strong. Ephesians 4:11–16 says:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

This passage makes it clear that the church is intended to be a growing, dynamic organism, a community of growth. Is your fellowship growing? If so, is it growing as it can and should?

In most churches and fellowships the case can be made for an ever sharper focus on discipleship. Your church may be so large that individuals who need accountability in order to grow are getting lost in the crowd. Or it may be so small that members aren’t sure how to get started growing together as disciples. Perhaps some of the members of your church are looking for an opportunity to develop a Christ-centered lifestyle in partnership with others who feel the same calling, yet you’ve not found a way to get these people together. For whatever reason, churches often feel the need for something that will help them become more effective at making disciples.

So how does the church create specific opportunities for disciples to grow within the church? Small groups! Small groups lend themselves perfectly to growth in discipleship because people learn best when they are part of a caring and committed community. That is, they grow in understanding and obedience when:

- they experience things together with other learners
- they are held accountable to one another for continued growth
- they are affirmed and loved
- they are part of a structure that allows for and reinforces growth
Good small groups can provide each of the above, and much more by allowing people to learn through both affirmation and challenge. In a small group, people meet regularly with committed fellow disciples. They learn together, formally and informally. They have opportunities to get to know each other better, to pray for each other, and to help out when there are needs. They can look for opportunities to reach out to others outside their group, and they may be involved in some kind of ongoing ministry together, either in the church or in the community. Their shared experiences reinforce the things they are learning together.

Then, as their knowledge of each other deepens, they are able to challenge one another to take new steps in growth. Through this process, each one becomes a source of encouragement to the other in the difficulties of life. As their commitment to obeying Christ and their gratitude for his work in their life increases, they find new reasons to worship and thank God together. Out of this kind of community comes a sense of joyful challenge that draws others to join them as they seek opportunities for growth. The possibilities are limitless.

“Go and make disciples.”

Jesus’ commission reverberates across twenty centuries to today. Are you willing to be a participant in the great “relay” of discipleship? Are you able, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to invest yourself in the lives of others, to challenge them (and yourself) to obey all that Jesus taught? Are you willing to be a disciplermaker? Then you are ready to go forward!

Questions for Individuals or Groups

1. Who (or what) has been the most important influence in your spiritual life to help you grow?
   What characterizes that person’s life (or that event)?
2. Why do you think we need help learning how to be a disciple?
3. How did Jesus make disciples?
4. Why was Jesus’ method of teaching so effective?
5. In what ways is our disciplermaking like that of Jesus?
   In what ways is it different?
6. What are the most important things to keep in mind when we make disciples?
7. In what ways does your church help people grow in their understanding of and obedience to Jesus Christ?
8. What other things do you think the church might try that could help people grow?
9. How do you feel about the possibility of being a disciplermaker yourself?
10. If you’re hesitant, what would it take to get you to that point? If you’re enthusiastic, what kind of support would you want?
THE CHURCH THROUGH SMALL GROUPS

Have you ever seen the inside of a beehive? If so, then you have had the opportunity to observe thousands of tiny creatures working feverishly, going in countless directions. One group leaves the hive to locate and bring back nectar (used to produce honey) and pollen (to feed the young). Another group works in the honey section to fill and cap honey. Still another works with the “brood,” the eggs, nurturing them until they are born. A smaller group attaches to the queen bee in order to protect her.

The beehive is a good example of how different individuals can work together for one common goal. There is very little time to bicker when each bee’s contribution is necessary for survival. When each different group makes its contribution, the hive is strong.

The church is no different. If you consider the church around the world, there are millions of unique Christians supposedly working for one common goal—to make disciples of all nations. Sadly, however, not everyone carries their weight, so parts of the church are inefficient, understaffed and struggling to survive.

The ideal church would engage each member in discipleship while encouraging them to make a positive contribution for the growth of others. But who would coordinate such an effort? How does the church, with many different persons, put each person where they belong as if placing pieces in a giant puzzle?

Small Groups in Today’s Church
The answer to this complex problem may appear overly simple, but small groups can go a long way toward engaging people in personal growth. Small groups help them to grow in relationships and stimulate them to make a difference in their families, church and world. Once formed into small family-like groups of partners-in-discipleship, people begin to know themselves and others better. They move past surface conversation and the preliminary fears of opening themselves up to others, and they begin to experience real fellowship. While weekly worship services and a “fellowship hour” afterwards are undeniably important, they alone cannot provide the depth that is necessary for believers to take root and grow.

What does it look like?
Perhaps you were “sold” on the benefits of small group discipleship before reading this book. Or maybe the first chapter alone got you excited to make the attempt to implement small groups in your church. But you may not know the next steps to take. Laypersons and pastors alike can be unsure when it comes to actual implementation, and that alone can render a ministry helpless. For this reason, I have included an overview of the development of small group ministries in two fictitious churches—one with no previous small group experience and one with an already established small group ministry.
Emmanuel Church—a new program. John Frank became the pastor of Emmanuel Church, located in the suburbs of a large steel town. A recent graduate of seminary, he had been called to pastor this active church of 200 and to bring new and creative energy to its progressive-minded membership. He had been “discipled” in college and seminary, and had a burden for making disciples, so he decided to develop a small group program. He shared his vision with the ruling body of the church and started a small discipleship group with four men and women who wanted to grow in their faith.

The first months of the group meetings consisted primarily in getting to know each other by doing community-building exercises. In addition, each member of the group agreed to challenge each other to spend daily time with God and to take steps of faith in their daily lives. As the first year passed, the group gradually added Bible study, prayer and worship to their group time. Each of the five participants agreed to pray for non-Christian friends, and they were surprised when, later in the year, a few of their number started to actively share their faith with friends.

The group continued into its second year, but a new focus emerged under John’s leadership. He challenged each of the four to go through a training course with him and to start small groups of their own. In the fall he took them through the course, and then in January the four leaders moved out and started two new groups. Meanwhile, the original group met less frequently, once a month, for mutual support. The new small groups continued through the spring.

As the fall approached, more changes came. A group of interested church members wanted to start another group, so John agreed to lead the new group. Meanwhile, one of the newer groups outgrew its self-imposed limit of twelve members and split into two groups (since the newer groups had two leaders, there was a trained leader for each of the groups). At the end of the third year, there were four groups with thirty-three members, and the church began to feel the impact of this ministry.

The small group ministry solidified its place at Emmanuel Church in the fourth year. The original leaders began nurturing other potential leaders within the groups, so John led another group of small group leaders through the thirteen-week course. In January, three new groups were formed. By this time, twelve people had gone through the course and, even though some leaders had already moved, there were plenty of experienced leaders. A few of the older groups died out, and some of the younger ones grew and continued to split, so by the end of the year there were nine groups with fifty-six members. Included in these was a support group for divorced women and an evangelistic Bible study.

The ministry at Emmanuel Church had changed dramatically during the four years. The ministry of the church had “followed” people to their neighborhoods and places of work, and many people had been awakened in their faith or been brought to Christ.

Christ Church—a continuing program. Christ Church had benefitted from small groups for ten years when they decided to hire Jackie Gordon as their Associate for Discipleship. Jackie had spent a few years working with a parachurch college campus ministry, and she considered small groups to be her main area of expertise.

Upon examining the groups that currently met at Christ Church, the first thing that impressed her was their resiliency. With no training or pastoral care, these groups met, died, started up again, and died with amazing regularity. There were three groups currently meet-
ing, and Jackie wanted to be sensitive to their perceptions of her leadership. At the same time, she wanted to start a small group ministry that utilized good foundational principles. She approached the Christian Education Committee and asked them to discuss ways in which small groups could positively impact Christ Church. With her guidance, they formulated a plan that included training leaders and forming new groups. These groups were not meant to replace the existing ones, which were allowed to continue as they had without interruption.

At the beginning, the church leadership was asked to compile a list of the people in the church with “pastoral” gifts and a strong relationship with Christ. These people were mailed a letter and invited to a training course for leadership starting in the fall. Jackie ended up with ten potential leaders, and she took them through the course. In January, the ten leaders formed three groups, and by June there were twenty-three new people in small groups.

During the second year one of the original groups ended, two of the newer groups split, and at the end of the year there were forty-five members. In the third year Jackie took ten new leaders through the course, and they started three new groups. The last original group died, as did one from the first training group. Taking into account a group split, there were nine groups at year end with eighty people, and people had to take notice of what was happening.

When Jackie had started her program there had been some skepticism from some of the small group “veterans.” At the end of three years, however, many of these people had become the ministry’s staunchest supporters. Christ Church had experienced a significant spiritual renewal, and new leadership had started to emerge.

Benefits to the Church
You can see from these two churches that implementation of a disciple-making ministry was well-thought-out. In both cases a full-time clergy-person combined a vision for the ministry with dedication and persistence, and they were rewarded. But laypeople can make a big difference as well, with equally significant results.

Once a healthy, thoroughly planned small group ministry is implemented, the church can begin to enjoy some of many benefits. Among these are the discovery of spiritual gifts, the development of lay leadership, effective congregational care, worship, evangelism, and spiritual and numerical growth.

Discovering spiritual gifts. Imagine someone like Christina, a relatively new believer in the process of becoming involved in a local church. To Christina, the Sunday-morning service seemed so well planned and the choir so well rehearsed that, although she loved to attend, there really did not seem to be anything that she could do to help. There were plenty of activities in the church—suppers, work days and retreats—but someone else always seemed to be taking care of them. Of course there were needs in the nursery and with Vacation Bible School, but Christina knew she was not very good at working with children.

Then Christina joined a small group that met in Bill and Sue’s home. One week Sue asked Christina if she would coordinate refreshments for the next few months. Christina agreed, and in the process she discovered a new and better way for the group to share responsibility for refreshments, cleanup and childcare. One night Bill asked Christina to plan the group’s upcoming workday at the community soup kitchen. She demonstrated a great deal of sensitivity when bringing together the small group members and the soup kitchen staff, and the day was a success.
When the small group decided they would like to have a weekend retreat together, Christina volunteered to organize it. She collected ideas from the members, delegated responsibilities, and worked out the many logistical details. Everyone agreed that the retreat was wonderful. By then Bill and Sue realized that Christina had the gift of administration. They mentioned it to the church’s central group of leaders, and the next time the church was planning a major project she was asked to take responsibility for it.

Everyone benefitted from the discovery of Christina’s gift. She was able to develop her gift of administration in the midst of a loving community where she was affirmed and encouraged to use her gift to serve others. Bill and Sue had the satisfaction of helping Christina mature and start using her gift. The church leaders had another resource for projects. And those in the church who were always called upon to do things, and who were already exhausted, were stimulated by her enthusiasm and help.

This story can be retold with respect to any number of gifts for ministry which are desperately needed in churches today—leading worship, teaching, giving money, showing mercy, doing evangelism (see Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:4–11), and so on. The bottom line is that individuals are often hesitant to explore their spiritual gifts in a large group. Sometimes they are willing to serve, but are overlooked in the crowd. Or perhaps they have been “plugged” into church ministries where they do not fit. Small groups allow people to stimulate each other and as a result, to put their God-given gifts to use for building the church.

In order for this scenario to become a reality, the small group leaders need to be open to finding and using peoples’ gifts. When people discover and practice their gifts in small groups, the whole church can benefit.

Developing lay leadership. Many churches now recognize that, in order to effectively carry out the various ministries of the church, a primary task of pastors and church leaders is to equip lay people to use their gifts. The pastor is properly viewed more as a facilitator than as the primary means through which ministry flows. He or she looks for gifted potential leaders and then spends time with them, helping them grow as disciples and encouraging them to use their God-given talents. But how does the pastor or elder, overseeing the congregation, find potential leaders?

Imagine what it was like when Bill and Sue came to our hypothetical church five years ago. They met the pastor and a number of new people at the regular Sunday activities, but it took a long time to get to know people beyond a surface level. The pastor and church members liked Bill and Sue but didn’t really know much about them.

Eventually, Bill and Sue joined a small group led by Steve. Steve soon realized that Bill and Sue were mature disciples who possessed leadership ability. He asked them if they would be interested in leading a small group of their own since his group was growing and would soon be ready to divide into two groups. They prayed about it and agreed, so for the next few months Bill and Sue helped Steve with various leadership tasks in their small group. They also joined a small group leadership training course. Then, when Steve’s group was ready to split, they were prepared to be leaders. Bill and Sue became small group leaders, and as they became more visible within the church they were occasionally asked to take on other leadership roles that fit their gifts.

The pastor and other church leaders might never have recognized Bill and Sue’s potential as lay leaders if there had not been an opportunity to know them better and observe them

interacting with other people. Small groups provide that opportunity. They can be the key to finding “anonymous” members, discovering their leadership potential, and developing that potential for the benefit of the church. In this way the church finds that the ministry of the many replaces the ministry of the few.

**Effective congregational care.** Imagine another member of Bill and Sue’s group. Eugene’s wife died several years ago but he had, to all appearances, been getting along very well on his own. He had a good job and could take care of the house and fix his own meals. In church he appeared to be happy and at peace.

In the privacy of his home, however, he often felt very lonely. He became very depressed on Sundays as he watched families leaving church together. He longed to have his family intact again. Unfortunately, his children and grandchildren lived too far away to visit on weekends.

One night while everyone was having coffee and dessert after a small group meeting, Sue asked Eugene how things were going for him. Since he knew Sue and trusted her, and since she had taken the trouble to ask, Eugene shared his feelings of loneliness. Sue then discussed Eugene’s situation with Bill and the other members of the group. As a result, the small group members took turns inviting Eugene to spend Sunday afternoons with their families, and he felt cared for.

“Small” needs like Eugene’s often go unrecognized in a church. People like Eugene are not likely to voice their needs without being asked. If there is nobody in the church specifically looking out for them, it might happen that nobody asks how they are doing. Even if someone does care enough to ask, who can meet the need? Bill and Sue were able to call on others in their group so that no one person or family felt overburdened.

A small group which provides ministry to its members contributes to the overall care that churches should offer their members. But small groups can also help shoulder the burden of care within the larger body as well. They can plan outreaches, visit the sick and shut-in, care for those in need, comfort the bereaved, greet and usher at services, and do whatever else needs to be done in the church family. Churches that care for their own members are healthy. And small groups, with their “grass roots” relationships, can contribute to the health of the church by loving those in need.

**Thanksgiving and praise.** Worship is a dynamic response to God, acknowledging who he is and what he has done in our lives. It is an overflow of lives which have been spent walking with God. When churches come together on Sundays and at other times for worship, they are to corporately respond to God. Together, they can experience God’s presence and rejoice in knowing and loving him.

Let’s return to our imaginary group. Bill, Sue, Christina, Eugene and other members of the group had been praying for the healing of one of their members, Michelle. Michelle recovered, and they all rejoiced in God’s grace. When Kevin was looking for a job, they prayed, and he was able to find the job he was looking for. Once again the group was able to thank God. They found that God was ready and able to answer their prayers, even though they often discovered that their prayers were answered in ways that they had not anticipated. In community they were able to view the plan of God in its mystery and creativity, and they responded by offering heartfelt thanks and praise.

There were other ways that the group was able to worship. As they became closer to each
other and enjoyed deeper fellowship, they appreciated God for allowing them to be a part of such a close community. When they confessed their sin together and sought God’s mercy and forgiveness, they were able to experience God’s mercy and were freed to worship him without the burden of guilt. Little by little, they learned a lifestyle of responding to God.

When enough people in a church start experiencing these moments of responding to God, the worship of the whole church begins to change. If some of the praise and thanksgiving occurring in small groups overflows to the worship service, there can be a new intensity and sense of purpose felt in congregational worship.

Evangelism. If mature disciples like Bill and Sue find it hard to discover their niche in the church, you can guess how much harder it would be for someone like Carolyn, a woman seeking to know more about God. As the Holy Spirit drew her into faith in Christ, she knew that she needed to join other Christians to learn how to follow Jesus better. But she was intimidated walking into a church full of strangers. Then Sue, who took the initiative to know her, invited her to be in a small group. For Carolyn the small group was crucial in establishing her relationship with a new church.

Or what about someone who would be very unlikely to go near a church on his own? Christina had a friend at work named David, with whom she was eager to share Christ’s love. David had refused to consider attending church with her, but when Christina told him about her friends in a small group, he was willing to visit. Bill and Sue and the others welcomed him and eventually talked with him about faith in Christ. He became a Christian and sometime later joined the church. This happened because God used the small group to meet David at a point where he felt somewhat comfortable—a home. His resistance to Christ and the church was broken down in a loving environment.

Biblical evangelism is not a program, but a person-to-person process of sharing the Good News about forgiveness of sin and new life in Jesus. Because small groups are likely to be the most personal setting in a church, they are natural places for this kind of evangelism to take place. Churches that reach people with the gospel through small groups can benefit by watching “baby” Christians being “birthed” right in their midst. Very few things can touch a church in a more positive way than new Christians with their enthusiasm and desire to learn.

Spiritual and numerical growth. Many frustrated pastors have tried program after program to resurrect lethargic churches, often focusing on one particular aspect of the Christian life (such as prayer) at a time, as if one area can be dealt with apart from others. Small groups provide a format where every area of the Christian life can be experienced in a loving community.

Small groups can attract and keep new church members. When mature disciples like Bill and Sue begin attending a church, they find a place to belong and exercise leadership because of small groups. Seekers like Carolyn find a caring group of people to support them as they begin the process of growth in Christ. Unchurched people like David find a non-threatening community in which to test the claims of the gospel. In these ways and many more, small groups can take those members and visitors who are on the edges of the congregation and provide a place for them to sink roots and grow while allowing more mature believers to grow to even deeper levels.

What would happen if one-third of your church’s members participate in a small group? Would your church be any different from a similar church with no small groups? Absolutely!


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Your members will be cared for. Many will have a better understanding of their gifts. People will be exercising leadership. Corporate worship will become more meaningful. And the church will be growing.

Starting Strong—Staying Strong
As you move ahead with plans for a small group ministry, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, attempt to enlist the backing of the appropriate church leadership. It is very important for the pastor, ruling body and leaders to be supportive if the ministry is to prosper. It is possible to prosper even if church leaders are not sold on the idea of disciplemaking, but it is more difficult.

Second, be willing to start small. You would be advised against developing a program that arbitrarily assigns all church members to groups. It is much more helpful to start with a few volunteers who are serious about their faith. Nurture these first disciples, and allow their success to attract others into more groups over time. Starting small also allows time to recruit and train quality leaders.

Third, it is helpful to start by utilizing small group principles with existing groups in the church. Is there a men’s fellowship group, a women’s circle, a board of deacons, a Sunday-school class, or a youth group leadership team that could benefit from becoming more focused at making disciples of its members? The more your small group ministry arises out of natural groupings within the church, the more easily small groups will take hold.

No strategy or program can guarantee a healthy and growing church. Only the Holy Spirit, working within the lives of individual believers and in the community as a whole, can produce growth. But small groups have shown themselves to be an important means that God utilizes to create a caring, worshipping, witnessing, growing body—a church—that will bring glory to himself.

Questions for Individuals or Groups
1. What has been your church or fellowship’s experience with small groups in the past?
2. Have they had a positive impact on the church? Why or why not?
3. How did John Frank introduce small group ministry into his church?
4. How did Jackie Gordon introduce small groups in her church?
5. How would you introduce or build a stronger small group ministry in your church?
6. In what ways can churches benefit from small groups?
7. How have you seen some of these benefits in your own small group experience?
8. How do you see small groups operating in your church?
9. What is your vision for this ministry?
Imagine two football coaches arriving at Midtown, USA, at about the same time. One coach becomes the head football coach for Northern High School, a team with a 2–12 record the previous season and a history of losing. The other coach takes the proud Central High School team with a 9–5 record the previous year, a strong football tradition, and a starting team intact.

The coach at Northern understands the difficulties facing him in his situation, so he works patiently with his young players, teaching them the basics. The coach at Central is a hard-driving competitor who pushes his players to the edge of their endurance. He is determined to make “men” of his guys and to take them to new heights, starting with the state championship. Both coaches expect a great deal from their teams, and both want to win.

The first years produce few surprises for both schools, as Northern continues to struggle and Central continues to win games. In the first year records are 2–12 for Northern and 8–6 for Central, followed by 4–10 and 7–7 records in the following year. As the third year rolls around, however, it appears that Northern is an up-and-coming program and Central is on the way down. Even though Central posts a 6–8 record, it ends the season on a five-game losing streak. Mean while, Northern has its first winning season in 10 years (8–6) and even qualifies for the district playoffs.

After both coaches have been there for four years, a strange reversal is completed. Northern High School enjoys its finest year ever, with a 12–2 record and an advancement to the quarterfinals of the state championships. Meanwhile, Central had a dismal 4–10 record, and its coach resigns in frustration.

There is an old saying in coaching: “If the team wins, you give the team credit. If the team loses, you blame the coach.” Is that how we are to understand the two football teams and their coaches?

It is overstating things to say that Central’s downfall and Northern’s advancement were solely the responsibility of the coaches. Each coach, however, by virtue of his position, assumed responsibility for the overall program—including strategy, vision, leadership, the offensive and defensive systems, teaching, and a host of other duties, as well as the successes and failures that occurred. If the coaches do their jobs well, then their teams will be prepared, but if they are not effective, then their teams will be left too much to their own devices at game-time.

Winners and Losers
The importance of leadership and vision cannot be overstated. A prepared leader makes things happen; an unprepared leader allows circumstances to dictate which direction to move
in.

There are two things that set apart a superior small group program from the others. First, its leaders understand its purpose, so it has a vision that propels it forward. Second, the leaders do the fundamentals well. In this chapter we will review some of these basics of small group ministry as we start to lay the foundation for an understanding of the vision, purpose and function of small groups in your particular situation.

Understand Your Purpose
Try to imagine our football example applied to small group ministry (or, for that matter, any other number of ministries in the church). Northern Church has had a history of poorly led, uncoordinated small groups, while Central Church has enjoyed a thriving ministry. Both take on new leaders for their ministries at the same time, and after a number of years, Northern Church is benefiting from a thriving disciplemaking ministry while Central is on the decline.

At Central, the new leader enters and takes an inventory of groups. She decides immediately to put an accountability structure in place. She requires leaders to meet together weekly and to fill out complete reports of their activities and group meetings. Then, she decides what materials each group will use in its studies. When she does not like a particular leader, she does what she can to “help” him or her out of the ministry. Finally, when a few leaders come for advice on what to do with certain group situations, she gives them trite answers.

Even though some of these changes can be positive, the overall plan takes away from what should be a major part of small group ministry—to build strong disciples able to think for themselves.

Meanwhile, the new leader at Northern Church takes that ministry to new heights by emphasizing two concepts. First, she believes that people with a gift for pastoring (nurturing) should be encouraged to exercise leadership, so she views her role as that of discovering, supporting and encouraging leaders in their ministry. And second, she sees the need for educated leadership, so she invests her time and energy in equipping leaders.

She finds great worth in people and is willing to bring out the best in each individual. In addition, she demonstrates a compelling vision for her ministry when she perceives her role as that of an enabler, and the role of the small group ministry as one of building disciples.

The other leader acts more out of compulsion or reaction than from conviction. And the end result is that the ministry will not go far under her leadership.

Do the Fundamentals Well
When small group leaders are able to act out of conviction and according to principle, they will have laid a positive foundation. The structure is not complete, however, until its size, shape and function are constructed. This is where fundamentals enter the picture.

There are five fundamental small group tasks within the framework of the Christian community: study, worship, prayer, evangelism and mission. These key elements will shape the rest of the chapters in the book.

*The structure is community.* For some, “community” is something you do, while for others it is merely a component (or fundamental) of small group ministry. But community runs like a current through all of ministry, so it is a vital part of each fundamental.

At its core, community involves relationships. And a biblical understanding of *koinonia*...
includes relationships between God and a group of believers. It is because of the human-God-human aspect that building community is perhaps one of the most “spiritual” elements of a healthy church’s ministries. God created us for relationship, both with him and with one another. Community building in all aspects of ministry allows that relationship to grow in a healthy way.

There are two essential elements to community building. The first is that people make a commitment to be in relationship together, almost like a husband and wife do when they are married (“for better or worse”). Knowing that a commitment of love has been made enables the various people in a group to experience the freedom of testing, growing, disagreeing and challenging within a safe framework.

The other element in a healthy community is communication. By this is meant a two-way, interactive sharing of ideas so that mutual growth occurs. Talking does not necessarily produce growth—only communication does. And healthy communication brings together many (“comm” means “with, together”) into one (“uni” means “one”) by breaking down the barriers that exist between people.

Can you see the benefit of community building? It frees people to know that they have committed friends who love them, and to learn by experiencing and understanding life through the lens of other peoples’ beliefs and experiences. You can imagine learning to pray, or to read God’s Word, or to be a better spouse, in a secure environment that allows people to take off their masks and start the process of real growth together.

A Studying Community
Within a relationship-building framework, a primary task of the community of Christ is to know what God wants. So we must learn to read and apply God’s Word with integrity. Small group study is a human community’s effort to glean God-to-human truth through the help of the Holy Spirit.

The most effective Bible study tool available to laypersons is inductive Bible study. Where the Reformation was successful in putting the Bible into the hands of laypeople, inductive study is successful because it provides the tools for normal people to read, interpret and apply the Word of God. When used properly, inductive study makes the Bible come alive.

Basically, this approach offers an outline study of God’s Word. It provides the questions to be asked when working through the biblical text, and it allows the student to make proper application of lessons learned. To get you started, following is an overview of the steps involved in inductive study.

Step 1. Observation. This step involves locating the facts relevant to the original situation of the text and deciphering the original intent of the author. Once you understand the text as it was intended, it is a fairly simple process to draw present-day conclusions.

Picture yourself as an interested passerby who comes upon a scene of confusion after something has happened. Being naturally curious, you want to piece the story together to find out what happened. Your best approach in that moment is to assume nothing and ask questions. So you go from bystander to bystander and interview them: “What happened? Who was involved? When did it happen? Where did it happen? What did you do during the event? What did others do?” These and other probing questions lead you to eventually put together a reasonable estimation of what happened so that you can draw your own conclusions.
Just like a passerby, each Bible student comes upon an event after it happened and attempts to glean his or her own lessons based on an appropriate understanding of the issues and facts. And there are many clues in each book of the Bible that help you gather information.

First, you should learn about the “players” involved, so you ask “who” questions. Among the people you want to learn about are the author, recipients, characters in a particular passage, and others mentioned in the passage. For instance, answering the “who” in regard to the crucifixion would mean that you attempt to understand more about Jesus, the disciples, the women, the crowd, the guards, the rulers, the Pharisees and religious leaders, and others.

Next, answering “where” questions allows you to place the characters in a specific location, whether it is a particular home or a geographic area. Important to grasp is the exact location of certain events and the characteristics of places specifically mentioned in a passage or book. Working through the “where” questions is especially helpful when reading Old Testament passages because they are rich with references to places and events. Knowing the place can enable you to understand some of the points that an author wants to make.

It is also important to locate the event in a particular place in time. So you ask “when” with the hope of learning things such as when the author wrote, when the recipients lived, and the historical time frame in which specific references in the book occurred. For example, 2 Timothy takes on added meaning when you realize that Paul probably wrote it near the end of his life, he was in jail, and he was alone. Timothy, on the other hand, was young and was being handed the “baton” in the relay of church leadership by Paul.

Then, you will want to know what happens in each passage. A narrative will yield events and relationships, while a prophecy or Epistle passage contains ideas that were relevant to the original readers. So you ask “what” questions like, “What happens in the story? What issues are important? What idea(s) is the author attempting to convey? and What themes and/or words are necessary to understand?”

The easiest way to begin doing inductive Bible study is to get a notebook and fill it with paper. Then, on the first page write “Observation—Who,” on the second write “Observation—What,” and so on. You can incorporate the interpretation and application steps (below) in much the same way. Then, you begin to fill it in, and you are on your way.

**Step 2: Interpretation.** Once you gather the facts, you cease to become a mere “passerby” and start to become an “informed bystander.” But a collection of facts, no matter how detailed, is not enough. You must start putting the story together in such a way that it makes sense.

Having asked questions about the event you “happened upon” earlier, you learned that the “who” includes a bank teller, policeman, innocent woman bystander, robber and crowd. The “where” is a bank and the sidewalk in front of the bank. The “when” happened just after noon, when the largest crowd frequents a bank, and the time frame was ten minutes. And the “what” includes a gun being pointed at people, a written demand on paper, a confused scene complete with shouting, screaming, extreme danger, and a hostage situation.

From these facts you then move to the “interpretation” stage and put together a story that incorporates all of the facts. You come up with this scenario: The lunch crowd had entered the bank and a number of people were awaiting their turn at the window when a scream from one of the tellers brought everyone to attention. A gunman had handed her a written demand for money. When she screamed, the guard on duty pushed his alarm buzzer and reached for his gun, but the robber grabbed a nearby woman and pointed his gun at her head. The guard
gave up his gun, the teller hastily filled a sack with money, and the robber backed onto the sidewalk with his hostage. All of a sudden, he released his victim and ran just as the police screeched to a halt in front of the bank. He was able to get away, but police were in hot pursuit.

That’s quite a detailed story to put together with facts, but if you have done your homework in the observation stage it can be quite accurate. In interpretation you work again through the “who, where, when and what” questions. In observation you pulled the facts apart in order to examine each one separately, and then in interpretation you attempt to put them together again in such a way that they make sense together. In other words, you want to see how the who, what, when and where are interrelated. Your search for answers will often lead you through the whole Bible and into Bible “helps” (Bible dictionaries, study Bibles, and so on). While observation is confined to the actual text being studied, interpretation makes use of any resource that will provide answers.

Once you have pieced together a basic understanding of the text you are studying, you must ask the question that is of extreme importance—why? Whether in a narrative history account, an Epistle of Paul, or a psalm of David, it is essential that you discern the author’s intent. Every story, whether it is a genealogy or lofty teaching, has a purpose that was clearly relevant to the original recipients. It wasn’t put in place by accident, but by a God who wants to communicate truth through it. So by the end of the interpretation stage you must “boil down” the unit you are studying—whether it is a verse, chapter or book—into one complete thought that expresses the author’s purpose and sheds light on all facts.

Looking at our robber story, you may know what happened, when, and to whom, but why did the robber do what he did? Was he going bankrupt and decided to pull a desperate heist? Or did he have an awful past and was reacting out of hatred for people? As one tabloid puts it, “Inquiring minds want to know!”

Answering “why” does two things. First, it enables you to see what the author was trying to teach people many centuries ago. And second, it allows you to move through history to the present day in order to make application to your own life situation.

**Step 3: Application.** Once you have the author’s intent clearly in mind you can attempt to discern what his or her message means to you. In this step, you “react” to the Bible story by working through your own response. Looking closely upon its message allows us to see where God’s Word is convicting us, and applying its truths brings joy to obedient hearts.

This step is clearer and easier in some instances than others. Many people feel safe reading Paul’s Epistles because they are often easy to apply. But what about the Psalms, or the Prophets, or Revelation? These are much more difficult.

When attempting to apply God’s Word, let just a few principles guide you. First, go to your statement of author’s intent (“why”), and ponder the lesson that is being taught. Then, understand the people to whom the message was intended and compare your situation, attitudes and understanding with theirs (you may not be a “Pharisee,” but you may have some of their characteristics). Next, ask what this passage is saying about your lifestyle and beliefs. And, finally, decide upon a course of action in response to what you feel God is saying to you through his Word.

Knowing how to do inductive study is just the first step. The second is knowing how to utilize it in a group setting. And while this may seem a bit intimidating, it’s not too difficult if you do your homework.


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You must first choose a book of the Bible to study. Many inductive study groups choose the book of Mark because it appears to be laid out in a fairly logical fashion. But no matter which book you choose—including Old Testament ones—here are a few helpful ideas (which are helpful even if you choose another mode of Bible study):

1. **The leader must have an overall understanding of the book before taking a group through its various passages.** You will want to read through the whole book (preferably in one sitting) and attempt to understand its audience and author, times and places, important themes and ideas, and its one clear purpose. If you need help with this step, consult Bible dictionaries and study Bibles for their summary of the book you are preparing to study. The information gleaned in this step will enable you to better discover the message contained in shorter passages.

2. **Lay out the book in such a way that you study it for a specific period of time in a logical manner.** You probably don’t want to wander aimlessly through a book of the Bible for too long or too short a time. Dividing the passages according to a logical plan over a specific number of weeks or months allows everyone in the group to know what will be studied each week, what is expected of them, and how long they will be involved with a particular book.

3. **Give the group a set of questions to work through a week in advance of a particular passage’s study.** In order to allow the group to be prepared and to foster stimulating discussion, let the group interact with a passage before it is studied in the group. This means that you will need to study the passage early enough to compile questions before the meeting previous to the group study.

   The questions can follow a simple formula. First, ask observation questions to help them dig through the facts of the passage. Just as we discussed above, these questions will all start with who, where, when or what. Examples of these questions include, “Who are the characters involved in this story? Who is Jesus speaking to? Where does this story occur? What happened prior to this event? after this event? What are the Pharisees concerned with? the disciples?” Second, ask interpretation questions that will enable the student to make sense of the story. These also follow the “who, where, when and what” formula, but they are expanded to include “why” as well: In what ways does this event demonstrate Christ’s continued tension with the Pharisees? What issues seem to be most important to Jesus? Why did Mark include this story? What is the main idea that we are supposed to glean from this passage?

   Then, ask a few application questions, such as: “What does this passage teach me about Christ? being a disciple? In what ways am I like the Pharisees? the disciples? What am I supposed to learn from this story? What can I do to apply it to my life now?”

4. **Lead the inductive study by building on the work already done by the students.** When it is time to study the passage that group members have worked through (all members must come prepared or you will be seriously hampered), don’t try anything complicated. When students are prepared, then everyone is a teacher. The best thing you can do is ask a few good questions and simply keep things moving.

   You may choose to structure the lesson time by simply following the outline of inductive study. There’s nothing wrong with that approach, but you should try not to duplicate work students have done on their own. It may be more helpful to structure a time in which you interact with the passage. To do so, you can follow the basic outline utilized in the “Key Bible Passages” appendix.

   First, you prepare an interactive exercise, in which you attempt to isolate the key idea in

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the passage and provide a lighter, yet pointed, activity that helps the group become focused in the appropriate direction. For instance, if the key idea in this week’s study is that of obedience, you may open discussion with something like this: When you were young and were caught doing something wrong, did you usually “come clean,” lie, dodge the issue by fighting back, or run? Why did you act as you did?

This exercise accomplishes a number of things. It contributes to the building of community by allowing people to share about themselves. Also, it is a “backdoor approach” to the idea of obedience, highlighting the fact that we are naturally rebellious. And, finally, it gives people an opportunity to consider themselves in light of the evening’s topic.

Second, you can follow the interactive exercise by directing the group to the passage under consideration. Allow the group to read the passage together and then to work through key issues (again, don’t rehash what they already know. Let them interact with what they have discovered). A helpful thing in the Gospels is to put yourself into the place of the disciples, Pharisees or others, viewing Christ and his actions and teachings through their eyes. In an Epistle, your group may spend time discussing a key “theological” word from the text, such as “faith,” or “justification.” As the discussion leader, you will want to ask questions about the passage that highlight certain points. Then, encourage the group to come to some sort of consensus on what the passage teaches.

Then, third, discuss how each individual and the group is to respond to what they have learned. You may open this area of discussion by asking: “Okay, now, we’ve had a stimulating discussion on Jesus and the Pharisees, but what does this passage mean to you, today?”

5. Finally, let the Holy Spirit guide the group. Encourage the group to understand that they are to respond to their relationship with God and others. Above all, let your Bible study be a personal ministry of prayer and the Holy Spirit. You can be the best discussion leader in the world and still not see growth, while another praying, Spirit-filled leader sees results because he or she is open to God and what God wants to do.

A Worshiping Community
The second fundamental ministry of a group is that of worship. Many groups do not worship together, perhaps feeling that worship is something that is solely for the benefit of the corporate church. Yet we are made for worship, and are encouraged by God to worship him. Worship opportunities, like singing, reading psalms, sharing in giving God thanks, and praising God together in prayer, belong in small groups. When we feel close to God, a significant part of our being is filled. When the community of Christ constituted as a small group has the opportunity to respond to God together, they should make time to do so.

A Praying Community
Prayer is communication, and communities are called to communicate. Since prayer is communication, and since humans are better at talking than communicating, prayer must be learned. Small group is a good place to start. Take time in your group meetings to invite God in and then to talk with God. Healthy prayer allows God to become an integral part of the group situation.
An Evangelizing Community
When a group grows in community, learns about God through the Word, and responds to God in worship and prayer, it opens itself up to the joy and blessing that a healthy relationship with God and others brings. But there is more to the Christian faith than just receiving, namely, that people blessed by God take the time, indeed, make the time, to share the Good News of Christ with others. Theingrown church is a contradiction in terms—God made the church to be an ever-expanding kingdom that reaches with Christ’s hands into the community, workplace and family to bring others to Christ. Sooner or later the development of a group will be stunted if it does not begin to have a desire for the lost of the world.

A Mission-Oriented Community
The last basic fundamental of small group ministry is that groups will, in the process of growth, learn to identify with God’s desire that the whole world will have the opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ. This is where some groups will decide to support missionaries, go on short-term trips, participate in local cross-cultural mission work, sponsor mission conferences, or other possibilities. How blessed the people of God are when they serve alongside each other to bring Christ’s love to those with need!

Knowing What to Do and When to Do It
You might be feeling inadequate after reading the previous section. There is so much that a small group can do! Leading in any of the fundamental areas can be difficult, not to mention the issues that come with discovering and utilizing your own leadership style. There is help, however—for those who know how to utilize tools. Here are a few ideas that will help you to implement a more effective ministry.

1. Help the group to write a clear, concise covenant that communicates the nature of the group and its membership requirements. Simply put, the covenant is an agreement that the group makes in relation to its character and purpose. Included in the agreement should be the length of time of the contract, materials the group will study, a layout of group time, communication stipulations, and membership expectations. If you are ready to launch a ministry now, then you may want to turn to chapter thirteen for a more detailed explanation of the group covenant, including an example of what the covenant must cover.

The covenant is the leader’s friend because it will spell out exactly what is to happen in group meeting times. The leader simply implements what the group has already decided. For instance, suppose that the group decides to have two-hour meetings that include 30 minutes for community building, 30 minutes for study, 15 minutes for sharing, 15 minutes for prayer, and 30 minutes for relaxed conversation at the end. In this case, the group leader’s responsibility is simply to initiate this program and see that it runs effectively. A good group covenant can go a long way toward making the leadership role an effective and fulfilling one.

2. Direct the group through the various stages of group life so that it becomes a loving community. Every group, like every relationship, goes through various stages. People often speak of marriage involving several stages, including: The “honeymoon stage” and the “why does she/he leave the toilet seat up/down?” stage. It is much the same with groups. Groups often experi-
ence an early flush of success, followed by growing tension, perhaps even conflict, and ultimately, we would hope a healthy community.

Although every group will chart its own course, the goal is to develop a loving community, and you can enhance the process by emphasizing, and facilitating, two things. First, include in the covenant and continually remind the group that whatever is said in the group must remain in the group. There is no time in which gossip is helpful. If you are to talk about another member of the group, do so in front of him or her.

The second thing to keep in front of the group is the idea of honesty. It is a sad commentary on the Christian church that we are often extremely effective at masking the truth. The small group should be a place where members can come to speak and hear truth.

3. Know your leadership role. Some leaders will be too laissez-faire, others too intense and controlling. You should obviously strive to maintain a positive balance between control and looseness, task-orientation and relationship building.

Your first job is to set the pace. Share a personal vision for discipleship and community that will “get your group’s motor started.” Fix in your mind clearly where you want the group to go, and communicate it clearly from the beginning. Then, facilitate group relationships and decision making by building community and helping the group create a covenant that is consistent with its wishes and desires. Next, delegate some of the responsibility for the group so that others are involved and peoples’ gifts, including your own, are utilized to the maximum degree. Then, throughout the group life, pray daily for each individual and for the group so that God’s Spirit begins to mold and shape the group according to God’s image of how things should be. And finally, continually evaluate so that you know where you have come from as a group and where you are going.

The Task That Lies Ahead
In this chapter we covered a great deal of ground—that will be built upon in the coming chapters. As you can see, there is a lot to think about, and the expectations upon leaders are great. But keep two things in mind. First, let your ministry be built upon positive principles, remembering that the goal of small groups is to make disciples, the foundation is leadership, and the structure within which growth occurs is community. Second, whatever fundamentals your group utilizes, do them well, using every possible means to build community.

Questions for Individuals and Groups
1. What are potential reasons that the football program faltered in one place while prospering in another?
2. What two things set a superior program apart from others?
3. Why is understanding your purpose so important in small group ministry?
4. In your own words, what is the purpose of the small group program in your church?
5. What is your purpose as a leader?
6. Why does community run like a thread through every aspect of small group ministry?
7. What are some benefits of inductive Bible study?
8. How can you implement an inductive Bible study in the small group setting?
9. What are other important fundamentals of a small group, and how may you implement these?
10. What was the most important thing to you in this chapter?

4

BECOMING A LEADER

You have been hiking for five miles with a fifty-pound pack on your back as part of a “Weekend Wilderness Adventure.” You are on this weekend getaway with a group of other businessmen and women in the hope of relieving some of the stress and strain of everyday living. The day is clear, the air crisp, and you hope to be able to get some beautiful panoramic shots with your camera.

The group has had a hard time getting started, however. No one knew how to pack the backpacks, so as a result many things have clattered noisily during the hike. Some of the smaller members of the group are having an especially hard time with their packs, and one guy is limping badly from a fall that he took a few miles back. As you struggle with your own pack, you wonder when the group leader will call a break.

The leader doesn’t seem to have noticed that there are problems. You can see him hopping merrily in front of the group—probably because he doesn’t have a pack of his own. When asked why he didn’t have a pack, he told the group that the experience was theirs, not his. He needed to be free so that he could point the way for the group and stay in front.

Eventually, the group comes to a cliff, and the leader consults his map. Sure enough, this looks like the cliff he is going to teach you to rappel on. You lower your pack to the ground while the leader gives instructions and gathers the rappelling supplies. You are nervous as you prepare to receive your training. Ladders scare you enough—how much more the sheer wall of a cliff. An encouraging thought, however, is that a number of your friends have done this activity and lived through it. They had taken lessons from expert mountain climbers and had felt a great sense of accomplishment.

The leader hooks the belt around the first rappeller. As you move closer to the edge you can see the climber’s face. She looks pale and afraid. But the leader, who appears undaunted by her response, is giving instructions in a firm, clear voice. As he continues on, however, concern appears on the faces of other group members. He isn’t making sense!

One group member timidly raises her hand and asks him how many times he has rappelled. As he urges the nervous first rappeller toward the edge he says, “Why, I’ve never rappelled before in my life! I’m scared to death of heights. But don’t worry, I know what I’m doing. I’ve watched this being done two or three times...”
Walking Your Talk
Would you trust your life to a rappelling instructor who didn’t know what he was talking about? Most likely not. We rightly stay away from rappelling instructors who have never been on the face of a cliff. Until they have lived through the experience themselves, they cannot identify with the struggles, fears and real dangers that come from rappelling.

The “leader” in our hiking story did not carry a pack, was not sensitive to the needs of others, and was not prepared to lead the group in rappelling. He was not a leader at all. Leaders cannot take people where they have not already gone. The rappelling teacher needed to feel what it was like to dangle on the face of a cliff. In the same way, the Christian leader needs to understand the struggles and challenges facing an active disciple.

Sometimes those of us who live in democratically oriented societies are a little uncomfortable with the idea of leadership. We feel the necessity to affirm the worth of every individual, so we are hesitant to single out any one person as somehow “better” than the rest. But effective Christian leaders are not of more value than others. Instead, they are servants who seek to build up the body of Christ. They are ones in whom others recognize maturity and experienced discipleship. They are willing to offer whatever spiritual gifts they possess to serve their churches.

Many people are standing at the “cliff edge” of Christian discipleship and are just waiting for someone to lead them. With the proper supervision, a whole new world can be opened up to them. As they struggle and claw, and take in the exhilarating view that accompanies growth, they will discover new perspectives and dimensions in life. When they reach the various destinations the Lord has for them they will feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment. They will be challenged to attempt bigger and more difficult challenges in discipleship. As their horizons expand, the church is blessed.

But who will lead them in the process of discipleship?
The church is in need of leaders who have walked in the footsteps of Christ, who are willing to demonstrate a genuine Christian life.

What Does a Leader Look Like?
A leader is one who, because of good character qualities, is able to influence others in a positive way. Most people are familiar with the phrase “born leader.” These are people who are so gifted in people skills that they appear to make things happen without much difficulty. While there aren’t too many born leaders in the world, there are many, many people who exercise leadership in various ways. Some of these leaders are obvious, and some are not so obvious. Perhaps some people who consider themselves leaders are not, while others who do not consider themselves leaders are.

Leadership ability is not necessarily something you are born with. It does come more naturally to some people than to others, but most people develop their ability to lead with time and experience.

A good leader is growing in maturity. Mature people know them selves well, are comfortable with what they know, and know how to use their abilities to help others. Others can look at such people and see qualities that they admire and want to imitate. A leader in this mold might not, in fact often does not, realize how much influence he or she has. That’s because a mature
leader will care for others without calculating personal gain. This kind of leader is willing to take a back seat when it is necessary and will mobilize people around Christ instead of around himself or herself. Very few people are totally mature in the ways we have just described, but a mature leader will at least make every effort to be a servant.

**Leadership has many personalities.** We often think of leaders as outgoing. But many times the quiet leader is able to develop the full potential of a group of people while the outgoing leader does not. This is not to put down the outgoing individual who wants to lead, but to demonstrate that leaders come with all types of personalities. In the Gospels we see that Peter usually spoke while the other disciples stood in the background. God used each of the disciples, however, to build his kingdom.

An outgoing person may be good at working with larger groups of people, or perhaps may be able to warm up to new people very quickly. A quiet person might feel more comfortable working in small group settings. Then again, a quiet person may be a great speaker and an outgoing person may prefer smaller groups. The fact is that the Lord can use every personality type to do his will.

**How Does a Leader Think and Act?**

Before proceeding, it is important to emphasize that nobody is perfect. We are all disciples-in-process who, by God’s grace, are striving to become more like Christ. As you read the following qualities, please understand that this section attempts to set a high standard of leadership. Although you can measure yourself according to each criteria, you should not judge yourself in a critical manner.

1. **A Christian leader’s character is evident in his or her relationship to God.** A Christian leader:
   - *Desires God’s will.* A Christian leader should, first and foremost, want what God wants. In the process of discipleship we come to realize that the kingdom of God has a King who wants our obedience, who brings both reward for obedience and discipline for disobedience. Our goal, as citizens of the kingdom, is to learn how to bring our desires in line with God’s.

   There is no room for self-seeking in Christian leadership. A selfish Christian leader is counterproductive to the purposes of God. When a leader seeks selfish ends, people they influence will do likewise. On the other hand, when a leader actively pursues God’s will, others are likely to follow.
   - *Is willing to let God have control.* In a world where we are bombarded by ever-increasing problems, the natural reaction is to find areas of life that we can influence so that we feel like we are in control. We may try to control our work situations, children or spouses. We may try to make lots of money so that our future seems under control. We may refuse to talk about topics that threaten us. Or we may even seek control through such “outs” as alcohol, drugs, food and sex. In short, we do anything that we feel will “save” us.

   Unfortunately, our efforts at maintaining control can bring very narrow and miserable lifestyles. If we face reality, we come to realize that all of life is beyond our control. There are no guarantees in life except one—God loves us and will never remove himself from us. We can give control of every area of our lives to God in full assurance that he knows what is best for us.

   Willingness to give God control means that we need to spend time acquainting ourselves with God’s power. The psalms provide great instruction in this respect. In the psalms we see people struggling to reconcile their struggles and loss of control with their understanding of a
powerful God who is involved in every area of life. And even though they sometimes complained and moaned about life, they always arrived at the point where they acknowledged God’s power and ability to turn things for their good.

The issue of control also applies to people whom we are trying to help. When we attempt to help people, we sometimes try to do the work of God. We try to change people’s thoughts and actions as if we are able to do what God alone can do (and as if they didn’t have wills of their own). A balanced Christian leader is able to “let go” of people and entrust them to God’s care while doing all that he or she can for each person.

Good leaders know that a struggle with control is inevitable. Through an awareness of ourselves and our motives, we can attempt to let God have control of every area of our lives, and of those with whom we work. Giving up control is a sign of positive Christian leadership.

□ Is humble. Humility is one of the most difficult virtues to understand; therefore, it is one of the most elusive to grasp. It is hard because each human being comes naturally equipped with pride and selfishness, both of which are opposites of humility.

Humility involves a correct understanding of God, others and self. It is rooted in the greatest commandment of all: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first, and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” Humble people put God first and seek his glory. Then, they seek good for others in addition to their own good.

There is no “doormat theology” here. In fact, a humble person is very proud in a positive sense. Only truly humble people can possess the confidence to help others because they know what they have to offer and are not scared to give of themselves. Humility does not seek rewards, but it finds satisfaction in acts of love. It finds its greatest joy in knowing that God the Father approves.

Too many leaders compete with each other, seeking the world’s approval instead of rooting their motivation in God. Rather than moving up in the world we need to focus on moving ahead in a spiritual sense. There is much more love to go around when leaders are humble.

2. A Christian leader’s character is evident in his or her personal life. Christian leaders are:

□ Willing and able to use their gifts to help others. Many people appear genuinely surprised when told that they have gifts that are appreciated by others. But just think how much more useful their gifts would be if they knew what they have and work to improve these gifts. The preacher can preach better, the servant can serve better. The whole church will function more effectively if we help each other to be confident in the areas in which we do well.

□ Aware of their strengths and weaknesses. A leader should be self-confident but also realistic. We need to be aware of what we do well. We also need to know what we don’t do very well.

A grave mistake occurs in churches when people who have no ability in a certain area are given those responsibilities. This is more counterproductive than anything. Not everyone should preach or teach. Not everyone should try to coordinate or administrate. People who are gifted in the specific area should work with children, youth or older adults. People with good voices should sing, while those with carpentry skills should build.

A healthy dose of self-honesty is good for any leader. Take an inventory of those things you do well, and those things that you do not do so well. You may decide that you talk too much when in group situations. Dominating the conversation by one individual tends to inhibit the growth of the group. Your awareness of this weakness, however, can be useful. You
can share your weakness and ask your group to help you, or you can organize group meeting
times in such a way that your weakness is minimized.

□ Risk-takers. A leader who is confident in God’s acceptance and in his or her abilities is willing
to take risks. Forward-looking leaders are not afraid to take risks even though there is the pos-
sibility of failure. If you were to take an inventory of your friends, you would probably dis-
cover that those who take calculated (not foolhearty) risks are the ones who are moving ahead
in relationships, at work and in personal growth. Those who are scared to take risks often get
stuck in places where they are not happy.

Fear of failure keeps many people from being all they can be in Christ. In the parable of
the talents (Mt 25:14–30) three servants were given varying “talents” of money. Their master
then went away and left the servants to themselves. The first two servants invested their talents
so that they were able to give the master a great profit when he returned. The third hid his tal-
ent, feeling that it would be much safer underground. The master rewarded the first two ser-
vants and punished the third.

The message for leaders is obvious. God has given us gifts and abilities to use for the gain
of ourselves and others. When we use what we have been given by God, the risk of failure is more
than offset by the benefit of gain. When we stop moving forward, we start moving backward.

We need leaders who take risks—not great gambles, but thoughtful, calculated risks.
When you work with people, you will sometimes risk giving love to someone who does not
return it. It is a painful experience when that happens, but the reward of healthy relationships
is worth that risk.

Along with taking risks in relationships, there are other times when small group leaders
will be called upon to take risks. In a time where group tension is running high, you may be
called upon to bring things into the open. Perhaps it is time for your group to think of divid-
ing, or dying, yet you know that bringing up the subject will create conflict. Maybe your
group gossips about people, and you feel that it is time to confront the issue.

A good leader will sort through the issues and take risks with the full knowledge of both
benefits and detriments. When failure occurs, that same leader will pick up the pieces and
move forward. When success occurs, another building block has been laid in place and the
group can continue stronger and healthier.

□ Ethical. Our culture has made a virtue of getting away with little things. For example, many
people feel little guilt over income that somehow never shows up on our taxes. And when an
employee at McDonald’s returns too much change, we think, “Why would McDonald’s be
hurt by my taking this $1.50?” Many people would not consider giving the money back.
“White lies” don’t cause us much concern.

Human nature should teach us that we are not satisfied with small steps. We tend to take
bigger and bigger steps, often without knowing it. The child who snatches one cookie, think-
ing it won’t be noticed, will be tempted to take another. Little “slips” can easily produce a pat-
tern that governs our thinking, followed by bigger slips and finally a fall.

Our world is full of politicians, businesspeople, and even clergy who fall into ethical sins.
When we read the papers, we find it hard to trust the very leaders that we have chosen. Lead-
ers need to be above reproach so that we can foster the kind of respect that our position dic-
tates. As a leader, you have a responsibility to be obedient in the small things as well as the big
things.
3. A Christian leader’s character is evident in his or her relationship with others. A Christian leader is:

☐ Nurturing. It makes little sense to be a leader without caring about people’s growth. A good leader will try to facilitate the growth process of those under his or her leadership. This is what the process of discipleship is all about.

There are two sides to a good nurturing relationship. First, a healthy relationship between discipler and disciple will involve complete acceptance of the person being discipled. You cannot work with people unless you are willing to accept them, with both good and bad qualities, as children of God. You will need to pray that you can see them as God sees them—beautiful, full of potential, and worthy of love and care.

The second aspect of a good nurturing relationship is that the discipler will want to provide an atmosphere in which the disciple can grow. Even though the leader has accepted others as they are, the potential for growth has not been downplayed. On the contrary, when people feel totally accepted they often feel free to start, or continue, the growth process. The end result of a nurturing relationship is a disciple who becomes more and more like Christ.

☐ Sensitive in listening. You probably have someone that you can talk to, a friend who understands and cares enough to listen without making rash judgments. This is also one sign of a good leader. Everyone needs at least one person who takes the time and makes the effort to be a listener.

You may be wondering just how much listening you will need to do. Perhaps you know people who, if you took the time, would stretch your listening ability to the breaking point while telling you all of their personal problems. Your instincts tell you that it is not helpful for people to be stuck in cycles of self-pity and frustration.

In such a situation, a characteristic like sensitivity in listening needs to be combined with other characteristics, like nurture. You can do more harm than good by listening to endless repetitions of pain, real or imagined. The purpose for good listening skills is to help others to grow. It is good to keep in mind that your ears are a tool for listening. When you allow yourself to be trapped by a needy person while you pretend interest, you are not helping anyone to grow (much less yourself).

One of the greatest assets you can develop is the art of asking questions. Questions keep you from being judgmental, and they allow you to steer clear of conversational roadblocks. Asking questions is helpful for disciples because it allows them to refine issues and it requires them to come to grips with the nitty gritty of what they are saying. Through listening, good leaders become better at understanding what is happening with individuals, with the group, and with themselves. As James 1:19 puts it, “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” This is good advice for the leader.

☐ Vulnerable. A leader should set a tone of partnership with others by being open about himself or herself. This is not to say that you must “tell all.” On the contrary, you need to approach the discipleship relationships as you would any other relationship. You are not called on to tell every secret, nor should you try to show emotions that you normally don’t. A good vulnerable leader will never try to fake it.

The reason that vulnerability is desirable in the leader is because you are then offering yourself as a real person in real relationships. If you make mistakes, you have the freedom to
point them out. If you are struggling with your leadership in the group, don’t hesitate to share it. If you feel that the group is not being honest, you can lead the way by sharing your feelings about the group. Chances are great that if you feel tension, others will feel it as well.

Although leaders do not need to tell everything, it is helpful when they can state things the way they are. People need some forms of vulnerability, especially since the opposite of the word vulnerable is “hypocrite”!

☐ A servant. In the Gospels we discover that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28). From the example of Jesus, we discover that we either serve others or we serve ourselves. There is no middle ground.

Consider what Paul said in the second chapter of Philippians. He challenged the Philippians to be like Christ in that, “although he is in very nature God, (he) did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness ... he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him” (Phil 2:6–9). Notice that Jesus recognized his equality with God, but he was willing to give everything up so that others could benefit. How much more should God’s children give up their worldly status to gain in stature as a servant.

A different picture is painted in James 3. In this passage James berates those who call themselves leaders while being selfish and arrogant: “But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (Jas 3:14–16). When we picture leaders like those spoken of in James 3, we begin to understand the confusion that they create.

There are many examples that could help us describe the characteristics of service, but few are more appropriate than this phrase: “Willing to go first, willing to go last.” Leaders are often willing to go first when things are highly visible, and there is glory. The flip side is that we tend to go last when there is no glory to be given us. We love to lead the parade but hate to wrap towels around our waists and wash feet. Christ, however, calls us to be different. Servant leaders will take the lead when things aren’t glamorous, and they will be willing to take up the rear when others may benefit during more visible times.

☐ Willing to give leadership away. The process of discipleship is synonymous with leadership development. A growing disciple is able to influence others in a positive way, demonstrating that they are becoming leaders as well.

Good leaders will train others to do the ministry of Christ. Unfortunately, leaders often get so involved in their own work that they don’t have the time or energy to invest themselves in the lives of others. It is easier at first to do things yourself than to train someone. But Jesus seemed to find great potential in others. As in Jesus’ case, the time spent training usually pays great dividends in expanded ministry effectiveness and scope.

One test of a person’s leadership effectiveness is what happens when it is necessary to leave, even for a short time. If things collapse, the leader probably did not work hard enough to develop leadership. If things keep running, or even improve, the leader has done a good job.

As your small group develops, you should begin allowing others to do more of the visible work and begin stepping out of the forefront. In doing so, you will be developing leadership in others.
Able to devote time and energy to the task of leading a small group. How much time a small group takes will vary from situation to situation. It will depend on how the church or organization structures its groups, the number of people in each group, the stage of development the group has reached, and the interests and abilities of the leadership. Ideally, each church should set general guidelines for how much time a leader might expect to spend each week on small group ministry.

Each leader should ask, “What does this demand of my family? Do I have the emotional, physical, and spiritual resources at this time to serve as a leader? Is this God’s will for me at this time?” Perhaps on consideration you may realize that this is not the right time to take on small group leadership. On the other hand, if you have a reasonable amount of time and energy, and your family’s support, God may be calling you to serve him as a small group leader in your church or fellowship.

Tools for Personal Growth
If you have been honest with yourself while reading this chapter, you will realize that we all have a long way to go in improving our leadership ability. On this side of heaven, we will always struggle with deficiencies in some areas, and it would be unreasonable to expect more.

At the same time, each and every leader must continue growing throughout his or her life. Leadership effectiveness will be validated by the way that Christian leaders apply discipleship principles to their own lives.

So the ultimate measure of healthy leaders is how they use God-given tools for personal growth before expecting others to follow. For disciplers that means seeking encouraging Christian relationships so that you can grow in community, learning how to listen to God by reading and applying his Word, learning how to communicate with God through prayer and worship, and sharing God’s love with a world in need.

Although every Christian has the opportunity to use these tools for personal growth, the leader must be proficient in their use.

Freedom to Fail Gracefully
What happens when we are not growing in the way that we should? What if we believe that God wants us to do a particular thing, and we refuse to do it? What if a relationship we are in becomes broken and we know that at least part of the blame is ours?

The most liberating thing about the gospel is that it provides a solution for failure. If you were a humanist, who believed that human beings represent the world’s highest potential, and you failed at something important, where would you go? There would be nowhere for you to go for help except to other failing humans. As Christians, we know that human beings are always failing, and living in constant need of God, but we can go to God. We can tell God about our failures and ask him to forgive us and help us to go on. In response, God tells us, “Yes, I saw that. You did blow it. But Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is enough to cover your mistake. Consider it a closed issue. Go and don’t do it anymore. I still love you.” This is what the Bible calls “grace”—undeserved favor.

Imagine how tormented Peter felt when he came to his senses in the temple courtyard and realized that he had publicly disowned his master and friend during Jesus’ most difficult hour (Jn 18:15–18, 25–26). Only a few days later, however, he ate breakfast with Jesus on the beach,
and their relationship was restored (Jn 21:1–19). Think how relieved Peter must have been to receive forgiveness from Jesus. Few disciples had blown it worse than Peter, and few disciples went on to become more useful to God. In spite of failure, God’s grace allows us to move on as disciples.

Remember what Paul wrote:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. (Phil 3:12–16)

Knowing this, with God’s help, are you willing to be a small group leader who becomes a disciple-maker? And more importantly, are you willing to be a growing disciple?

Questions for Individuals or Groups

1. What is the point of the rappelling story in the beginning of the chapter?
2. Give some examples of people who are like the “leader” in our story?
3. Who, in your estimation, is the opposite of the leader in our story?
4. What, in your own words, is a leader?
5. How do you feel about yourself in relation to your definition of a leader?
6. Why is maturity so important in leadership?
7. What is your leadership personality?
8. What do you think a Christian leader’s relationship with God should be like?
   - with himself or herself?
   - with others?
9. What character qualities from this chapter do you need to work on?
10. What can you do to help yourself grow?
11. How does suffering shape the character of the leader?
12. Why is it necessary to know that you are going to fail as a leader?
13. How can you balance the demands of leadership with a healthy understanding of your weakness and frailty?
OF COMMUNITY

Blast Off!

**Mission control to small group:** “We have engaged all engines and blast-off has been a success. Have a great trip!”

**Destination—Discipleship**

Nothing good and lasting can occur without thoughtful planning and preparation. Consider how much time and energy goes into one spaceship. Companies all over the world assemble the various components while a team of scientists, physicists, engineers and managers prepares to pull everything together into a working vehicle. As experience has shown, one flaw can be fatal. The responsibility given to the team of designers and builders is tremendous.

Yet when a rocket or spaceship has been successfully launched, it is a marvelous sight to see. And it brings great satisfaction to the workers who put it together. A team that sees its work resulting in space walks, or photographs from faraway planets, has much to be proud of.

People at NASA and in other space programs around the world are always reaching for the next planet or star. People who lead small groups should aim high as well. We started this training course by showing you your destination—discipleship. Picture your small group ministry reaching many in your church, town or state with the disciplermaking claims of Jesus Christ.

It’s great to know where you are going, but you also need a way to get there. We may think of a spaceship as the most important component for reaching a faraway planet, but there is something even more fundamental—the launching pad. And in order for us to realize the goal of making disciples, we, too, need a foundation. This is where the leader comes in. The leader provides, if you will, the initial thrust that sets the small group on its course.

Before we start our journey as a small group, we also need a structure, or spaceship, we can travel in. That structure is a caring community, something we will learn about in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

**The Fellowship Hour**

You know the routine. Walk out of the sanctuary on Sunday morning, shake the pastor’s
hand, take a left down the hall, and enter the fellowship hall. You make small talk with people as you stand in line for a cup of coffee, and then you spend the next thirty minutes mingling with your friends from the church. When you feel a tug on your sleeve, you are reminded by your youngest child that it is past time for her meal. You round up everyone, load them in the car, and head for home.

The fellowship hour, whether before or after church, is often an indispensable part of a church’s life. In fact, in some churches fellowship hour is almost as important as the worship hour. These times are valuable because they allow people to get to know each other through normal conversation. By coming to a fellowship hour, people can feel loved and accepted just because people are willing to spend time with them.

Others, however, may not feel so positive about the fellowship hour. In many churches there are probably people who leave church fellowship times feeling rejected, ignored or sad. Maybe they were struggling with something and nobody asked about their problem. Perhaps they were shy and few people came over to talk to them. The nature of church fellowship time is such that it is very difficult to meet individual needs.

Our world, which has produced many alienated people, can benefit from a caring place where people are accepted and loved. The church should be such a place. And small groups are the best way a church can reach out, listen, and care.

They Broke Bread Together

Many people turn to the famous passage in Acts 2:42–47 in order to provide a snapshot of community in the early church. It is a wonderful passage, full of people spending time together—praying, talking, eating and worshipping. It would have been very exciting to be a part of the Jerusalem Christian Church during the early days of church growth after the Holy Spirit had been given. Acts 2 is helpful because it shows how a group of people who wanted to be faithful to Christ attempted to grow in discipleship together. Any fellowship would do well to take the principles that they operated with and put them to use in their own community of faith.

But there is no passage in the Bible that says, “You must have a small group in order for people to grow in their faith.” Instead, what is in the Bible is an understanding, from beginning to end, that people need a close community in order to grow.

In our society, the family is the first such community. What is it that draws people together in marriage if not an understanding that they can help each other become fulfilled? To the married couple God often adds wonderful little bundles of challenge—children. Our job as parents is to provide an atmosphere in which each child can be nurtured through to adulthood.

After the family we might think of our neighborhood or town, job, school, special organizations and church as structures that provide community. Each of these has the tools to become, in its own way, a community. A person might envision growing spiritually through church, socially through neighborhood, and mentally through work.

In the Bible there is no separation between various communities. God is to be over, under, in and through all that is done. In the Bible, a community is a group of people, living under God’s rule, who are learning how to love God more while loving one another.

The community of Israel. If you have read the Old Testament, you will know that it is the


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story of the Israelites. Genesis shows how God promised Abraham, Israel’s forefather, that he would bring blessing to the whole world through a nation that would come from his seed. The people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, and then released by God’s intervention. It is in the book of Exodus that God’s purpose for Israel becomes very clear. He had chosen Israel so that he could build a community of faith that would influence other nations for his glory (Ex 33:15–16). This community would live under God’s Law, helping each other to love and serve God with heart, soul, mind and strength.

The promises contained in the Law (Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) were for the whole nation, and the curses were for the whole nation as well. In fact, it becomes obvious that the entire nation of Israel would rise or fall together. When God saw Israel he saw a whole, a community. When the community was obedient to God and loving toward each other, he blessed them. When they were disobedient to God and they oppressed each other, he removed his presence from them, and they were punished.

In the end, the community of faith became a society of sin. Sadly, the Israelite nation which had started with much promise, ended up dispersed and defeated. But God never lost the vision for what a positive, God-centered community could do.

**A new community.** In the New Testament we learn about a new community beginning with the faith community that Jesus and his disciples had. After Christ, the book of Acts traces the development of the New Testament church, depicting a cohesive, forward-looking church (though not without problems). Other New Testament books, seeking to build a caring, interrelated community, encourage believers to love each other according to Christ’s example.

Perhaps no New Testament book makes a clearer statement on Christian fellowship than Ephesians. It is in Ephesians that we read these words about God’s plan:

He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household…. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:17–19, 22).

From this passage we discover the first basic principle undergirding community—*people of different backgrounds have been brought together through the salvation offered in Jesus Christ.* The common bond that links Christians together is not the similarity of our past, but the convergence of our future. We are family, now and forever.

The second principle is in Ephesians 5:1–2: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Thus, the Christian community is a place where we can start to *practice the Christian life together.* It needs to be a place where we can succeed and fail in an atmosphere of acceptance and adherence to God’s Law.

The third principle is found in the second part of the verse from Ephesians. **We are commanded to love each other as Christ loved us.** A Christian community is a place to learn about unselfish, kind, patient, trustworthy love. As we experience the love of other Christians, we experience the wonderful love of God.

To summarize, it is in Christian community that believers are brought together in order to learn obedience to Christ in an atmosphere of acceptance and love. How do small groups fit into this plan for community?
Priority has been given to developing a biblical concept of community because, while we don’t necessarily find a biblical imperative for the formation of a small group ministry, we do find the concepts of discipleship and community in Scripture. It is through small groups that these twin imperatives are best served.

**Discipleship and Community**

Some things just naturally go together, like peanut butter and jelly, or pork and beans. Or like the old commercials that link the all-American traditions of “baseball, hot dogs and apple pie” to Chevrolet. We think of Disney World and Mickey Mouse, Washington and government, and New Orleans and the Mardi Gras together. Trying to imagine the one without the other would be like losing part of the identity.

Discipleship and community go together as well—in fact, they are inseparably linked. Without other believers to grow with, the process of passing the Christian faith from person to person is impossible.

As we live under God’s direction, our faith will be affected by how we relate to the people around us. And because we are family with other believers, we should seek out other disciples we can learn with. Being a Christian involves a relationship with God, yes, but it also involves a relationship with other Christians. The goal of community is to develop the ultimate atmosphere by which the small group can speed toward its destination—discipleship.

**Diversity and Unity**

If you look again at our definition of community (in Christian community, believers are brought together in order to become better disciples of Christ in an atmosphere of acceptance and love), you will see that there is one, and only one, main issue in community building. Resolving this would mean that disciples could have the kind of environment that they need for growth. The issue is how to bring together various individuals, with their different pasts and needs, into a functioning, effective body going in one direction. In other words, there are many different parts to a rocket, so how do you put them together so that it can effectively fly as one vehicle?

The solution is not simple, and you will stretch your leadership ability as you wrestle with this issue in your own small group. We will examine the issues involved in chapters five and six as we consider how to minister to individuals in the small group. Then, in chapter seven we will discuss how to bring individuals together into a unified whole.

**The Individual—Past, Present, Future**

We are unique, not only in our personalities, but also in our life experiences. On the positive side, this means that there is a wealth of experience in the church that, if tapped, could provide wisdom, guidance and vision. A person who has experienced the death of a parent brings her own special gift to the church. Another has come from a family of entrepreneurs and possesses incredible creativity. One is from a farming family and has a special love for the outdoors. Another grew up in the poverty of the inner city and fully understands the needs that exist in our cities. Each person can bring, from experience, something that the church needs if it is to minister effectively in the world.
There is another side to the vast diversity that exists within the church. Alongside the wonderful potential, there exists a great possibility for division. People from different experiences have to expend energy just to understand another person. It is easier to interpret what is said and done from one’s own mindset than it is to delve into another person’s mind.

The ideal would be an honest community in which differences could be brought out into the open, discussed and affirmed. Unfortunately, it is much easier to brush differences under the rug and misunderstand each other. It takes tremendous effort to arrive at the place where we can find value in each other’s differences. But this is just what is needed in small groups. It is the responsibility of the small group leader to do whatever is possible to provide the conditions that will lead to such growth.

In order to affirm each individual in a caring environment, healthy small groups will take time to share, allowing every person to tell about the unique story that is their own past, present and future.

Past. Each of us could probably spend days sharing how family, friends, school, work and church have influenced our lives. We could also think back over a multitude of experiences that have altered the course of our lives. Someone’s fear of heights might have come from a scary experience on a ladder. Another’s stability could have come from a supportive family. One person’s fear of deep relationships might have developed through a traumatic marriage. Still another person might love to invite guests over because they grew up in a home that always had people coming and going.

True understanding comes from catching a glimpse of the various paths that have brought us where we are. You can facilitate the process of sharing that will allow the group to open themselves, especially their past, to one another. There are few people who do not like to talk about themselves. Most people willingly share because, deep down, they want to be understood, loved and appreciated. Even quiet, shy people will, over time, open up.

While getting the average person to talk about himself or herself is not the most difficult task in the world, getting people to share meaningful things from their past is difficult. The major turning points of life are often crises, and some people have yet to deal positively with them. Others would like to keep a checkered past hidden from friends, spouses and children. It is not always easy to get people to open up.

This is why it is best to start with things that are easy to share, like favorite childhood memories, or the food that you have most detested all your life. People are delighted to share these, and in giving them an opportunity to share they are allowed to make a positive contribution to the group. From basic questions about one’s past, then, it is not as difficult to move to deeper questions, like those related to values, character shaping, or pain.

Allowing people to talk about their past will help each person in the group be appreciated as a unique individual with something valuable to offer. But remember, as you allow people to open up, that nobody should share until ready.

Present. Whether a single with a night job or a married person with four children and two jobs, each person also has present realities that determine moods, points of view, and even spiritual growth. It is essential that the small group leader facilitate the process of sharing about present realities for three reasons.

First, it helps the leader better determine what each person needs. A leader might speak confidently about three-hour devotional times, while a businessperson in the crowd dies a
slow spiritual death because his business is going down the tubes, and he is not able to spend much time alone with God. If you knew of his need you might learn to soften your tone, or offer to help. At the very minimum you need to know where people work, what their family situation is (children, spouse, other responsibilities), what their worship patterns are, and how they feel about life in general. Understanding people is a discipline that starts with the leader.

The second reason it is so important for people to talk about their present situation is that it allows them to bounce ideas off the others in the group as they work to handle the trials and challenges of life.

The third reason it's important is that it allows the individuals in the group to understand each other. It is very easy to make snap judgments about people when they are not present, but it is difficult to do the same when they are telling about their lives. You cannot watch friends agonizing over particular problems without learning to identify with them in their struggles. When you identify with them, your prayers for their well-being start to take shape and a community starts to develop.

**Future.** Do you ever dream? If you do, what is your dream for yourself? for your family? for your church? If everything went well, where do you see yourself in five years or ten years?

You may never have been encouraged to dream. Yet looking to the future is the by-product of a biblical concept called hope. In the Bible, hope does not mean “wishful thinking” as it often does in our culture. Instead, it is an expectation of something being fulfilled.

In the Christian faith we know a few things with certainty upon which we place our trust. The first is that Jesus will come again. We can wait for that day because we have been promised its fulfillment. The second is that we will reign eternally with God in heaven. We will one day be rid of our trials, tribulations and pains. In the presence of God there is joy and no more pain (Rev 21).

As Christians, we have something to live for. We can wake up each day knowing that God is present in our lives and that his priorities will win out. We have hope. Christians can be people of purpose and confidence, living God-centered lives filled with challenge and vision.

On the other side of the coin is the hopelessness of a culture going downhill. One of theclearest, most notable philosophies of television and music is the notion that we must live for today because there might not be a tomorrow. It may be that drug abuse is so high precisely because people are not able to dream about their tomorrow. A culture without God does not think too far into the future.

In small group we can encourage people to talk about their future. As they grow in discipleship, and as their confidence in God grows, they will speak increasingly of a future that is God-centered.

**The Leader and the Individual**

At least until the small group feels comfortable as a group, the leader will be responsible for reaching out to each individual. Two character qualities govern the relationship between leader and individual. The first is love, and the second is empowerment.

Anyone who comprehends the Bible message understands that love is one of the most important concepts for human beings to grasp, if not the most important. In the Bible we are exhorted and commanded to love God with all of our might. We are also commanded to love one another (see 1 Jn or 1 Cor 13).
Very few people would dispute the requirement of love. However, when we get down to business, we often fall far short of really loving one another. Love requires great effort and acquired skills. It is not the warm fuzzy feeling that we identify in songs. Instead, it is an honest effort on the part of one to care for another as God would. In love, we seek the best for another person. This means that we must learn to “put ourselves in other peoples’ shoes,” actively doing our best to bring them joy, and being willing to act on their behalf even when we don’t feel like it. The first quality that should describe a disciplemaker is love, both for God and for others.

Then the leader should empower people. To illustrate, think about the following situation: You are the leader of a group of people who will be building a shed. You are the only one who knows how to build the shed, and in fact you could easily build the shed with just one other person. But you have been given a group of twelve to help you, with no instructions on how to use the people. You have people of all shapes and sizes, ages and abilities. Now think for a minute—how would you react?

Many leaders would realistically have to say that they would end up doing most of the work while giving minimal tasks to others. This is probably the easiest and most efficient way to build the shed, and leaders are often concerned with efficiency. Unfortunately, when you do all of the important work people feel useless. They are overpowered.

Other leaders might sit the group down and try to work through a committee structure. They could pretend to know nothing so that people could derive maximum benefit from planning and building. In this kind of leadership style, the leader would view his or her role as one of supporting individuals and overseeing disputes. The problem with this model is that very few lasting sheds have been designed and implemented by committees. The end product in this case might look nothing like a shed. When the leader does none of the work, people are left without direction.

These first two models represent opposite extremes, but realistic leaders will see themselves tending toward one extreme or the other. Actually, most of us are in process of moving from one toward the other.

The best way to build the shed while caring about individuals would be to take the best of the first two styles and combine them. The leader should feel very confident in exercising the maximum knowledge that he or she possesses while directing the individuals and empowering them to build a shed. In this instance, the leader would probably sit everyone down, share what he or she knows, and receive feedback. Then the team could break into groups, all members doing what they do best, and they could get the job done quickly and efficiently.

The question is this: What do you think of people? You may think of people as a nuisance or as generally incompetent. When you think of people in a negative way, it comes through and your relationships with people are affected. You probably come across as overbearing or insecure, and people do not feel comfortable with your leadership.

It is the leader’s job to make things happen in a positive way. Anyone could come in and tell others how bad things are. A good leader comes in and, by reaching out to individuals, starts people moving in the right direction.

People in churches need to be empowered. The leader is going to be the one who does the empowering. Will you seek to be one who, by reaching out in love, helps people to use their gifts so that they can grow?
Questions for Individuals or Groups

1. Notice the image used in the section entitled “Destination—Discipleship”—the destination is discipleship, the launching pad is leadership, and the leadership structure is community. Since this is such an important concept, restate these principles either through your own words or through a diagram illustrating their truth.

2. How is the idea of community demonstrated in God’s Old Testament plan for Israel? in God’s New Testament plan for the church?

3. In your own words, what happens in Christian community?

4. Have you ever been involved in the type of Christian community that you have described?

5. Why must we affirm each individual’s uniqueness before experiencing group unity?

6. In what one way could your sharing of your past allow people to understand you better?
   - sharing your present?
   - sharing your future?

7. In what ways do you affirm people?

8. In what ways might you be not as affirming as you would like to be?

9. Look at the example under the section on empowerment. When there is a task to accomplish, do you act as a dictator by taking charge? act as a bureaucrat by giving all responsibilities to committees? or act as an empowering leader by allowing each person to do what they do best while using your leadership to build everyone up? Explain your response.

10. What could you do to better empower people?

6

A CARING COMMUNITY

I can’t be a part of this group anymore. It is tearing me apart, because of all the tension that has not been dealt with. And I am tired of lying awake late at night after our meetings because I am so hurt. I hope you all know that I care about you, but I can’t deal with this group any longer. Please understand.”

You had come to the small group meeting this Tuesday evening prepared, as always, to get deep into Bible study. But your study was suddenly interrupted by Brian when he started sharing his pain. It was as if a dam had burst, and there was nothing that could hold back the flood.
As he speaks, you want to object to what he is saying, to fix the situation quickly before it gets more out of hand. But you find yourself listening intently, believing deep down that what he says is true.

You, too, leave the small group meetings frustrated at times. You wonder if you talk too much, and your spouse wonders if she sometimes comes across as stupid and uneducated. You are able to talk to each other and calm each others’ concerns. But Brian has no one he can vent his frustrations to. Even so, you wonder how Brian can feel as he does. He is smart, has a great personality and a good job. Why does he feel rejected and misunderstood?

Fortunately for Brian, your group reaches out in love, and his feelings are affirmed. The problems that he has addressed are dealt with, and Brian feels accepted as a person. Little does he know that he has just helped your group become a more loving, accepting, caring group.

But what went wrong? Why, after months of meeting with the small group, did he feel that people were rejecting him? How could this be when everyone wanted this group to be a place where they could find refuge?

What Is Left to Give?
Statistics, studies, reports and surveys all inform us of what we already know—our lives are fragmented, stressful and just plain hard. Many families have two working parents encountering frustration at work as well as overwhelming responsibilities at home. Children who need their parents are left to themselves because their parents are struggling to make ends meet. Singles often struggle with loneliness. Elderly people are neglected. In short, many people are just trying to survive.

The survival mentality carries over into the church as well. People need a break, and the worship hour is often the best time they have to just relax, take a few breaths, and stop thinking. This is why many church leaders become frustrated with a membership that is not engaged in active Christian living. Other members who do become involved in the work of the church tend to back away when tensions flare because they don’t want to deal with another kind of stress. Church leaders must be concerned with people who are attempting to just survive, rather than to grow.

The social sciences teach us that human beings have various needs which they seek to fulfill in a variety of ways. As Abraham Maslow has pointed out, these begin with the physical and move “upward” until self-actualization needs are met. Maslow emphasized that we will take care of physical needs before we move on to meet deeper ones. In other words, we first learn to survive before discovering how to live fulfilled lives.

There are many people in the church who are trying to cope with the busyness of their lives. They have enough trouble addressing the problems that come with everyday living without also focusing on spiritual, mental and emotional growth. So these needs often get put on the back burner for a day when there is enough time and energy. And that day often doesn’t come.

The process of discipleship, however, involves moving people past the daily effort of living and into the joy of being Christ’s children in the world.

Survival and the Small Group
Going back to the problem with Brian, it’s not very difficult to understand why the group
never recognized his pain, even though other members were also struggling. We can be so occupied with everyday pressures that we miss the subtle relational messages that are exchanged. In addition, we are better at focusing on and understanding our own feelings than understanding others’.

Nobody meant to hurt Brian, and nobody meant to ignore his needs. Unfortunately, his need for acceptance was not being met by the group. Yet, if small groups are ideal places for people to grow and are the best way to provide care for individuals, why is it that people are frustrated by small groups?

While small groups are indeed an ideal place for individuals to be cared for, there are potential pitfalls. Small group leaders who want to develop a caring community need to understand individual needs, how they can affect the group’s perception of individuals, and how to care for those with special needs.

**Individual Needs**

“Oh, isn’t he cute!” The young parents beam as they present the young child to the excited gaze of family and friends for the first time. Very few things generate as much enthusiasm as a young child who is brought into a room.

We think of children as little bundles of joy, but they are also bundles of responsibility. Their physical needs require constant attention, and parents spend many stressful hours determining what particular cry fits which need.

There are many other needs that must be met at birth and for the rest of their lives. Their minds need to be stimulated, so parents invest countless hours introducing them to different sights and reading them books. In addition, children must learn that they are not the only people on the face of the earth, so they will need discipline in order to learn consideration for others.

And then come the esteem needs. Children need to be shown, in a myriad of ways, that they are loved. Without the foundation of solid love at home, the child is often handicapped in other areas of life. Rejection by parents can be worked through, but at great cost.

Finally, they need to be encouraged and stimulated to grow. They might take up musical instruments or sports. Perhaps they will edit the school yearbook, or they might run for student government. A big part of growth, their spiritual growth, must be encouraged in order for them to become all that Christ wants them to be.

In adulthood, these needs are just as important. Perhaps you are aware of your need for approval or stimulation. Or you may understand the importance of discipline when it comes to certain areas of your life. A good small group ministry which understands individuals will seek to minister to these unique needs.

There are four basic needs that the small group can, and should, seek to address in love. They are the need for reality, acceptance, stimulation and leadership development.

**Reality**

Reality is an important concept to grasp if we are to live balanced lives. You probably know people who have lost touch with reality. They may think that they are somebody or something that they aren’t. Or, their handicap may be a little more subtle, so that they think others are out to get them, when in fact they are the cause of their own problems. Unbalanced people are
unlikely to get their lives together until they are able to gain a more realistic understanding of life.

All of us have areas in which we are not exactly realistic. Often those who think that they are great counselors encourage people to depend on them. People who want the lead part in a play or in the choir may not realize that they don’t have the necessary gifts. We may picture ourselves as great speakers, or leaders, or athletes, when in fact we are nothing more than ordinary. We all need a healthy dose of reality so that we can realize our limitations and our potential.

But just what do we mean by “reality”? There are two parts to reality. First, reality involves an understanding of the way things actually are. We are realistic when we understand that a large part of the world is at war. Or when we perceive that drugs and other powerful influences are destroying our culture. We are also realistic when we recognize our own limitations and sins.

The second part of reality seeks to perceive reality as God created and intended it. In this kind of reality we come to understand the way things could, and indeed shall, be. We truly comprehend reality when we understand and attempt to live as God intended—loving God and one another.

People who think that realistic life is depicted in movies which contain drugs, sex, violence or filthy language are mistaken. Drug use, illicit sex, and other sins are based on lies like “I’ll never get hooked,” or “This will make me happy,” or “Now I’m really free.” Sin traps people, and being caught in a cage is not the way life was intended. Even though it is realistic to be aware of the presence of drugs, violence and sex, the greater reality, based on truth, is that people who find peace in God are truly free and happy.

Ultimate reality is seeking to move toward God’s way of living while coming to grips with an evil world and one’s own life situation. And it is the responsibility of the small group to help individuals deal with the present reality of their lives while coming to grips with the future challenge of God’s reality. What better place than a small group to discover about ourselves and God’s plan for our lives?

A caring community enables us to understand how we need to change. We can also learn our limitations. And as we learn to rely on these friends to teach us, they will point us in the direction we should be going in order to experience growth.

Unfortunately, there are many things that hinder this process in the small group. We aren’t always honest when we deal with one another. We sweep problems under the rug, saying in effect that we don’t want to rock the boat—until finally some incident causes us to take action.

In order for realism to be a part of the small group, three ingredients are essential. First, humility must be present in both giver and receiver. It is impossible to share weaknesses with those who you know will make fun of you later, or with those who will use it to their advantage. It is also impossible for weaknesses to be dealt with when we know that the subject is unable to take loving correction.

The second ingredient is honesty. If you think about it, we are often not very honest with each other. Even when we are hurt repeatedly and even tell other friends about it, we don’t usually confront the person who causes our pain. When we don’t, we allow people to go on hurting others or even themselves. We also hinder the growth process when we lie by our
actions or words.

The small group is a good place for caring, sensitive honesty to be utilized. Some people cannot accept the truth, and they are better left alone. Many others, however, are relieved that others know their weaknesses and still accept them. In this environment people can overcome their weaknesses and grow.

The third ingredient is self-examination. When was the last time you went back to someone whom you might have hurt, and asked them if indeed you had done something to offend them? It’s probably not something we do very often. Yet Jesus spoke about setting relationships in order when he said these words in Matthew 5:23–24: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

We need to pay attention to how we interact with others so that we can learn from our own mistakes. In fact, if we would pay close attention to how our actions affect others, they probably would not need to confront us.

When it comes to providing a sense of realism, you will set the pace. It will require concentrated effort, and some risk taking, for this to happen.

Acceptance
We can’t do better in life than to have a few close friends who know, understand and accept us. You have probably heard people say, “We like you because...” and “We love you spite of....” Everyone possesses certain character traits that could potentially turn others off. We guard these areas carefully, only letting people see our inner selves little by little. When we finally find a friend who loves and accepts us even when there is reason not to, there is no better feeling in the world. Unconditional love is the greatest gift one person can give another.

We come to Christ understanding that we are sinners, and we should also live with Christ’s community in the same way. Small groups are effective only if people are accepted with both good and bad qualities and encouraged to try new things. When we stumble, we need loving hands, not condemning shoves. When we fail, we need approving looks, not disdainful glances. When we succeed, we need gentle encouragement, not silence. Nurturing happens when we learn to accept ourselves and each other before God.

Stimulation
Have you ever listened to someone talk about a very exciting topic, while droning endlessly in a monotone voice? Instead of getting excited, you want to go to sleep. Why expend your energy getting excited for the program of a person who doesn’t seem to care?

Small groups need to stimulate people to move forward in the Christian life. People will leave an exciting small group meeting believing that the challenge of living as a Christian in the world is possible and rewarding. People in a backbiting or boring small group will feel as though they are facing insurmountable challenges in their faith.

There are three steps involved in growth stimulation. The first is fascination with a particular issue that could change your life. Perhaps it starts with respect for the way a friend treats her spouse, and it produces questions about how it might change your own marital relationship. Maybe a timid group member looks up to another member who is not afraid to take
risks. Then again, it might be a non-Christian observing how Christians in the group interact. People are more willing to grow when they are attracted by the lifestyle of someone they want to imitate.

The second step is intellectual knowledge. In this step people attempt to learn more. The learning hasn’t yet produced much fruit, but the knowledge necessary for growth has entered the thought process. As they think through the new information they have received, they become convinced that a particular course of action would benefit them.

The third step is actually acting on acquired knowledge. In chapter one we talked about playing tennis. A person sees others playing tennis and becomes fascinated with the possibility of being a tennis player. She then needs to understand how the racket, court, net, balls, rules, and other player(s) fit together. Finally, she gets to practice her brand new knowledge on the court. As time goes on she become better and better, perhaps even reaching the professional level.

People actively engaged in learning go through these three basic steps. Knowing this, the small group leader can better understand why, even after a particular topic was covered, the actions of a group haven’t changed. Unless they have been shown the reality of Christian living in another person’s life, they will not understand its relevance in their own.

Leaders must believe very strongly in what they are doing or very little positive action will occur. On the other hand, leaders should not try to push their beliefs on the other group members. Instead, they should seek to demonstrate, by their actions and words, the truths that they are trying to convey. Eventually, these ideas become issues with the group. And as the group learns and grows together, the Spirit will begin to apply the knowledge to each one’s life.

The small group will also produce leaders when the group atmosphere is realistic, accepting and stimulating. This happens when people are allowed to speak about what is on their minds, make positive contributions in relationships, and share ways that they are growing. They become more confident in their ability to use their gifts to make positive things happen.

Relating to Individuals
“Hey, Sharon, I love ya!” shouts Jim, as he wraps his arm around your waist. He pulls you into a hug, asks you how you are doing, and pats you on your shoulder as he Waltzes away. You know better than to respond to his greeting. Jim is already reaching for the next person as he comes into contact with you. You find yourself cringing inside when you see him because you sense his insincerity.

How would you like a small group leader like Jim, who feels that his physical touch and outgoing personality are adequate to reach each member of the group? Or what about a leader who is detached? How about a leader who looks down on some or all of the group? What if your leader put people down for their answers, or always had the right answer?

Leaders like Jim do more harm than good, with their “feel good” message which makes “ministry” easier on them. Small group leaders must learn to focus their ministry on the complex needs of individuals.

How can the leader facilitate the realistic, accepting, caring, empowering environment that we are speaking of? The place to start is to consider how you view people. This influences your attitude and actions. People will feel loved, judged, inadequate or empowered according to the way you act and speak with them.
If you don’t like someone in your group, it will be communicated whether you want it to or not. If you think someone talks too much, or if you consider someone a weakling, your words and actions will subtly demonstrate how you feel. Even if you do not recognize your attitude on a conscious level, individuals will sense your feelings one way or another.

On the other hand, if you genuinely care for each person and make every effort to help people grow, your group will be effective. If you strive to be free of negative attitudes, you can concentrate your leadership efforts on ministering to people. Here are a few principles that will help you develop a positive atmosphere for individual growth in the small group:

1. **Understand that the small group will, over time, learn to perceive individuals as you perceive them.** Not only do your words and actions influence individuals, they also influence how the group will perceive its individuals. If you use guilt to get people moving, your group will learn to thrive on guilt. If you compete for glory, your group will also compete. If you are threatened by an individual, others will become threatened as well. Instead, the apostle Paul would tell you to “build others up” and “take on the mind of Christ in humility.”

2. **Make it a habit not to talk about one member of the group to others when that member is not around.** Gossip tends to make us feel self-righteous, thereby feeding our pride. Additionally, it hurts the person who is not present. And then it causes a breakdown in trust, because we know that if one person is talked about when they are not present, it could just as easily be us. If things need to be said, tell them to the whole group. If your concern for one member of the group is strong enough, speak to your pastor or another qualified person. But don’t talk about members who are not present.

3. **Foster interpersonal group caring.** One of the most positive things that can happen in your group is that each member is genuinely cared for by the others. The leader cannot demand that the group be loving toward its members. Neither can you use guilt or manipulation. But you can facilitate the process of caring by first modeling genuine concern and then encouraging the group to follow your lead.

Suppose one member criticizes another, and you see it causing pain. Bringing it to the attention of the offender could save a lot of damage. Or, perhaps two people have differences and one comes to you to talk about the other. You could send them to each other and perhaps act as the mediator. Or, a member might end up on the fringe of the group because of being ignored. You could make the others aware that this is happening so that they could draw the person in. Through modeling and gentle direction, you can effectively teach the group how to care for each individual.

4. **One of the greatest gifts you can give anyone is your loving prayer on their behalf.** Shortly before Jesus was crucified, we are allowed an intimate look at the prayers of the Savior on our behalf (Jn 27:20–26). Jesus was praying for one thing—that all Christians would know the Father as he knew the Father. The cry that welled up from deep within his soul on the night before he was to die was that the intimacy he possessed as part of the Trinity would be shared by all who would call themselves his children.

This prayer should be yours as well. What is it that allows you to be a leader if not a heartfelt desire to connect people with God? The only difference between Jesus’ prayer and yours is that you must also pray that you receive the same blessing of intimacy that you desire for others.

5. **Finally, know that the way you perceive yourself is, in a great part, responsible for how you deal...**
with individuals. Every person in the world possesses a degree of insecurity, whether realizing it or not. But leaders need to be aware that their feelings about themselves can hinder or harm good leadership skills.

Do you like yourself? Then you will tend to like others because you won’t be easily threatened.

Do you feel inadequate? If so, you may try too hard to win approval, or you may compete, or do something worse. We need to take seriously the command to “love our neighbor as we love ourselves.” Healthy love of others starts with a genuine love for self. If you need help in this area, please talk to your pastor or someone else who can help you.

Handling Special Needs
In a healthy, caregiving small group, people will be dropping their guards. As they do, they allow each other to see more of their struggles. We all experience insecurities and problems, and sometimes we need help. Even though peer helping is a difficult part of community building, and despite the fact that there are pitfalls when attempting to meet individual needs, helping is necessary because Christian love offers itself in good times as well as in bad.

Every group struggles at one time or another with special needs. Someone may be struggling with depression or the loss of a loved one. Another may be struggling with issues from childhood. A businessperson may be frustrated in his or her job. You should do all that you can to be prepared to minister to special needs within the group. Think back over your life in the past few years. Was there a time when you went to another person for counsel? If so, you will remember that it involved your relationship with God, others or yourself. People are relational, and we become imbalanced when any or all of these three relationships causes undue tension. Understanding this, the goal of Christian helping is to enable a person to find restoration with God, others or self.

A Christian helper recognizes God’s role in the lives of people. Knowing that we are created in the image of God, we understand that a part of us will never be right until we are in good standing with God. We might help someone through a particular crisis by focusing on the situation at hand, but we must always keep in mind that each individual needs a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Basic Helping Principles
Here are a few principles that may help as you deal with people in a helpful manner:

1. One of the basic premises in a helping relationship is that people are responsible for their own actions. Some people do not want to walk alongside you; they want you to carry them. Your relationship with them must lead them to independence, not dependence.

2. People may come to you with what they think is the problem (or what they want you to think is the problem) when there is another, deeper issue. Make sure that you gently probe until you find the full extent of the situation.

3. People come to you assuming that you will keep their problems in confidence. You do not have the prerogative to discuss one person with another unless—perhaps—you need to seek help from someone who is more qualified than you.

4. On the other hand, never swear or promise your own secrecy when someone asks for it before telling you something. As a lay helper you are not bound by law to confidentiality, and
you might need to act on a rare occasion in someone’s defense (in the case of suicide, for example).

5. You need to be careful not to get in over your head. You can do a lot as a peer helper, but there are many problems that should be handled by professional counselors. If you feel that you are not equipped to help a person, you should say so and consult your pastor.

6. It is wise to let men help men and women help women. There is a special kind of intimacy that occurs in many helping relationships, and sexual attraction can easily complicate things.

7. It is very easy to want to “fix” peoples’ problems, especially when you see that the “answer” is very simple. But what is obvious to you may not necessarily be apparent to the one being helped. You shouldn’t try to rush the process of helping just because you think you know the answers. Your job is to empower people to discover for themselves what their problems are and what they should do in response. Until they reach that point, they are not ready to deal with their problems.

8. As you become involved in helping relationships, you will find yourself wanting to express your opinions. But sometimes your statements will come as judgments. The best way to show people their weaknesses is to ask the right questions (in a sensitive manner) or restate the problem so that they start listening to what they themselves are saying.

For instance, a man might be saying about his wife, “She’s a real loser, and I wish that she were dead. Why, she’s never even tried to love me. I don’t know why I stay with her.”

In response, you could say, “Don’t you think you’re coming down a little hard on her? My goodness, nobody is as bad as you say.”

But in fact that response would probably cause him to feel stronger about his original statement because you have attacked his original idea. Instead, you should try this response: “It sure sounds like you are mad at your wife. You are saying that she has never really loved you.” This kind of statement allows the speaker to hear what he is saying, so that his next words are directed at his own statements rather than yours.

9. Please, avoid pat answers like “You just need to pray,” or “God loves you, and so do I.” People need real relationships with caring friends, not pre-programmed brush-off maneuvers.

10. Feel free to pray with people. You will find that people discover real peace when you pray with them, and this can serve as a model to help them discover restoration with God.

**Handling Crisis Situations**

There will be times in your ministry life when special situations arise that stretch you to the limits of your ability. For example, in the case of accident, illness or death, you should become involved as a friend. You need to avoid pat phrases, seeking instead to become a good listener. People who are grieving need caring, nonjudgmental people to share their grief.

Suicide is another problem you might face. Some people are always talking about suicide and never try it. Others “attempt” suicide, doing just enough to draw attention to themselves. Still others keep quiet and do what it takes to terminate their own lives. No matter which situation you find yourself involved in, suicide is a very serious concern.

In the course of normal conversations, someone might make an offhand comment about suicide. Don’t treat it lightly. When people talk about suicide, find out what caused them to mention it, and help them to understand what it is they are talking about. If you are scared for
their lives, don’t hesitate to act.

You do have a few weapons at your disposal. You can first try to help the person as much as you can. You should also involve your pastor and any church members who have expertise in helping people. Then, you might want to call local psychologists or psychiatrists for advice.

In the case of a critical situation, you must use the police. If the person is alone in his or her home, the police can get there and stop him or her from doing something drastic. If the person is with you, you can try to get him or her to go with you to the hospital. Most hospitals and some police stations are required by law to have trained psychologists and psychiatrists on duty twenty-four hours a day.

When things are going along as planned, we seldom take the time to think about individuals and their needs. But when a crisis takes place, we are reminded that ministry to individuals in the small group is crucial to the strength of the community. And that ministry begins with the leader.

Questions for Individuals or Groups
1. In your own words, what is the main issue that is presented in the opening section as well as the sections “What Is Left to Give?” and “Survival and the Small Group”?
2. What other problems might hinder ministry to individuals in the small group?
3. Picture yourself leading a small group. What do you think a reality-oriented small group would look like?
   - an accepting small group?
   - a stimulating small group?
   - a leader-developing small group?
4. What happens when you take the element of realism from the group?
   - acceptance?
   - stimulation?
5. Which of the five principles highlighted in “The Leader and the Individual” is most important to you, and why?
6. What are some ways that you can teach the group to care for its members?
7. Why is prayer “one of the greatest gifts you can give”?
8. How do you feel about being a “helper”?
9. What could help you be more prepared?

7

A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY
Have you ever worked on a complicated jigsaw puzzle? While you worked, you probably had the cover of the box with the picture of your final goal propped up as a silent but constant reminder of the end result that you hoped to attain. Surveying the pile of hundreds of pieces, you observed that each one is uniquely cut, possessing its own color pattern. And each piece made sense only when placed together with other specially shaped, different colored pieces. Your job as the puzzle-solver was to search for pieces that fit together. No matter how you went about putting the puzzle together, if you put in the time you ended up with the picture that was on the box top.

Some people are better at building puzzles than others, but most people are capable. Hard work, strategy and studious concentration are all keys necessary to bring hundreds of pieces together into one scene.

And this is where we have come in our discussion of community: How do we bring together a group of 3 to 12 individuals in such a way that all needs are met in one group? How can we “fit” unique people into a picture representing God’s idea of community?

**God’s Design for Community**
The challenge in community building is that we need to bring a number of individuals together in such a way that they are headed in one direction without losing their uniqueness. And it is a great challenge. There are over four billion distinctly unique people sharing the same planet. If all of these people went their separate ways in order to meet their own needs, we would have a great problem. Without unifying factors such as laws, dreams or causes to unite people, there would be total anarchy.

Like the world, the church is a composite of millions of people. We already have our unifying factor in Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. But put twelve different Christians in the same room for a few days, and you will discover the incredible diversity, and potential for conflict, that exists. Many wonder if indeed they even want to be part of the same movement when they discover how different they are from others.

But what did God intend for the church? Are we just to know each other on a surface level so that we get along better? Should we get together only with those who believe, think and act as we do? Or should we unite around a particular cause, such as missions, so that we keep busy enough not to emphasize differences?

God’s plan for community building in the church is that people who would not necessarily be friends in another setting come together and start the long, difficult process of becoming co-disciples. The Black man, the White woman, the Indian child, the businessperson and the construction worker all belong in the church. In community we learn that ours is not the only race, or life situation. We also learn that we are not the only person with gifts, or sins, or trials. In short, the egocentrism that marks each of our existences is slowly dismantled when we confront and love people who are as special as we are.

The Bible says that even spirit beings will watch in amazement as God creates a unified church out of very different groups of people (Eph 3:6–11). It is a beautiful plan, although one full of dangers, and we have a part in fulfilling it.

**Small Group Dynamics**


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Every group, like each individual it represents, has a distinctive character. However, there are dynamics in every group that we can explore together. Awareness of each of these can help you as you prepare to make disciples through small groups.

Communication patterns. You have probably seen the communication diagrams that portray what happens in the course of ordinary conversation. The “sender” speaks to a “receiver,” followed by the “receiver” becoming the “sender.” The two individuals in the diagram interpret, or decode, the messages by using their own “filters.”

In extreme conditions, two people might use the same phrase(s) and mean opposite things (for example, to one person “I am going home” might mean his present dwelling place, while to another the phrase might mean the place where she grew up), or they might say different things and mean the same thing. Each person interprets communication from personal experience.

This highlights the importance of discovering each person’s past and present so that individuals in the group can become more sensitized to what others may think and feel. A person who had grown up in an extremely strict family might cringe inside when present at a conversation on the importance of discipline. Another person going through a long and painful crisis could feel guilty if the discussion centered around being joyful in the Lord. In these cases, two perfectly legitimate topics could bring very negative feelings because they are interpreted through different filters.

In every group, there is a possibility of misunderstanding, confusion, doubt and guilt occurring through ordinary conversation. Every small group must consciously work to overcome the problems of communication if it is to become a loving community. So the leader can strive to both model and teach rules for communication. These can include, but are not limited to, honesty, a non-judgmental attitude, and affirming what each person says before responding.

Expectations. Group expectations affect group dynamics because people have ideas about where they are going in the future. People in the small group have both conscious and unconscious ideas about how the group can meet their needs. These thoughts, often unexpressed, provide the motivation for their actions.

As long as the group knows what each person expects, this area can be very fulfilling to both individual and community. The problems come in when people have not communicated, for one reason or another, their hopes for what the group can do for them. In this case members might appear content when in reality they are frustrated by the group.

You cannot stop people from desiring what they will. Indeed, you also will have your own expectations. You must make every effort, however, not to let one person’s agenda destroy the group. A group with good communication patterns will be able to deal with this problem much better than one with poor communication. A positive way to handle group expectations is to develop a clear group covenant which deals with the issues of who the group is and what they do. (More on covenants in chapter thirteen.)

Consensus. The small group is not a democracy, where the majority rules. Neither is it a republic, where elected officials rule. Instead, decisions are made by the group for the good of the group. Each person is vital to the survival of the group, so each person’s opinions and feelings can and should be expressed on any relevant issue.

The process of reaching group solidarity is difficult, but the consequences of not doing so
are potentially devastating. The potential pitfalls of not reaching group consensus can be seen when the group must make decisions such as what new people to invite into the group, what to study, or where and when to meet. Satan works best through division. Arriving at decisions through majority rule or the will of one strong personality opens the door for problems. When consensus exists, people are affirmed and built up because their opinions are necessary. Leaders are developed through consensus.

Stages of Community
A major part of group dynamics is the life stages that groups will encounter. Each small group must go through one form or another of the following four basic stages of community building:

Stage 1: Exploration—unity at the expense of diversity. Imagine that you are ready to lead your own small group. It may be your first small group or your twenty-first. You find yourself sitting in a parlor with eight other people who have expressed their desire to be in a small group. Your job as their leader is to help them become the best group that they possibly can. Needless to say, everyone in that room (if they are typical) will want the small group to be a positive experience. As a result, each person will do what seems to best insure the success of the group. The foundation for later group life is being laid, and it should be laid properly.

In the beginning, this means that people will often push aside personal feelings, small differences, and personality clashes. The unifying factor in this first stage is generally the common desire to begin a small group. So you will spend the first few weeks developing a group covenant and preparing to move forward. Then you will settle into the weekly ritual of being a small group. Like a newly married couple, you will be flushed with early successes. People may have gushed forth praise in these first weeks, and you may even be basking in the glow of being a good small group leader.

You should enjoy this stage, because it is the easiest. People generally lay their individuality down and are content just being a part of a group. If some are feeling tension, they keep it to themselves in order to avoid rocking the unified group’s base. The group is free to behave as it thinks a small group should. Unity at all costs has been earned, but at the expense of diversity. Sooner or later, diversity will make a comeback.

Stage 2: Transition—diversity at the expense of unity. Many groups bog down in the first stage, contenting themselves with the ease that comes with keeping relationships on a surface level. These groups often rely on a strong leader to keep them functioning. Unfortunately, discipleship does not occur when people are merely followers.

Some groups, who are willing to pay the price and who have allowed themselves to maintain open communication, will move to step two. If step one represents the honeymoon stage, then step two is the “Hey, stop squeezing the toothpaste tube in the middle!” stage. Like a newly married couple just learning some of the faults of their mates, individuals in a small group will take issue with one another. Frustrations that were forgotten come back in a rush, and differences become accentuated.

People are somehow surprised when this occurs. In gearing up for the group’s birth and maturity, they have forgotten their own uniqueness as well as the distinctiveness of others. Chances are that there are great personality differences within each group of people. There are also a wide variety of personal beliefs, ranging from parenting ideas to theological issues. Add

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personal biases, bigotry, pride, competition, and you have a recipe for disaster!

Fortunately, a healthy small group will move into step two and begin to confront its own diversity. A group may be “going along its merry way” when one member suddenly interrupts the conversation and raises concerns or hurts. The group will often be shocked, for its unity is being called into question. If all goes right, however, others will soon join in, and the leader will have a number of hot issues to work through.

At this point it is essential that you avoid trying to fix everything in order to make things right again. In order for your group to grow, they need to go through this stage. You should be prepared to facilitate the process as well as you can, knowing that great harm, as well as great good, can come from a time like this.

First of all, you can help them discover that everyone thinks differently. In times of tension, people often retreat to what they know instead of opening up for compromise (or admitting they are wrong). For example, someone may imply that you are raising your children incorrectly. Or a health enthusiast might get on your nerves because she thinks people should eat better than they do. One man may be so legalistic that you feel he stifles the group. A loving woman with a wonderful disposition may threaten you because everyone gravitates toward her. When they see how different they are, the group may wonder if things can be worked out.

The next thing you can help the group see is that people have different beliefs which influence their lives. Some of these will be, in your estimation, totally incorrect. In fact, some of their beliefs will probably go against all that you have been taught about the Bible. One woman might not believe that a particular book of the Bible belongs in the Bible. A man preoccupied with end times might believe that Jesus is coming in the year 2000. Someone who had a dramatic conversion might believe that everyone has to celebrate a “Christian birthday.”

Finally, you can help the group see that each person has a personality that is unique. Your group might have a man who picks his teeth during a meeting. An abrasive woman might butt in when you need to talk to another person. Maybe a particular woman is a frustrated leader who wants everyone to be like her. Or perhaps a successful businessman thinks he can run the small group like he runs his company. One is egotistical, another terribly insecure. You may ask yourself how you ever got stuck with such a group of people!

The beauty of this stage is that you are forced to recognize that people are not at all like you, even when you thought your group was homogeneous. The ugly part of this stage is that your perception of others is clouded by insecurity and fear. Like the married couple in our example, you wake up to the realization that this relationship will involve either hard work or miserable coexistence. And one of the biggest lessons you learn, if you are willing, is that it is impossible to “convert” another person. You may want to reach out and change a person who is not like you, but you discover you are unable to change anyone but yourself.

So, you either make a commitment to work things (as a group) out until you can honestly love another, or you pretend to love, or you reject the other. If you are willing to work and make every effort to understand and love that person who is different, then you can go on to the next stage.

Stage 3: Action—unity alongside diversity. When you are busy trying to convince others of their faults, they pull back and deny them. But when you allow people to come as they are, they are often the first ones to let their faults be known. Your group is now entering a time when you can focus on your tasks. This doesn’t mean that you forget what you have learned


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through the first stages, only that you apply your knowledge to build others up in Christ. You know that each new person who comes in will mean adjustments, but you feel secure in the structure of community that has been constructed. In this environment, people can “let down” their guard and start to grow. While this stage is not clearcut or smooth, it is a time when you can focus on the present and future of individuals and the group. Adding the reinforcement of periodic self-evaluation by the group will enhance your progress as a group.

By God’s grace, many small groups should reach this stage and “take off.” If you are willing to work within this open, honest, caring environment, you can enjoy the benefits of being affirmed as an individual while discovering the unity that Christ offers.

Stage 4: Termination—affirming unity, bringing the group to an end. Everything must come to an end, and small groups, no matter how healthy, are not exempt. Some groups will last one full year, others ten, but there inevitably comes a time when, for the good of both group and individuals, the group will dissolve. A group may have outlived its original task, or seen members move away. A group of young couples may find that babies change their situation, while other groups will terminate each summer with the possibility of restarting in the fall.

Ending the group is a natural part of a small group’s life, and a healthy small group will plan well for its termination. In planning for termination, the best tool a small group has is its group covenant. If you are consistently writing covenants for specific periods of time, you can have regular evaluations that will enable you to determine if, and how, you will continue meeting. Many groups reach a point in their lives where they are not necessarily ready to disband, but at the same time they need a change. At that point they can begin meeting less frequently, perhaps once a month, to aid them as they move to termination.

Termination is a good time for the group to look back at its history, to thank God for blessings, struggles and lessons learned, and to celebrate together. Human experience is such that people feel much better about a group experience if they plan an official good-by. Instead of just disbanding a group, plan a celebration complete with all the “fixings.” Look back on the past and celebrate the good things that have happened in and through your small group. This will allow your group to terminate while providing the means by which its individuals can still look to the future.

Roles and Personalities
In the process of building community you will undoubtedly discover that there are many different gifts, abilities and personalities in the body of Christ. We all function more effectively when we learn to affirm and encourage people to use their gifts for the benefit of all. People who develop and use their gifts invariably become Christian leaders.

It is helpful when discussing roles to remember your high-school days. Remember the many different types of people and groups that existed? We use such labels as “Nerd,” “Jock,” “Brain,” “Druggie,” and “Redneck” for those who belong to certain distinct groups. Labelling people, while often destructive, does give us a kind of framework within which we can understand a person’s personality.

Without oversimplifying, or allowing for the bigotry that comes through putting labels on individuals, you can learn to see people for who they are and what they offer the group. Our focus will be on roles, personalities and gifts that people bring to the group setting.
Me-Centered Roles
Do you remember in the story of Tom Sawyer, when he was love-stricken with Becky? He wanted so badly to make a good impression that he generally made a fool of himself. In the process, he offended her and put his hopes for a relationship with her in serious jeopardy.

Everyone wants to make a good impression. We generally dress in a way that is appropriate to different settings, and we say things that we hope will demonstrate our intelligence, wit and charm. There is nothing wrong with trying to come across in a good way. The problem arises, however, when we use different settings solely for our advantage. There are several such “me-centered roles” that group members assume.

First, there’s the group clown, a person so insecure that he or she has something witty to say for everything. While this individual could bring the group together for a time, his or her behavior keeps the group from serious discussion and positive growth.

Then, there’s the group expert, who makes others feel like losers. The result is that people often feel stupid for raising questions. In the end, this person does all the speaking, and everyone else listens. A similar type is the egocentric, who has a bigger and better story than the one just told. Eventually, this person will inhibit others from opening up.

The one-issue individual manages to turn every discussion into his or her one area of expertise or fascination. Group members are turned off when their own concerns are constantly twisted to fit this person’s ideas. Another type, the counselee, is adept at turning any small group meeting into a counseling session. Unless the group is specifically for counseling, and especially if this person is not trying to help herself, people either ignore this person or they are destined to listen to countless tales. Eventually, some or all of the group members drop out, and the counselee has to find another group.

Although each of these characteristics hinder the group, these types often feel that they are making a positive contribution. On the other hand, much more destructive group behavior comes from people like the group cynic who thrive on seeing bad things happen. This person loves a good scandal or failure, because it just proves to him what he already knows about life—that it’s the pits. Another type, the group gossip is always good for a few juicy tidbits about others. While he often expresses the desire to help others in a positive way, he influences group perceptions about people in a negative way. Eventually, the group members learn to watch their own backs around this person.

There are many other negative roles, but they all have one thing in common—they draw attention to the individual and away from others. The root problem is usually insecurity, so the leader must not only deal with the negative behavior, but also try to find more positive outlets for the people playing me-centered roles. Negative behavior must be dealt with firmly and in love if the group is to survive.

Other-Centered Roles
Perhaps you know someone who is a fatherly or motherly type, one who can look on others with incredible kindness, listen with terrific sensitivity, and care with warm compassion. These people are indispensable in the group setting, for their main ministry is to the individuals within the group. Their strength is making people feel wanted, loved and cared for, and their gift is empowering others to live life with confidence and gusto.
Included in this category is the friend, the person who is able to reach across race, gender and other barriers to develop a significant relationship with others. (We would also call this person a disciplemaker!) This individual often gives advice, can be counted on to listen when others don’t hear what is being said, and will stand beside people when everyone else has gone.

There are many kinds of friends, and a number of qualities that go with being a friend. One role is the group affirmer, finding the good qualities in others. Like the one leper, out of the ten that were healed, who returned to thank Jesus, this person is able to say, “Thank you,” and “You did a great job,” when others might miss the opportunity.

A second role is the group sensitizer, the individual who senses what others are thinking and feeling. A great deal of hurt is hidden during group meetings. The group sensitizer can make others aware of a member’s reaction to the rest of the group. Then there’s the servant, quietly moving from person to person and from situation to situation, doing the things that need to be done, without fanfare. There are very few real servants, but when we come into contact with one we can picture the Master himself, towel around waist, teaching the disciples how they were to think and live.

The other-centered person not only meets the ministry demands of the group, but also shows the rest of the group how to care.

Group-Centered Roles
There are also individuals who contribute to the composite group. The “group” is the intangible means by which people are drawn together, and there are three different kinds of group-building persons. First, there are those people who help the group understand “what it is.” Then, those who will help the group to function effectively in “what it says.” And, finally, others who will help the group in “what it does.”

1. What the group is. The basic role in this category is the group-focus person, who never allows the group to forget why they come together and where they are going. Because of the importance of the role, this person is a leader, whether or not he or she is the “official” leader. Many groups wander aimlessly, some for years, with no clear direction. The group-focus person does not allow that to happen.

2. What the group says. Discussion is the trademark of small groups, but good problem-solving discussion is often hard to find. Some pastors are unsure about small groups because they feel that in that setting people tend to “share their ignorance” about the Bible, which could reinforce harmful beliefs. This is not too far off base where some groups are concerned. Fortunately, good mind-stimulating discussion with people filling some of the positive roles listed below can go a long way toward solving this problem.

Since groups are easily bogged down and sidetracked, the issue clarifier has an indispensable role in discussion. This person can remind the group what they are trying to learn and can help take a number of seemingly unrelated ideas and sum them up for the benefit of the group. From there, the question asker can probe by asking tough questions. A good question asker, who is encouraged to do so, can help a group learn many things. Then there are people who react positively to the question askers by posing possible solutions. The problem solver, like the issue clarifier, can keep the group on track. This person is often frustrated until issues are worked out. At the end of the discussion, the summarizer can bring together what was said, while the reality tester tries to determine if truth has indeed been discovered. The reality tester
is one who can especially keep the whole process free from shared ignorance.

3. *What the group does.* All of the above roles are sometimes hard to pinpoint in any one person. This is not to say that they are unimportant, for they are essential for the survival of a healthy small group. But this final category is very tangible because it involves fairly well-defined roles within the group. In fact, your group might attach special titles to some of the following people.

These functional roles can either be assigned or understood and are based on what people do best or what they believe most strongly in. Groups might have a prayer coordinator, song leader, mission chairperson, outreach coordinator, community builder, Bible study leader, or any number of other roles. It is not necessarily expected that these will be the small group leader’s roles. Instead, as the leader, you become the group coordinator by placing people in areas they have expertise in and want to focus on.

There are two more roles required by the group. First, the group evaluator, who can help the group obtain a realistic picture of its progress. And finally, a time-keeper to help you stay on track timewise.

As you can see, there are many different types of personalities and roles that can be found in the small group. Most people possess more than one of these roles—you should try to implement a group environment in which unhealthy roles are minimized, individuals are ministered to, and the group understands what it is, what it says, and what it does.

**The Leader and Group Dynamics**

You may be feeling a little overwhelmed with your responsibility. Even though I may appear to be speaking about small group ministry as if it were a scientific process, nothing could be farther from the truth. Indeed, it would be impossible to design a course that listed a step-by-step recipe for small groups. You will learn to rely on the Holy Spirit, prayer and positive implementation of leadership qualities as you put the principles in this book to work. And this final section provides a framework which will enable you to ask the questions which you need to answer in the course of disciplemaking through small group ministry.

Good honest evaluation will be your key to discerning how you are doing. Leaders tend to be threatened by evaluation because they might discover things that are negative. But that is the very purpose of evaluation—to change what is bad and emphasize what is good. We’re not in ministry to be God, so we don’t have to be perfect. Evaluation can show us the areas where we are weak so that, with God’s help, we can become better leaders while building a strong group atmosphere. The following are a few questions that leaders should regularly ask and answer:

- **Are we as a group making disciples?** It is easy to lose sight of our goal when we are just trying to keep up with the demands of life, family and ministry.
- **Am I, the leader, an effective disciplemaker?** A good leader is growing, willing to lead others in the process of disciplemaking, and willing and able to empower others to become leaders in Jesus Christ.
- **Where is our group presently?** Develop the habit of studying the individuals and the group to discover where you are as a group. Unless you know the emotional, spiritual and mental state of your group, you may operate under a serious leadership handicap. A group of baby Christians might not be ready for heavy systematic theology. A bickering group should not take in
new members. When evaluating the past and present reality of the group, you will want to evaluate group strengths and weaknesses, the status, contributions and problems of each individual, and the relationship of each individual to the group.

☐ Where is our group headed? Once you know where your group is, you can realistically set group objectives and start moving forward. This evaluative step is the goal-setting stage. You will want to evaluate the group both in its present state and for its future potential. Does your group want to get better at prayer? outreach? Bible study? interpersonal relationships? If so, then what would you like to see happen in the group?

☐ How are we getting there? Once you have set your goals, you can move from them right to the program. If community will be your emphasis, then you can develop a program that will stimulate sharing, fun, honesty and other aspects of community building. If you also want to study the Bible together, then you can pick a resource and move forward.

Community building is not easy, and sometimes it is not fun. But it is indispensable in the church. The church often makes great noise about world peace, and yet we find it difficult to coexist in a small group together. No matter where you go as a small group, you will accomplish little if you have not developed a loving, caring, honest atmosphere.

Questions for Individuals or Groups

1. How can the process of community building be compared to constructing a puzzle?
2. Why do you think God wanted to bring so many different Christians together as one body?
3. Briefly state the problems inherent in group expectations.
4. How can you clarify group expectations?
5. How does working through “who we are and what we do” (Small Group Dynamics) define a group’s identity and help the group understand its expectations?
6. Why do you think group consensus is so important?
7. In your own words, what happens in the first stage of community?
   second?
   third?
   fourth?
8. What situations from your past can help you see these various stages at work?
9. What different roles have you played in groups?
10. Are there any negative roles that you have taken, and if so, what?
11. What do you think are some of the most important roles to a group?
12. Why is it so important to regularly evaluate?

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COMMUNITY

You have waited for the box to come for quite some time. Inside is the gas grill that you ordered. Without waiting for your spouse to come home, you unpack the box and start assembling the pieces. You cannot wait to surprise her with a good charbroiled meal.

It doesn’t take long, however, for you to realize that you have gotten in over your head. You have pieces all over the floor, but you cannot make sense of the large assortment of nuts, bolts and other parts. Eventually, you give up and push the box out of the way. Maybe you and your wife can work on it together when she gets home.

When your wife arrives she notices the mess in the corner. She runs to the box as excitedly as you had at first, and she starts to pull things from the box. You tell her how confusing it will be to assemble the parts, and then you busy yourself in the kitchen preparing an oven-baked supper. After a while, and wondering what has become of her, you wander into the garage. To your embarrassment, she is successfully assembling the parts.

How did she do it? Unlike you, she had gone straight for the owner’s guide, complete with assembly instructions. You had decided that you could do without the guide. She had been much more realistic and was coming up with much better results.

You cannot do without the owner’s guide when putting together a complicated gas grill. The same is true with the Christian life. You can learn about God from nature, and you can discover a great deal in relationship with others, but it is impossible to be an effective Christian without an understanding of God’s Word. Unfortunately, even though we have a wealth of Bibles, Bible helps, and books about the Bible, most people spend very little time studying and meditating on Scripture. And until we discover the Word and its importance in our lives, we will be as frustrated and confused as the man who tried to put the grill together without instructions.

Reading the Bible can be stimulating and invigorating. Our lives, which are often full of seemingly unrelated pieces, come together under God’s direction.

Approaching the Bible
Most Christians believe that the Bible is essential. But just how should you approach the Bible? The following are good guidelines to use in your own reading and application of the Bible.

Fact #1. The Bible is God’s complete written Word. It represents all that God wanted to communicate directly to humanity about how to live within his truth.

Fact #2. The Bible is authoritative in every area of faith and life that it addresses. There may be things in the Bible that we cannot understand, but if we take its teaching seriously we can accept it with all sincerity, humility and obedience.

Understanding that the Bible is God’s Word and is applicable to our lives, our first responsibility is to read the Bible and attempt to understand what it is saying. Since the Bible is recorded in human language and was written at specific times with special information, we first need to determine the original intent of the author (this is called exegesis). Then, we can discover what the Bible says to Christians in our day (this is called hermeneutics).
Many religions beside Christianity have used the Bible for their own ends. It is possible to twist the Bible endlessly when verses are taken out of their original context and put together with other verses out of context. Thus, our second responsibility is to make sure that integrity guides our study, so that instead of manipulating the Bible, we study its different parts in context.

This means that a verse must be understood by its surrounding sentences and paragraphs. Sentences and paragraphs are interpreted by other paragraphs and by chapters. Chapters are interpreted by other chapters and by the book. And the book is interpreted by the other books of the Bible. Only by interpreting Scripture with Scripture will we be enabled to achieve a closer understanding of what God intended when his Word was recorded.

Then, our first response to God’s Word must be willing submission to what it says. This does not mean that we become blind to our own feelings, questions and hang-ups. Instead, we are ultimately putting our faith in the One who authored the Book. With God’s help, and our submission, the Word can “be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our paths” (Ps 119:105).

Our second response to Scripture is obedience, the byproduct of submission. If the Bible is truly our guide, we will attempt to become the kind of obedient disciples that God wants us to be.

It is said that, when trying to capture monkeys, trappers will put some food in a box and cut a small hole, just big enough for a little hand to slip through, in the side of the box. A monkey sees the box, reaches for the food and grasps it, then tries to pull its hand back through the hole. Unfortunately for the monkey, it is only possible to remove its hand when it lets go of the food. The trappers discovered something about monkey (and human!) nature when they realized that monkeys never let go. The foolish animal will hold on, caught in the trap, until the trappers return for their prize.

Like the monkeys, we have trouble letting go of our own sins and shortcomings, but there is something very freeing when we give in and turn things over to God. We discover that there is tremendous peace that comes with being in God’s will. John 15:9–11 tells us what happens when we are obedient to Christ:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

This passage makes the connection between obedience and joy. The church, or small group, or family, or individual, that follows Christ will have joy in life.

The Bible in Small Groups?
There are some who might make a case, and it carries some legitimacy, that since the Bible is so precious, we should keep its interpretation in the hands of trained leaders who can teach us all that we need to know. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it overestimates the role that trained professionals should play in biblical application. Pastors and church leaders are human and just as subject to error and sin as any other person. While not downplaying the pulpit and teaching ministries, we need to view them realistically. Without the balance of an educated laity, ministry can be used to lead many astray.

Secondly, this view underestimates the role of the Holy Spirit, who provides understanding.
and direction to the reader. The Spirit, God’s “God with us” in the lives of believers, specializes in applying the Word to our lives. Only the Spirit can change a heart. Only the Spirit can convict a person in sin. Only the Spirit can convince somebody of the wisdom of God’s plan. God’s Word and the Holy Spirit are inseparable. When we remove people from directly reading the Bible, we tamper with a means that God finds effective for reaching tender hearts with his message. The Spirit will work in your life as you learn to apply principles of biblical interpretation that bring forth the clear meaning of God’s Word.

And finally, this way of thinking underestimates the value of people. Church history has shown us that people who have been allowed to read and respond to God’s Word directly have been Christians on the move. One of the greatest battles of the Reformation involved whether people were capable of reading the Bible for themselves. Wonderful results came from places where people had access to the Bible.

We need the same sort of movement today. We need to put down our “how to” books and books about the Bible and approach the Word of God itself with fresh vigor. Satan wants to keep us away from God’s Word. God is waiting to reward those who read and apply his Word. Whose voice will we heed?

The Bible and Small Groups
Small groups are ideal settings for people to study the Bible. In small group study, people have ownership in the process of study and change.

It doesn’t take a world-renowned scholar to figure out that people learn best when they are accountable for the learning process. This is why teachers are stimulated by researching their subjects. In preparation for the teaching event, they not only need to put the information into their brain, they must also process it so they can present it in an understandable way.

Students, on the other hand, are much more inclined to put information down on paper in preparation for test day without caring about the information they have been given. They often have no feeling of responsibility for the class time—their concerns are focused on exams and papers.

Good small groups are helpful because they can bring teacher and learner roles together into one. Everyone in the small group is responsible for what happens in the small group. In this sense, each person is a teacher.

Because they have a part in the learning process, all members are held accountable to complete what the group has agreed to study. If group consensus has been properly utilized, everyone will find the work reasonable and within reach. Knowing that others in the group will be expecting their participation, they are stimulated to complete their work. Whether reading a chapter of the Bible per day or answering questions in a workbook, they will be much more inclined to work on a consistent basis with a weekly meeting to look forward to than if they were studying alone.

Then, because they decide what they want and need to study, the topics will challenge members within the framework of their lives.

You learn soon enough if people in a small group possess ownership in the group. If they come prepared and ready to share, they feel like the group is theirs. The small group leader can encourage the group to choose study materials that bring the whole group together as co-teachers in the process of learning.
Small groups can teach orthodoxy and encourage orthopraxis. There are two parts to living in God’s truth. Orthodoxy, or “right belief,” means discovering what is true about God. Orthopraxis, or “right action,” means living a life of obedience to God’s way.

The Christ-centered small group will want to teach its people God’s truth. In the Bible, people come face to face with teaching about gossip, lying, bitterness, salvation, the Holy Spirit, holy living and a host of other issues. More importantly, they discover God’s plan for the world and begin to find their place in history. Without an understanding of God’s plan, the foundation for holy living is built on sand.

Once we understand what God wants, we are then able to act in obedience. The process of sanctification (Christian growth) is one that involves constant enlightenment. The more we learn about God, the more we learn of our own failure and weakness. We are encouraged by the Holy Spirit and our brothers and sisters in Christ to work on different areas of our lives, and we grow. Although we will not attain perfection in this life, we can move closer to God’s model as displayed through Jesus Christ.

Bible Study Methods
There are many choices that are yours as you and your group decide what you would like to study. You can utilize discipleship booklets and other options listed in “Resources and Activities” under the heading “Deciding What to Study,” or you can choose one of the Bible study methods below.

1. Scripture memory. Joshua 1:8 says, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” This verse in Joshua commands us to allow the Bible to permeate our thought processes until we are able to think spontaneously about its truths. This happens best when we spend enough time on a portion of Scripture to memorize it.

There are some wonderful topical memory systems, such as those produced by Navigators, that allow a group to learn, meditate, and benefit from the Bible. They are broken down topically so that a small group can discuss each week’s subject while sharing the weekly memorization verses.

2. Character study. Your group can locate each part of the Bible that tells a person’s story and follow that character from beginning to end. As groups study like this, they are able to “climb into the skin” of Bible heroes. They learn that each is portrayed in graphically honest terms. Many were reluctant servants. Some were gifted speakers. All had glaring weaknesses. And God used each one to work his will in history.

You might, for instance, choose Elijah. Elijah was a fascinating person. All alone he stood up to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel with holy boldness. He faced down 400+ prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel. He lived in a cave, a widow’s home, and by a brook. He suffered defeat much of his life. Tracing his story throughout the pages of 1 and 2 Kings can be fun and challenging at the same time.

One benefit of this type of study is that, although there are books that can guide the study of a particular individual, all that’s really needed is a Bible concordance, some diligence, and a notebook.

3. Themes. Another type of study that utilizes the Bible concordance, diligence, and a note-
book is the study of Bible themes. Perhaps the group wants to learn about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Or it might want to understand faith, or hope, or love. It is a great challenge to root out the whole Bible teaching on a particular matter so that the group can better understand its meaning. Group results can then be checked against other resources.

4. **Bible study helps.** Perhaps you have been involved in a Neighborhood Bible Study group. Or you may have used Serendipity’s Mastering the Basics studies. Or you may have used InterVarsity Press’s LifeGuide® Bible Studies. There are a good number of Bible study materials that have been written to help Christians study a particular book of the Bible. These often take the inductive approach, allowing the Bible student to answer directed questions. People feel comfortable with these studies because the authors have designed them to allow for maximum student involvement. The group is allowed to draw its own conclusions from the study.

5. **Inductive Bible study.** Some people like to get right to the heart of Bible study and are willing to put in the time that is necessary. For these people inductive Bible study is a wonderful tool. Inductive study teaches you how to approach the Bible so that you can arrive at biblical truth with confidence. Through the use of questions, and the careful analysis of each text in its context, inductive Bible study can be the most exciting kind of study.

6. **Book Bible study.** Some people want to study books of the Bible without printed material and without the in-depth study that inductive Bible study often requires. For these, studying the Bible in the group could very simply involve each person reading a portion of Scripture and sharing what they have learned from their reading. The benefit of this type of study is that all conclusions are original and people are forced to think for themselves. A possible drawback is the potential for error that exists if passages are studied out of context.

### Characteristics of Good Group Bible Study

Leaders often get scared when they think of leading a Bible study. Handling of the Word of God brings great responsibility, and no sincere leader wants to lead people astray. Some of this fear is legitimate, coming from a desire to be faithful to the biblical text. Many ministers experience the same feeling when they are preparing to preach on Sunday mornings.

But some of the fear need not be present. People in the church are often intimidated by pastors and other “experts” who seem to know all the answers and who appear well trained. But we don’t need to compare ourselves with others. God can use our attempts to do good work, just as well as those of a charismatic speaker.

Are you a disciplemaker? If so, then you are more than qualified to lead a Bible study. People respect a disciplemaker. People are empowered by a disciplemaker. People are stimulated by a disciplemaker.

There are five things that lead to good study. If these five are present, and if the small group has the goal of discipleship, the foundation of leadership, and the structure provided by community, then group study can be extremely challenging.

1. **The nature of the study has been agreed on by the group,** and each person expects the study to meet needs in their lives. This is one place where “the rubber meets the road” in group consensus. If a strong leader has pushed a particular pet study through, or if the majority has overruled a minority, then people in the group may not feel that the study is relevant. The place to start in group study is where everyone has legitimate, and felt, need.

2. **The study has been broken down into legitimate units of study,** and each student knows what
is expected in weekly preparation. People are going to benefit from the small group study if they have work to do on their own during the week, but this can also be counterproductive. If half of the group members are setting aside times alone with God and the other half are not, then home assignments will do more damage than good. It is better to start with small assignments and work up as people feel fulfilled in their study.

3. *The study has definite application in the life of each group member.* There is a potentially limitless number of study possibilities for a group, but not all studies will be beneficial. The goal of discipleship must always be kept at the forefront of group study. A group might be fascinated by Near Eastern architecture and its theological implications, but if this course of study does not help the group become better disciples it should not be done.

4. *The group does justice to proper study of the Bible.* Another characteristic of good group study is that the study utilizes exegesis (discovering author’s original intent) before attempting hermeneutics (understanding the passage in today’s world). It is easy to make up for our Bible comprehension weaknesses by jumping to quick conclusions. But the Bible is not trivial reading, and we are wise when we read it carefully.

   Studying a complete book thoroughly, in a systematic and careful manner, is the best way to conduct a study. This allows you to see the book as a unit before getting into specific verses.

   When this is not done it is easy to read a passage and discuss it without truly getting to the heart of the author’s intent. Misunderstanding the Bible’s message is like miscommunication—if you miss what I am trying to say, then we are most likely going in opposite directions.

5. *The leader understands his or her role in the study process.* The process of discipleship does not call for Bible “know-it-alls,” but for people who can stimulate learning and application. Small group leaders need not come prepared with extensive notes, thousands of questions, or cute illustrations. Instead, the leader should come prepared to facilitate the learning process.

   First, the leader can use study resources like the ones we have talked about in this chapter (and in “Resources and Activities”). These studies can greatly aid in your preparation because you will be doing the same work as everyone else. If you understand the study’s intent, you will be able to chart your own course by following and adapting that of the material.

   There is a pitfall to avoid, however. Some leaders will woodenly follow a study, question by question, not allowing for deviation. If everyone has prepared, repeating each question will insult the intelligence of people who, having answered the questions, will want to move on to deeper levels of discussion. So the leader will want to keep discussion on course while allowing individual expression of concerns as well. A prepared group will need very little stimulation for great discussion to occur. Don’t let a printed study hinder group creativity.

   Second, the leader does his or her homework before the small group study. Most Bible study helps are written for those who are not experts on the Bible. Use of resources and basic prepa-

   Before studying a particular book of the Bible, and in order to give yourself a “jump” on everybody else, read a synopsis of the book in order to determine author, purpose, themes, historical setting, and other relevant information. Then, get a leader’s guide if it is available, since this will also provide valuable tidbits. Next, work through the study carefully to insure that you have dealt with every issue in the study. And then, when someone asks you a question and you don’t know the answer, admit it. It may do the group good to wrestle with deep questions
nobody knows the answers to.

Third, the leader will want to direct the group discussion in such a way that people feel free to express themselves within certain bounds. You don’t necessarily want a discussion on prayer to turn into a conversation on how to hang drapes. You might, however, allow a person to raise her concern about why God doesn’t answer yes to every prayer. If allowed, people will often chase tangents for the sake of chasing tangents. The leader could keep things on track by saying, “I’m fascinated by drape-hanging as well, but I have a question on prayer that I’d like to address,” or “Speaking of drapery, I have a question on prayer....” People appreciate a leader who keeps them moving in the right direction.

Fourth, you will want to ask open-ended questions. The fastest way to build roadblocks in a group is to ask yes-or-no questions. Much more exciting are questions that begin with who, what, where, when, how and why. So instead of asking, “Do you think this is as important as the apostle Paul seems to make it?” you will want to ask, “Why do you think the apostle Paul felt this was so important?” Good questions lead to further discussion.

Fifth, you need to affirm each person who speaks so that their answers will be given value by others. Many people are scared to speak up, afraid that they will give a wrong answer and make fools of themselves. Imagine the pain of someone who finally does speak up and is laughed at!

Perhaps the best way to affirm people is by your paraphrasing back to them what they are saying. In this way, you are showing them that you take what they say seriously and that you are not judging them, even if you might disagree. If they are wrong, they will often discover it when hearing you recite what they have just said.

For example, someone might respond to the question “What does the phrase ‘he makes me lie down in green pastures’ in Psalm 23 mean?” by answering, “I think that it refers to the necessity of sleep.” You could then say, “Barbara thinks that David is talking about sleep.” Even though you think Barbara is wrong, by saying this you do not judge her response. Instead, you let Barbara, and the rest of the group, hear what she is saying. As she listens to your interpretation of what she says, she may amend her response to “Actually, what I meant was that God helps us to slow down when we become compulsive, and sleep is one aspect of his care.” If she does not respond, the group probably will. But in the whole conversation, Barbara must feel affirmed so that she will speak up at another time.

Choose the Right Tools
Beside the study materials and your own creative approach to Bible study, there are other resources that provide help in group study. I suggest the following Bible study tools, in descending order of importance:

1. A good study Bible. (The NIV Study Bible is excellent, but there are other good choices.)
2. A good concordance—either in back of a study Bible or a complete concordance like Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance or Young’s.
3. A Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.
4. A book-by-book analysis of each book of the Bible including author, recipients, date, purpose, setting and outline—a good study Bible has one, but Unger’s and Eerdmans’ handbooks are helpful.
5. A good commentary.

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Avoid the Pitfalls
When you have done everything possible to prepare, the final step is that you can watch out for the following pitfalls that accompany group study.

- “Shared ignorance,” which results from a group approaching the Bible with no clue about what it is saying to them, will lead to easy—but incorrect—answers.
- Taking verses out of context and using them to fit your own circumstances and desires, inhibits God’s Word from speaking.
- Overemphasizing certain themes which a group feels comfortable with. Sooner or later the group must take a more balanced approach to study and life.
- Allowing group experts to take over makes others feel inadequate.
- Focusing on only academic study, so that no application is made, and people come together for mental stimulation.
- Using one study method repeatedly. Groups can become bored when they do the same thing year in and year out. There are many options available and they need to be used.
- Leaders must have a general idea where they want the study time to go, and they must feel comfortable with the material. An unprepared leader hinders a group.
- If students are not prepared, either they are being lazy and need to be challenged or the work is too much for them. A correction needs to be made in these situations.

Become a Student
Nothing will stimulate your group more than seeing its leader excited about God’s Word. You need to spend time in God’s Word on a daily basis so that you are grounded in the Bible. In a loving community with positive leadership, disciples will be encouraged to learn about the Bible and apply it to their lives.

Questions for Individuals or Groups
1. How is the Bible like the owner’s manual to a complicated piece of machinery?
2. In your own words why is it so important to read and apply God’s Word?
3. What does it mean to study text “in context”?
4. How are we to respond to God’s Word?
5. According to John 15:9–11, what happens when we are obedient to God’s commands? Why is this so?
6. What objection might some have to serious study of God’s Word in small groups? In what ways is this concern valid? not valid?
7. What are some benefits that come with studying the Bible in small groups?
8. What are the five characteristics of good group study?
9. What kinds of questions should the leader be prepared to ask?
10. How (besides looking at resource books!) could you determine an author’s main purpose for writing a book of the Bible?
11. Why is it important to get the “big picture” or purpose of a book before studying specific verses?
A WORSHIPING COMMUNITY

Picture 60,000 fans, packed into the colossal Skydome, watching the “baseball game of the century.” Two of the best teams in recent memory are locked in mortal combat, both attempting to insure their place in baseball history. Tension is written across all of the players’ faces as they give every ounce of their energy to winning. It has come down to the seventh game of the World Series. Each team has won three games, and now there is a tie entering the bottom of the ninth inning.

The home team is at bat, the best reliever in the league on the mound for the visiting team. First one out, and then two, and the hopes of the team rest upon the shoulders of Harv Iceberg, the incredible home-run slugging outfielder. He waits for the right pitch, sending a few pitches into the foul zone and working the count to three and two. The drama is intense, and all the fans are on their feet. Each time the pitcher looks to the catcher for the sign, the crescendo builds in a steady beat until the sound rocks the very foundations of the stadium. Then, as the pitcher goes into his full-count wind-up, the noise becomes deafening.

And then it happens. Almost as if it were written into a script, Harv sends the three-and-two pitch high into the upper deck of the outfield. He is immediately swarmed by fans and teammates, while those in the stands clap, cheer and raise their hands to this man who won the game. The revelry will continue long into the night as the stadium empties and excited fans pour into the streets of the city.

Now try to picture this: There is a hush in the auditorium as the ballet performance nears its end. For two hours the audience has been given the treat of watching some of the best ballet dancers in the world, and each has seemingly outdone him or herself in this performance. There is one dancer, however, who has emerged to stand above the others. A young, unheralded dancer has touched the hearts of each person with her sensitive, artistically flawless performance. In this, the final scene, she is dancing the final steps to the ballet. As she finishes, flushed and dainty, the crowd erupts in thunderous applause. Every heart in the auditorium is warmed, not just by her performance, but by their own response to her. As she curtsies to the crowd, people bring roses to show their enthusiasm.

And finally, picture this: The afternoon mob in front of the posh Grand Hotel is almost stifling, yet some people arrived well before dawn. Word has somehow leaked out that Flash Jenkins, the rock star of the decade, is to arrive sometime early in the afternoon. Young girls,
middle-aged men, and even older women are crammed together in the hope that they will somehow glimpse this modern-day hero.

Finally, to everyone’s great joy, a stretch limousine pulls up and Flash, surrounded by personal bodyguards and local police, emerges onto the sidewalk. The crowd shouts in glee and presses upon the small entourage as they struggle up the sidewalk to the hotel. Some people actually get through and touch his clothes, while others have to be content with a close-up look at his face. When Flash, in a rare moment of generosity, stops to autograph a young girl’s album, others in the mob scream as they picture how they would feel if he stopped to touch their own album. With voices and hands raised, they shout praises to this rock prince.

There is one common element in all three of these scenarios. In each story, one person has captured the hearts of others and receives praise and glory for his or her accomplishments. And while you might not personally act the same as the audience in any of these examples, the point is that praise, or worship, comes naturally to humanity. We praise good speakers, great athletes, wonderful singers and musicians, and a host of others who are gifted.

Typical Children
We enjoy worship, it is true. But heartfelt worship for God is something that doesn’t come easily to many people. To discover why this is so, consider the example of children relating to their parents.

The typical child makes many demands of his or her parents, in fact often pushing them to the limit of their giving capabilities. Infants cry for love and care are replaced by “Ga Ga Goo” (or, “Give me my bottle!”). Toddler demands are replaced by “Daddy, can I have some money for an ice cream cone?” and childhood demands are followed by “Mom, I’m going to the movies with friends, and I’m taking the car.”

Imagine the relief that comes to parents of children who, upon reaching adulthood, choose to become friends with their parents. A child-friend is able to move past the arena of personal need into a genuine relationship with his or her parents.

Now think of how the typical Christian approaches God, our heavenly Father. Like the baby, or the child, or the adolescent, we generally approach God with “Dear God, I pray that...” We tend to come with our shopping list of requests as if he were the cosmic father whose main purpose in life is to cater to our needs and the needs of others. In doing so, we miss a vital part of our relationship with God.

It is the rare child who takes time to genuinely express love or thanks. But when it happens, it is satisfying to a parent’s heart and strengthens the bond between parent and child. It is the same way with God.

When we approach God with genuine praise and thanksgiving, we experience a wonderful closeness to our father. It is almost as if we climb into his lap, rest our head against his chest, and tell him how safe we feel when his strong arms are wrapped around us. Most children take their parents’ love for granted. We, too, take God’s care for granted.

Purpose of Worship
In worship we begin to learn who God is and what God does. When we start to appreciate God, we are better equipped to live a balanced life. A deeper relationship with God brings a sense of closeness and security that carries over into other areas of our lives (including prayer). Like the
child who has come to appreciate her parents and has stopped using her parents for her own good, we can start working with God instead of “working God.” Worship is a special kind of key, for it unlocks many doors to deeper Christian joy.

So what is the purpose of worship? To declare, through praise, thanksgiving, and our very lives, the worth-ship (or worthiness) of God, as we lift our hearts in love and reverence to God.

If you recall the earliest pages in Genesis, human beings had started giving sacrificial offerings to God as an expression of their devotion. Even though sin had marred the human and divine relationship, humanity attempted to worship God by bringing things to him that were very important to them. And in its very essence, worship does involve bringing an offering, our offering, to God. Coming from imperfect humans, it is sin-stained and imperfect. Yet, we are the ones who benefit when we worship God.

There are three basic components, or “offerings,” in Christ-centered worship. In worship we praise, then we give thanks, and finally we offer our lives to God.

**Praise**

Without realizing it, we spend a great deal of time searching for things that bring joy, satisfaction and fulfillment. The hiker will look with excitement to each new summit. The expecting parents will marvel at each young child that they see. The young dancer will watch enthralled as an expert dancer performs intricate maneuvers.

This desire to find meaning in our lives is present because sin created a vacuum where close fellowship with God had previously existed. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve enjoyed a special closeness with God that was based upon genuine, uninterrupted adoration of God. Then Satan entered the picture in Genesis 3 by seemingly offering Adam and Eve the same place, and therefore devotion, that God alone inhabited. In response to Satan’s offer, they turned from worshipping God so that they, too, might be worshipped. Successive generations have proven that human goals— searching for riches, power and fame—are driven by our need to be the center of worship and to be in control. For those who can never attain power or control, there is disillusionment, frustration and bitterness with life.

There are some, however, who have found peace because they have discovered at least a partial restoration of the Genesis relationship. These few have looked past themselves and their own small worlds and have come to know One far greater who is worthy of their praise. They have found joy by trading in their self-centered lives for God-centered worship.

Christian praise focuses on who God is and what God does in creation. When we praise God, we attempt to think about his nature and actions and to respond in faith and adoration. In order to enhance your understanding of praise, read Psalm 145 and underline every reference to who God is and what God does in creation. Then meditate on what each one means.

I will exalt you, my God the King;  
I will praise your name forever and ever.  
Every day I will praise you  
and extol your name forever and ever.

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;  
his greatness no one can fathom.
One generation will commend your works to another;  
they will tell of your mighty acts.  
They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.  
They will tell of the power of your awesome works,  
and I will proclaim your great deeds.  
They will celebrate your abundant goodness,  
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.

The Lord is gracious and compassionate,  
slow to anger and rich in love.  
The Lord is good to all;  
he has compassion on all he has made....  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures through all generations.

The Lord is faithful to all his promises  
and loving toward all he has made.  
The Lord upholds all those who fall  
and lifts up all who are bowed down.  
The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food at the proper time.  
You open your hand  
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.

The Lord is righteous in all his ways  
and loving toward all he has made.  
My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.  
Let every creature praise his holy name  
forever and ever.

If you examine this, and other praise psalms closely, you will notice that there are three emotions that naturally flow from what we learn about God. First, there is anticipation. The psalmist appears to be excited about what he is learning and will learn about God. In this psalm, the author promises that he (the author) “will exalt you; will praise you; will tell of your mighty acts; will meditate on your wonderful works.” Rather than ending after one good experience, one positive time of worship will lead to others as we anticipate yet another wonderful time with God.

The second emotion is appreciation. Like a starving man savoring every bit of a gourmet meal, the psalmist examines, with obvious pleasure, a great many things that God is and that God does. He apparently enjoyed writing this love song to God. He knew, as we also know, that it is impossible to worship God without appreciating and experiencing God.

The third emotion is awe. If you were to meet your favorite actress or sports hero, you might approach that person with a measure of awe. So we also learn to respond in awe to a powerful, creative, loving, gentle, compassionate God as we learn more about him.
These principles may sound great, but praise is a very difficult concept to grasp and apply in life. It is not easy to praise One who is not physically present. It certainly almost defies logic to get excited about God. However, God has provided help for sincere believers.

First, Christians have the Holy Spirit in their lives. The Spirit helps us worship God, and we can find comfort in the fact that weak, fumbling efforts are being directed by the Spirit. Second, worshiping God is a discipline. Even though worship comes naturally, worshiping God is something that we have to teach ourselves over a lifetime of loving God. It requires much effort to reorient our thoughts from self-centered to God-centered devotion. Third, there is a lot of God-centered praise in Scripture. By meditating on these passages we can learn how to lift our hearts before God in praise. Fourth, by examining even little things in nature, like delicate flowers, we find many things we can praise God for. We can praise him for his creativity in designing the flower. And we can praise him for his knowledge, because he knows each particular flower (in fact, according to Matthew 6, he adorns them)! Finally, we have each other. When we come together and share God’s greatness and goodness together, we are greatly blessed.

Thanksgiving
The focus in thanksgiving is on what God does on our behalf. Thanksgiving takes the God-centered perspective in praise and applies it to our individual lives. In doing so, we realize that God, who is at work in the world, is also present in every area of life itself.

Thanksgiving is important because it is very easy for us to forget where blessings come from. The great church response “The Doxology” (meaning “Praise God”) contains these words: “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow!” A genuinely thankful person remembers that an exclamation point follows “flow.” We should be happy when we thank God!

Just as with praise, we find it difficult to give thanks. Yet God has given us much to thank him for. With humble gratitude in our hearts we should remember how Jesus suffered so that we could know God personally. With growing joy we can sense the Spirit at work in our lives and thank God that we have been given the Spirit “who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.” As we look forward to heaven, we should thank God that we have a reason for living.

We can also thank God for each healthy day we enjoy, for each breath, for each day with family and friends. We can be grateful that God has called us to be his servants. Additionally, we can thank God for all of the material blessings that we enjoy (often without realizing their benefit until we don’t have them). And we can even thank God for our suffering because, as Peter says, “These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine” (1 Pet 1:7).

Thankfulness always starts with a desire to give God the credit for his goodness, and that requires concentrated effort on our part. Eventually, though, we reach the point where both praise and thanksgiving pour forth from grateful hearts.

Offering Our Lives
Praise and thanksgiving are only the warm-up for true worship. For, as is stated again and again in the Bible (see Ps 51:16–17), God doesn’t want our offerings if we are somehow detached from them. God wants us. Romans 12:1 says it this way: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your
spiritual act of worship.” When we offer ourselves to God, we are performing a spiritual act of worship.

With this third element of worship, we begin to understand the nature of worship. Worship is a personal expression, a deeply rooted response. To worship lightly would be like going to a football game and pretending to be a great fan, without knowing the rules or caring about what happens. In order for us to worship, we must actively engage our heads, our hearts and our very lives in knowing and serving God. For the fact remains that the greatest offering we can bring to God is ourselves.

**Reasons Worship Is So Important**

Here are six reasons worship is essential.

1. **God is worthy of our praise, thanksgiving and offering of self.**

2. **There is joy in worship.** If someone is a great figure skater, we don’t compliment that person on basketball playing. We speak truth when we affirm his or her skating abilities. It is the same with God.

   We worship God because the things we say about him are true. He is faithful, loving, powerful and kind. He offers salvation through Christ, and he enters the life of the believer. When we begin to grasp the truth of God, we are that much closer to letting God’s truth touch our lives. And when God touches our lives, there is joy—and worship.

3. **Worship is essential to life.** We spend our lives searching for the thing(s) that will bring the greatest satisfaction, and when we think we have found it, we give our all to it. Christians struggle because we, like the rest of the world, are led to believe that material possessions, or power, or other worldly offerings, can give happiness in life. But over time, through worship, we realize that there is joy and peace only through living in God’s will. By focusing our lives on God, we are able to bring relationships, thoughts and actions, and lay them at God’s feet as our spiritual offering. As we do this, we fulfill our natural earthly desire for worship. You’ve got to worship someone (or thing)—it might as well be God!

4. **We are practicing for heaven.** Whenever the curtain that hides our view of heaven has been pulled back a little, it always reveals one action in progress. Worship. Revelation 4:8–11 gives this snapshot of heaven:

   Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.” Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

   Just imagine, night and day, without fail, they sing the praises of their God! In heaven, when all of the smoke of life has been cleared away, we will comprehend that the ultimate and only reality is God. So why not try to learn this now, by focusing our lives on worshiping God?

5. **It is a sin not to worship.** If we were indeed created to worship God, then it is a sin to ignore our calling. In fact, Romans 1:21–23 connects a lack of worship with immorality when it says: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but
their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” Notice in this passage that they neither praised God nor thanked God, the first two elements of worship that we talked about. The result was that they found it easy to ignore God and turn to lives of sin.

When we forget to worship God, it is easy to lose connection with what is important in the world, who provides and cares for us, and what he expects from us. Our focus becomes me-centered, as opposed to God-centered. When we don’t worship, we sin.

6. The devil hates it when we worship God. As long as we are me-centered, the devil does not have to listen to us adore and praise God. But when we become God-centered, the devil cringes because our praise, thanks and very lives become focused and meaningful. His role is to sidetrack and frustrate, while God is there to give meaning and joy.

Worship in the Small Group
There are some high-profile small group experts who believe that worship does not really have a place in small groups. In their framework, worship belongs on Sunday mornings, when the whole church body is gathered. And they have a good point—the church corporate should worship God.

But so should each individual member of the church. If worship is an integral part of life, then it is just as important outside of the church building as within it. True worship is not something that can be turned on and off.

In the small group, disciples are getting to know God better. As God starts to touch lives, and as God’s children learn to respond in praise, thanksgiving and by offering their lives, then worship becomes a necessity. Worship belongs in the small group.

Within the context of small groups, there are a number of activities that can enhance worship. These include the use of psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, sharing and prayer.

The book of Psalms is a compiled list of songs that take the form of praise and thanksgiving hymns as well as prayers. In the psalms we come into contact with people who attempted to worship God in all the varied circumstances of life. The psalms include everything from war to creation, bitterness to joy, fear and frustration to victory and celebration.

When reading Psalms, we can identify with the psalmists and their varied human experiences. Even when there was terrible fear or struggle, they almost always ended the psalm by expressing their confidence in or devotion to God. In doing so, they gave us a model for dealing with life.

In the small group, you may want to have a worship time in which people share their favorite psalms, or you may open prayer time with the reading of a psalm. Reading and discussing the psalms will reinforce a deeper love for God in the group.

Some of the people in your group will have grown up singing hymns. Some of the good old hymns can provide a wonderful worship experience in the small group. Colossians 3:16 talks about singing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Hymns represent a more traditional approach, generally focusing on praise for who God is and what God has done. If your group has a pianist, it can be great fun to sing hymns to accompaniment.

Colossians 3:16 mentions “spiritual songs,” probably because they represent a more experi-
ential aspect of the Christian faith. Where hymns tend to be doctrinal, spiritual songs often represent our perception of what God is doing in our lives (thanksgiving). These songs are generally simpler. They easily adapt to guitars or sing-a-long albums, and they have varied rhythms and beat.

There are other ways besides singing to worship. A slightly different focus can make sharing into a praising and thanking time. You might set aside one sharing time a month for praise and thanksgiving. As you learn to praise and thank God together, you can weave worship into all of sharing by encouraging the group to watch for answered prayer; understand that all sharing, whether good or bad, occurs in the presence of God; and talk about how your lives do, and don’t, reflect your worship of God.

Up until now we have shared ways to worship God while talking about God. In prayer, you can worship God by talking to God. When we worship God in prayer, we use the highest form of communication (prayer) for our highest action (worship). What better combination is there?

It is stimulating to read prayers in the Bible (including the psalms), because they provide a good model for those who would worship God in prayer. These prayers generally contain a number of references to what God has done in the life of the one praying. Even in prayers in which people are making requests, praise and thanksgiving are almost always present. The interesting thing is that, by telling God he is great, we become more confident in his ability to guide our lives.

Prayer in the small group should include praise and thanksgiving. You may set aside special times to do so, or you can integrate praise and thanksgiving into the small group prayer time in a more general way. Simply use your creativity, and God’s worth-ship, to bring prayer and worship together.

Getting Started
You can imagine, even with what you have learned in this chapter, the difficulties inherent in teaching a group to worship God. Worship calls forth deep feelings, and wherever there are deep feelings, there will be some discomfort.

A few simple steps will help you introduce worship in a more non-threatening way. First, be willing to start with yourself. Use the worship above to explore ways that you can be more worshipful. The best creative worship ideas will come from you as you learn how to worship God.

Second, be willing to go slowly. Start with a song or two, or the reading of a psalm. There is no need to push people when they are not ready to go. Over time, and with your good leadership, the group will relax and want to spend more time worshipping. Then, you can learn to use the different gifts that are in the group. If some have special musical ability, use their talent to enhance worship through song. If someone loves the psalms, or loves to share about God, let him or her lead parts of the group worship time. A grass-roots worship movement is much more inspiring than a leader-led worship movement. Let the people help each other worship God.

Finally, keep worship spontaneous. When people get used to something, they often stop thinking about what they are doing. If you sing the same songs week in and week out, you will stagnate. On the other hand, if you utilize your group’s creativity there are hundreds of exciting worship ideas that you can implement. You can memorize Bible verses, have worship-ori-
ented skits, or use rhythm instruments to lighten the atmosphere. Allow worship to be an expression of your own dynamic relationship with and love for God.

Committing to Worship
Is it your hope that you and your group will fall in love with Jesus in a deeper way? Do you think worship will help you in your quest? If so, then commit yourself to a life of worship. Your own declaring God’s worth-ship will go a long way toward focusing your group in worship.

Questions for Individuals or Groups
1. How do the illustrations in the first section demonstrate our natural desire for worship?
2. How would you define the purpose of worship in your own words?
3. What are the three basic components of Christ-centered worship?
4. How would you describe each of the three components?
5. What, in your opinion, is the most important reason demonstrating the importance of worship?
6. Which of the five worship ideas (psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, sharing and prayer) do you feel most comfortable with? Why?
7. What are ways that you can introduce worship into the small group experience?
8. How will your life of worship enable the group you lead to respond to God?

10

A PRAYING COMMUNITY

You are trapped, and you know it. There appears to be no way out, at least no easy way. The only thing you can do is attempt to make the best of a bad situation. You had come to church to let go, to worship, to find refreshment and stimulation. Instead, you find yourself pinned in a corner of the Fellowship Hall listening to the endless ramblings of a very needy individual. If only this person would catch his breath, you might find a way to leave. But he somehow maintains his stamina while connecting an endless series of run-on sentences.

After a while you go numb. You perceive that his face has doubled in size. His ears multiply themselves, then disappear, as he moves his head back and forth. His hair becomes a forest, and you imagine yourself lost among its foliage. His nostrils flare and you recoil at fire that

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seems to be coming out. Then, when he laughs and punches your arm, you are brought back to reality with a jolt. How will you ever remove yourself from this predicament? Will your youngest child remember you when, and if, you finally get to go home?

Eventually, and with tremendous feelings of guilt, you extract yourself from the situation with a mumbled excuse and a hasty retreat. He follows you for a while, then gives up and heads for another person. As you hurriedly exit the Fellowship Hall, you remind yourself to take drastic measures the next time you see him coming. If there is a tree handy, you will jump into its welcome branches. If there is a chandelier, you will swing to freedom. No matter what, you will get away!

This person is frustrating because he is unable to communicate. He can talk, and he thinks that he has a lot to say, but when it comes to meaningful dialog he has very little to offer. And this is where your difficulty lies. You cannot connect with this person because he will never understand you. He has used up all his time and energy on himself. You want to help this person, but as a realist you understand that you will probably get nothing in return.

God created us to be relational creatures. We need to be understood. We also need to be understanding. Relationship occurs when two persons meet, reach out, and love one another. In understanding, we are understood. In loving, we are loved.

This principle of reaching out in relationship—communication—is also true of prayer. Prayer is a major part of our relationship with God. In prayer we seek to be known (by God). In prayer we also seek to be knowing (of God).

If you learn nothing else from this chapter, you will begin to comprehend the importance of relationship in prayer. If you are not involved with God in relationship, you will miss much that the Christian life has to offer. And every relationship starts and ends with communication.

Poor in Spirit

When prayer is mentioned, many things probably come to mind. On an objective level, you may recall that prayer is communication with God. Or you may think of the various parts of prayer, like confession or worship. Then again, you might focus on theological truths, such as God’s power and love.

On another level personal feelings also reveal a great deal about what we think of prayer. It is here that we address our insecurities—every praying person has them. Many people struggle because they feel that they don’t pray enough. Others feel inadequate because of sin or insecurity. Still others wonder if anyone is listening, for it takes great faith to believe that God is listening.

There are those who feel so bad about their relationship with God that they don’t know quite what to think about prayer. Perhaps intimidated by super-religious people, or maybe without a good Christian role model, they feel completely overpowered when it comes to living a life of prayer. They say, in essence, “We don’t know him, and we have no idea how to get to know him.”

Insecurity comes out in small groups as well. Most people, even those willing to try, are intimidated by group prayer. Because of this, prayer times may be characterized by silence and tentativeness instead of boldness and joy.

With our many insecurities, we may seem to be like the man in the story at the beginning of this chapter. We bring many deficiencies and needs to our relationships with God, and we
appear to offer nothing in return. And this brings up a vital question: Is it possible that, like the man in our example, our intense need for God causes us to turn him off when we approach him in prayer?

No. We part ways with our needy friend when we care how God is responding to us. In trying to understand God, we are making an honest effort at communication. The tension that results from our insecurities may come from a desire to be close to God in a healthy way. It is important to address each insecurity, and this chapter can help, but their presence can be a healthy sign that we are reaching out and trying to know God better.

Pharisee or Sinner?
In Luke 18:9–14, Jesus tells a story that sheds light on what our attitude should be when approaching God in prayer:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In this parable we see two very different people. The Pharisee was a righteous, well-respected spiritual leader. The tax collector, on the other hand, was probably a liar, cheat and thief. The Pharisee had spent his life learning how to be good. The tax collector had used his position to receive financial gain. We could fully expect Jesus to tell a story about how the Pharisee would be blessed for his goodness. But Jesus didn’t do that. Instead, the “punch line” of his story was that the tax collector received the blessing instead of the Pharisee. Why is that?

In his prayer the Pharisee drew attention to himself by telling God (and anyone listening) how good he was. He was, if you will, a braggart. And we notice two things about him. First, he seemingly lived a good life in order to inform the world that he was good in and of himself. And second, he talked about what he offered to God and humanity (“see what I give?”) while needing nothing in return. He had it all.

The tax collector prayed in an opposite way from the Pharisee. Where the Pharisee stood tall before God, the tax collector could not even raise his eyes to heaven. Instead, he beat himself on the breast and begged God to have mercy on him. He drew God’s loving and compassionate attention by telling God that he was a sinner in need of God’s grace. He came with empty hands, in need of God’s mercy. He needed it all.

This parable underscores two points about how we are to approach God. We begin by approaching God with an understanding of who he is. And then, we are to approach God with an understanding of who we are. We are sinners at the core—poor and frail in our abilities. We need God. We don’t need to convince God of how good we are, or that we can be independent from him. Good communication occurs when two individuals understand each other. God already knows us, for he created us and made himself available to us. So the burden of communication in prayer is ours. If we want God to hear us, we must learn to approach God as sin-
ner, not Pharisee.

Small group prayer will be enhanced when we begin and end with a clear understanding of our place before God. A group of truly humble people will be powerful in prayer. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

**What Is Prayer?**

Prayer is our attempt to communicate with God through worship, confession and petition. And the purpose of prayer is, through intentional communication with God, to get to know God while worshiping him and asking him to act in response to our requests.

You will notice that we don’t say that the purpose of prayer is to ask God to act on our behalf. Instead, the purpose of prayer is to get to know God while we worship and make our requests. The primary focus in prayer is our relationship with God.

In this definition I have listed three things that we do in prayer—worship, confession and petition. Prayer can take any number of forms, and it will vary with each unique God-human relationship, but these three broad categories cover what is communicated.

**Worship**

In worship we begin to understand and appreciate God. In essence, the One we approach in prayer is first known in worship. For this reason, all of chapter nine is devoted to this topic.

**Confession**

The first response to worship is penitence. In Isaiah 6, the prophet Isaiah had a vision of the Lord. He saw God seated on a throne, surrounded by angels singing his praises. At the sight, he cried out in terror, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Why does confession come from worship? Quite simply, a sinful person comes into contact with a loving and pure Being. We are laid bare. Fancy suits, high-powered executive positions, and vacation homes don’t help at all. As the tax collector stood before God in humility, so we also must stand.

You may wonder why we need to confess if we have already asked Christ into our lives, and he has forgiven our sins. On an objective level it is true that Christ’s work on the cross, and his forgiveness of our sins, is complete. Psalm 103:12 says that “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

However, on a subjective level, it is essential that we confess our sins to God. When we sin, we damage our relationship with God, and it takes effort to make things right. On a human level, this is necessary when one friend does something that hurts another.

An example on a human-to-human level is when Mike lies to Steve, and Steve finds out. Even though Mike may be fairly sure that he will be forgiven, there is no way that he can ignore his sin. He has breached the special trust involved in friendship, and it takes heartfelt repentance to heal the injury.

The same is true with sin. When we sin, we defy the Law of God. Yet we want to be God’s friend. From a relational aspect, we need to come with heartfelt repentance and a desire to be the kind of friend that we have been called to be.
We don’t need to be unreasonable in confession, however. It would take a long time to confess each sin we do in one day, and focusing exclusively on sin can be counterproductive. Our purpose in confession is to try to restore our relationship with God on a personal level. We know the sins that hinder that relationship (whether pride, greed, lust, or any number of others), and we can focus on these. Then, on a more general level, we can approach God as the tax collector: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

In the small group, special times, possibly in silence, can be taken for confession in group prayer. And when people begin to trust each other they can confess their sins to each other, knowing that not judgment but empowering help will be given.

Petition
Along with confession and worship, we make requests of God in prayer. And while it has taken us a while to reach this part of prayer, most of our prayers take very little time before we start petitioning God. Many prayers go something like this: “Dear God, thank you that we can be here. Now, we pray that you would ....”

It is not bad to make requests of God. However, you are communicating with a Person, not a robot. You might place an order at a drive-in window without exchanging pleasantries, but you cannot carry on a fulfilling relationship without meaningful dialog.

When you know God and feel close to him, you can have great confidence talking to him about what you need. In fact, the more you know and love God, the more your desires fall in line with his will. You will end up praying for what God already wants. John 15:7 says, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you.”

When making our petitions, we naturally focus our attention on three distinct areas—self, others and special needs.

Praying for ourselves. Many people feel uncomfortable when praying for themselves because they feel that their prayers are somehow selfish. And this might be the case if you are praying for cars, homes, money, power and other such human toys. But in the areas of Christian growth and effectiveness, provision and protection, praying for yourself is crucial.

Your first prayer for yourself should, under normal circumstances, be in the area of Christian growth and effectiveness. Each day you have the opportunity to consecrate yourself to God and ask for help from the Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ model prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, he prays for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done. God’s kingdom will not become a reality until you learn to live in obedience to God the King. And, God’s will must first be done in your life before you can expect it to be done in the lives of others.

Then, you can also pray for God’s provision and protection. The Lord’s Prayer includes petition for daily bread and protection from temptation. We pray for these things so that we can believe in God and take him at his promises.

Praying for others. We live in a world of need. We watch people suffer, observe tension in homes, and see the results that come from a world that has ignored God. Each person reading this chapter could conceivably spend ten hours per day praying for others and still have things to pray for. And it is need that prompts our prayers—need for personal reconciliation, for family, friends and/or work associates to meet Jesus Christ, for our churches to experience renewal through the Holy Spirit, for the mission of the church to go forth into all parts of the world, and for healing. When we pray for others, we expand our personal prayers for Chris-
tian growth, provision and protection to others.

It is in our prayers for others that love often finds its greatest expression, for it demonstrates a willingness on our parts to invest our time in secret for another’s benefit. It is very easy, apart from prayer, to manipulate circumstances or people to get our way. But when we pray for others, we relinquish some of our personal control when asking for God’s will to be done. True love seeks the best for others. Loving petition on another’s behalf allows us to move beyond our own realm of thought and into God’s. And God knows what is best.

Praying for special needs. Nobody can get through life without experiencing some degree of pain and suffering. As we mature in life, we learn that, no matter how well things seem to be going, hard times could always be lurking around the corner. And Christians are not exempt from pain. We have the same chance as any one else to get cancer, or to be in a car accident. Christians struggle with depression and chemical dependency. Christians also experience the loss of loved ones.

But we do have one thing that others do not. We are part of a body, the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:26, Paul says that “if one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” We are not alone, in good times and bad. We have others who can share in our lives, tempering the good times by reminding us to continue to rely on God, and smoothing out the bad times by demonstrating God’s love. Small groups that support their members through times of pain demonstrate precisely what this passage is about—God’s people helping each other during hard times.

We can also pray to God in special times of need. Our first prayer is often for healing, whether emotional or spiritual. We want God to put things right, and this is not unreasonable. Our “Daddy” has the ability to make everything work out in the end. Our faith can grow when he answers our prayers according to our requests.

But our faith can also grow when things don’t work out the way we would like them. First Peter was written for those who were experiencing great suffering. But there is nothing in the book about God “fixing” things so that they could enjoy life again. Instead, Peter reminded the believers again and again that they had a special calling before God (1 Pet 2:4–5), complete with benefits and responsibilities. Suffering, rather than bringing an end to things, instead brought great opportunity to grow in Christ (1 Pet 1:3–9). And this should also be our prayer—that suffering would allow us, and others, to grow strong in Christ.

In Acts Peter and John were arrested for healing a crippled beggar and for using the occasion as an opportunity to spread the gospel. The temple court was convened and the disturbed religious leaders had listened in fury to how the people were continuing to follow the teachings of Jesus, whom they had put to death. Not knowing exactly what to do, they had threatened Peter and John with terrible persecution if they continued preaching the gospel.

Peter and John had taken the threats seriously, and Acts 4:23–31 describes how they had found other believers in a small group and had given them the report. No doubt the young Christians were scared for their lives, and their prayer serves as a model prayer for how we respond to life’s circumstances.

They started by acknowledging who God is and what he has done:

“Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:
'Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the Lord
and against his Anointed One.' (Acts 4:24–26)

Notice that they immediately reached for the One who is always in control. In worshiping, they were no doubt reassured.

Then, they proceeded to make their requests:

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. (Acts 4:27–30)

They first identified themselves with Jesus, who had also suffered. But they affirmed that God had been in control when Jesus had suffered, just as God was in control in these circumstances. Their requests came from a knowledge of God’s power and sovereignty. Then, instead of asking for protection, and rather than asking God to change the hearts of the temple court, they prayed for boldness and effectiveness in ministry. We would probably have prayed for the situation to change in our favor; they asked that they would be enabled to use it as an opportunity to spread God’s love.

Finally, notice the result of their prayer. “After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31). God heard and answered their prayer. Each person went forth in peace, knowing that God was with them.

Like them, the end result of our prayer should be peace, a deep satisfaction that God has heard and will answer. Philippians 4:6–7 makes the exciting connection between prayer and peace: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” If you are not experiencing such peace, then you might memorize these verses and practice leaving your requests at Jesus’ feet.

We can learn many lessons from such prayers as the one in Acts that we just examined (and there are more in Acts). We can, and should, pray for God’s intervention. But the focus of our individual and group prayers should be that we will use every circumstance in life as an opportunity to exercise our faith. As God’s friends, and as his children, we can approach him with our petitions, in full confidence that he will work things for our good (Rom 8:28).

Meeting Each Other in Prayer
True prayer belongs in the small group because its effects are enhanced in community. It allows a group to learn more about God. Small group prayer also helps people know each other better.

When we share communication with God, we are also communicating with each other. In
prayer our greatest desires often pour forth. We exchange, with God and each other, our vision, love for God, and motivation to follow God. Listening to a new believer pray is like receiving a breath of fresh air. Hearing a mature believer converse with the master is a rich experience. Sharing prayer with teachers, young mothers, teens, construction workers, and other kinds of persons, helps you understand their world much better.

Small group prayer also gives structure to the rejoicing, suffering body of Christ spoken of in 1 Corinthians 12. It is hard to get a fellowship of 80—or 250 or 1,000—to identify intimately with your struggles and joys. It is much easier to share together in prayer with a group of six close friends. People who share prayer needs and joys in a small group are loved and cared for.

Suggestions for Small Group Prayer
Envision yourself as a small group leader with people who don’t know how to pray or are intimidated by prayer. You are not going to start out with deep, joy-filled times of prayer. It can be extremely awkward at first, but with practice you will find prayer can be the part of the small group that people look forward to the most. Here are some suggestions related to what you can pray for and how you can initiate group prayer:

- **Deciding what to pray for.** To start with, you could occupy your time praying for each member of the group, asking God to help you grow in Christ. Most groups don’t do this enough because it feels uncomfortable at first, but you should seek to strengthen each other by name in prayer. Then, you could pray for any of the following:
  - personal needs shared in the group
  - family and friends of group members
  - the needs of your church or fellowship group
  - sick, shut-in, suffering and/or bereaved people that group members know
  - non-Christian friends, family and/or neighbors
  - missions and missionaries
  - and don’t forget worship!

You might also go back through the sections on worship, confession and petition and make your own list of possible prayer items.

As you pray for these and other requests, you may want to keep a “prayer notebook” so that you can record answered prayers and further enhance group worship.

- **Initiating group prayer.** As you think about how to introduce prayer into the group, remember that, no matter what you try, it could be very awkward at first. Fears about prayer are often based on what others think, rather than on what God thinks. As the group begins to feel more comfortable together, prayer will come more easily.

To start, you can open and close your meetings in prayer. When you open group meetings in prayer, you are consecrating the time to God and inviting his presence. When you close, you are offering yourselves to God and asking him to go with you. In the beginning, the burden for these prayers will often fall on the leader. You don’t need to impress anybody with your prayers, least of all God. If you keep prayer simple and yet genuine, others will pray much more readily when given the opportunity.

If you want others to pray, make sure that you ask them before group time. Some people are embarrassed when asked in public. Rather than being a scary experience, group prayer should be an affirming exercise.
There are other ways to encourage prayer, especially in a group prayer time that comes as a scheduled part of the evening. For example, try holding hands when you pray as an expression of unity. Then, you can pray around the circle, allowing some to squeeze the hands of the person next to them if they don’t want to pray. Alternatively, allow free, conversational prayer so that those who want to can pray while others choose to pray silently. Or you can ask volunteers to pray for specific requests. And you can just start the prayer time and let the Holy Spirit lead. However you choose to pray, try to allow the group to develop its own unique ritual of prayer, one that stimulates freedom of expression in relationship with God.

Practice Makes Perfect
Prayer in the small group will more readily become a reality if the leader is a praying person. If you worship God, keep the lines of communication open through confession, and find freedom to bring your requests to God, then you will be the kind of person who encourages others to pray. Start now. Become a person who knows God in prayer.

Questions for Individuals or Groups
1. Do you know people you are unable to communicate with? How do you feel when around them?
2. Why are “relationship” and “communication” such important concepts in prayer?
3. Why is it important to be humble when approaching God? What is humility?
4. Why was the tax collector honored in Christ’s story while the Pharisee was portrayed as wrong (Pharisee or Sinner)?
5. What is your definition of prayer?
6. What do you think is prayer’s purpose?
7. What happens when you confess sin?
8. When presenting petitions to God, how do you think faith in God’s ability should be balanced with humble submission to God’s will?
9. How did the Christians pray, in Acts 4, when faced with a threat to their lives? How could this prayer guide your own?
10. How can prayer minister to the individual needs of people in a small group?
11. What are ways you can initiate praying in a small group?

II

AN EVANGELIZING COMMUNITY
The “Conquerors,” a small group at First Church, have met at Rachel’s home for two years now. The group started with seven members, and all seven members still come. The weekly meetings at Rachel’s are the highlight of the week for each individual. The Bible study is intense, the prayer victorious, and the fellowship deep. God has used the group to bless each member, and they feel stronger in their faith as a result.

Rachel has proved to be an effective leader. She has faithfully kept the goal of discipleship before the group, encouraging them to take risks in their faith. She has exerted positive leadership as well, leading the pack when they needed someone to follow, and following the pack when they needed to lead. In addition, she has allowed an honest, loving community to develop. And within the context of their caring community, the group has studied, worshiped, prayed and taken group outings together.

But now tension is starting to enter the group. The group is studying Acts because they want to learn to identify with the early church. Like their early brothers and sisters in Christ, the Conquerors meet in a home, eat together, and enjoy talking about their master. The study started with great promise, with the group members reading a portion of Acts each day in their time alone with God.

Then Sam changed the direction of their study. The group had been skipping over the practical emphasis of Acts, that the Holy Spirit was using the disciples to spread the gospel throughout the whole world (Acts 1:8). One Wednesday Sam came to the group with the following composition, which he felt that Acts 2:42–47 would say about the Conquerors:

They focused their energy on the study of Scripture, because they were fascinated with what they were learning. Also, they couldn’t wait to be together. Their meals and their prayer times were very enlightening. They got excited when they were together, exchanging hugs and talking about how they couldn’t make it through a week without each other. Some of the members even allowed their study to bring positive change in various areas of their lives. For instance, when one member needed help, others would chip in, whether they needed money or sympathy or physical help. Each week they came together, but they also got together outside the group. Many called each other throughout the week, and they often had dinner together after church.

Because of their love for each other and for God, the group felt close to God and enjoyed worshipping God. The pastor of the church was thrilled with the Conquerors because they were growing in their faith. But others in the church and world felt left out, for the group decided that it was better to stick with a proven group than to risk a new person ruining things for everyone.

**Blessed to Be a Blessing**

What was Sam pointing out in his version of Acts 2:42–47? He is chiding the group for being ingrown, allowing themselves to enjoy God’s blessing while withholding it from others.

Sam’s honesty, and willingness to ask tough questions, led the group in a new direction with their study. The question that arose from his paraphrase was, “What would have happened if the early church had hoarded God’s blessing, keeping it from others?”

The answer to the question is simple. The growth of the church would have been slowed or even stifled.


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In the book of Acts, everything occurred within the context of evangelism. Acts 2 (along with numerous other passages in Acts) contains a reference to people being saved. “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (v. 47). Peter preached his sermon, and people were saved. Later, believers met together in homes, and others were saved. Christians met at the temple for prayer, and the Lord added to the church. The church was scattered through persecution, and the worshiping, praying, studying community of faith went forth into the world to make other disciples.

Just as the early church was blessed so that they could carry God’s blessing to others, small groups are an extremely effective means through which people can be brought to Christ.

What Is Evangelism?
Evangelism is the conscious attempt, through word and deed, to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others, so that they can become disciples of Christ.

To expand on this definition, we will first consider how evangelism involves a conscious effort, through word and deed, to share the message. Second, evangelism is sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with another. Therefore, we want to take a look at the process involved in sharing the Christian faith. And third, the goal of evangelism is that people will become disciples of Jesus Christ. In the final section we will talk about how small groups can help, not only to evangelize, but also to lead people into the process of discipleship.

The message of evangelism, called the “Good News” in the New Testament, is that salvation has come through Jesus Christ. In John 10:10 Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

The message that we carry has both an objective and subjective side. We not only must know what is true, but also allow that truth to influence and penetrate our lives before we can be positive witnesses.

The Subjective Message
If you want to lead someone to Christ, you first have to know what you are talking about. Do you remember the rappelling instructor in chapter four who had never gone over the edge of a cliff? We saw how absurd it was for him to presume that he could lead others over the cliff edge when he had no idea of the challenges that lay ahead. This same illustration applies in witnessing. If Jesus Christ has not made a difference in your life, indeed if you are not striving to grow in Christ each day, then witnessing is a very difficult proposition. There are a number of motives that may lead you to witness (including guilt and obligation), but none is as compelling as a deep love for God. It is this experience of God that flows from your life to those around you.

Amy Grant has said it this way: “It’s not a song till it touches your heart; it’s not a song till it tears you apart. After what’s left of what’s right and what’s wrong, till it gets through to you, it’s not a song.”

You cannot understand the words of the gospel until they have touched your life. Objectively, they are true and full of meaning. Subjectively, they have no place in your life until you have accepted their truths and watched them transform you through the working of the Holy Spirit.

There are two evidences that the gospel of Christ has changed your life. First, you have fal-
len in love with God and begun to develop a life of intimacy with him. This shows in both your thinking and behavior.

Look at an example of how someone responded when changed by Christ. In Luke 7:36–50, Jesus was anointed by a sinful woman while he was eating at the home of a Pharisee. This woman entered a home in which she was not welcome and approached Jesus unannounced. She wept over Jesus in front of all the guests. Then, she lovingly washed his feet with her hair, spreading perfume on them as she bathed them.

When Simon, a Pharisee, wondered why Jesus let a sinful woman do this, Jesus said:

“Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” (Lk 7:40–43)

The woman was willing to expose herself to ridicule because she had been changed by Jesus and wanted to express her love. While anyone could question her previous life, nobody could question her love for Christ. And we can also demonstrate this same sincere love for Christ.

This is especially relevant in a small group whose members are, often for the first time, beginning to sink their roots deeper into God’s love in a loving community that studies, prays and worships. Lively, Spirit-filled small groups put people in touch with their Creator, and therefore they allow their people to be more effective witnesses simply because they are growing in Christ.

Your love for God will, sooner or later, cause you to view human relationships in a new light. So the second evidence of a changed life is that you are growing in your ability to love others.

Colossians 3:1–4 commands us: “Set your hearts on things above.” And what are those things that are “above”? “Kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience…. And over all these virtues put on love” (3:12, 14). As God works in our lives, change is produced in human relationships.

Compassion and love, among other traits, are important in witnessing. People respond to love much more readily than to ideas and concepts. You can try to witness to people by sticking tracts in their faces and demanding answers, or you can witness by developing loving relationships and demonstrating that Jesus is the reason you act as you do.

Can you see how much sense it makes to be loving and alive in Christ when you witness? Instead of speaking time-worn phrases, you can share living, vital truth. And people will respond when they see your love for God and for others.

Small groups allow this kind of personal, subjective growth to complement the objective truth of the gospel. Small groups encourage people to love God. They also teach people how to love one another. Without perhaps knowing it, they are preparing people to be effective witnesses of Jesus Christ!

The Objective Message
So perhaps a non-Christian has entered your small group and is “turned on” by the genuine love in your midst. Now what?

Sooner or later you will need to verbalize not only your personal (subjective message) testimony but the objective representation of the gospel so that others can receive Christ as their
Savior as well.

There are a great number of devoted followers of Christ who do not know how to lead another person into a saving relationship with God. However, there are helpful tools available. These include Campus Crusade's “Four Spiritual Laws,” The Navigators' “Bridge” model, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship’s outline, “First Steps to God.” These different methods present in a simple manner the process by which individuals can give their lives to Christ.

The key facts to remember are (1) we are sinners; (2) we need Christ; (3) we must respond to Jesus. Once we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, we are to seek to live as children of God for the rest our lives.

Is that all there is to it?

Basically, yes. But it is difficult to gauge people's sincerity as they respond to God. A probing question can help. For example, Evangelism Explosion trainees are taught to ask, “If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and he were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you say?” The response to this question reveals whether people have assurance that they are truly a child of God.

You can begin to see how small groups are perhaps the most effective way to bring evangelism into focus today. But the message is only part of the story of evangelism....

The Process

Very few people come to faith by picking up a Bible and reading it. Indeed, most people give their lives to Christ because they see the Christian life being lived out (subjective message); they have become aware of the truths necessary to become a Christian (objective message), and they have been loved by a Christian (the process).

Many people may be involved in the salvation of just one person. In the past of most Christians is someone who prayed for that person, as well as a number of others who patiently planted seeds in the hope that they would someday bear fruit. Jesus told his disciples in John 4: “I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

For the sake of simplicity, let’s pretend that there are only three relationships involved in the witnessing process, as in the following model:

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GOD

WITNESS ←→ POTENTIAL CONVERT
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The arrows in the diagram show that each of the three individuals is related to the other. With all three persons, there is both give and take.

The place to start in the process is with God’s part. God is the power behind the salvation of an individual. Jesus said in John 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

When we pray for the salvation of a person, we pray believing that God is not only involved working through us, he is also involved directly in the person we are praying for. God the Holy
Spirit convicts people of their sin and need for God, and he slowly draws people to himself.

God also works in and through the life of a witness. He leads us to specific relationships, puts a burden for particular people upon our hearts, and gives us the right words when we speak. God wants to use us to bring salvation to others.

Our response to God’s role in the process of evangelism is simple—obedience. We know that he is powerful enough to change lives, and living enough to know what people need. What he uses are vessels who can bring his life-changing Word to those in need. For a willing small group, evangelism always begins with prayer.

The witness serves as a complement to God’s part in evangelism. God uses witnesses who are willing to reach out in humility, love and confidence. Paul describes the evangelistic relationship that he had with the Thessalonians:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. (1 Thess 1:4–6)

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. (1 Thess 2:6–12)

The witnesses in this passage were willing to give everything, including their very beings, in order to bring people to Christ. In John 15:13 Jesus says that the greatest love is to lay down your life for another. But if our life is the greatest gift we can give, it is also the most difficult. The needs we naturally seek to meet are our own.

This creates a dilemma. In witnessing we want another person to experience the same joy we have found in Christ. But even though this appears to be selfless, there is the real possibility for selfishness and manipulation to enter the process. So we should emphasize the following three attitudes:

- **Humility.** The focus in evangelism should be the potential convert, not the witness. We often worry about how we look and whether we’ll know what to say. Instead, we must seek the heart of God and learn to identify with others by putting them first.

- **Love.** There is nothing more compelling, and more powerful, than true love in action. It cannot be ignored. While you may find this kind of love difficult to carry out alone, with the support of a small group—or with the whole small group working to love someone together—you will find that it is much easier. “A cord of two or three strands is not easily broken,” as Proverbs says.

- **Confidence.** A witness should be confident in the power of God, the effectiveness of love, even when mistakes are made, to break through barriers, and in the joy that will be his or hers when a person responds in faith. God will use your weakness as well as your strength.

Remember the parable of the sower in Matthew 13? Jesus told about a farmer who went out to plant seed in a field. Some seed fell on hard soil, some on rocky, some among weeds, and some in good soil. Jesus ended the parable by saying, “He who has ears, let him hear” (13:18). The point of the story is that some people are ready to hear the gospel message, others are
unprepared.

It is our job to plant seeds which represent the objective and subjective message of the gospel and have been nurtured in humility and love. Then, we can wait patiently for God to prepare the right hearts at the right time.

The Vision for Small Group Evangelism

One of the most exciting small group stories is found in Korea, at Dr. Paul Yonggi Cho’s church in Seoul. Using a few basic church-growth principles, including prayer, small groups, and small group evangelism, the church has grown to include over 500,000 members in just a few short years.

How did they grow so quickly? They encouraged each small group to pray for non-Christian friends, and they taught leaders how to lead people to Christ. With thousands of small groups in operation, each group bringing in a few new Christians every year or so created phenomenal growth.

What does this mean for your church or fellowship? You can grow through small groups as well.

A group of people, meeting together weekly, can start to pray for a few non-Christian friends, knowing that they will want these friends to eventually join their small group and come into the church. Sooner or later, if the group is serious, the prayers will start to work. The potential convert will be invited to the group and, surrounded by love, will respond with faith. In this way the small group can be used to touch one life for Christ.

How many small groups do you have? Ten? Then, can you envision ten new people coming to faith through the small groups in the next two years? What a great victory that would be! By God’s grace and power, what can be done through small group evangelism in your fellowship?

Principles of Small Group Evangelism

As you begin to implement small group evangelism in your church, here are a few principles that can help:

1. Remember that the goal of small group ministry, and of evangelism, is to make disciples. When new people come into a group, they come into a context of growth and challenge. Your job is not just to “win” people. It is also to nurture them into maturity. This is why small groups, with their emphasis on discipling, are ideal places for people to come to faith in Christ.

2. The leader can have a grand vision for evangelism, yet until the small group is ready they will not respond. It takes prayer to prepare the group’s heart and your own heart. It also takes patience because it may take months or years before the group is ready to respond. Keep sharing your vision for evangelism, but don’t push your agenda onto the group.

3. A good group is necessary for effective small group evangelism to occur. You don’t want to bring people into a group that backbites, fights, or has other unhealthy elements. While the group is not expected to be perfect, it should be healthy.

4. Evangelism needs to be intentional. The small group needs to decide what they are doing, how they will accomplish it, and why they are doing it, before anything will actually be done.

5. A growing, evangelistic small group ministry will soon begin to burst at the seams. When groups grow past twelve members, they tend to become less intimate and more confusing.
There will come a time in a healthy, growing group, when it has to split. The group leader should be prepared for this (it is a sign that you are doing a good job!) and nurture leaders who are prepared to lead the new groups.

**Incorporating Evangelism in Small Groups**

You may be wondering what you can do to bring evangelism into a small group. Here are a few ideas.

First, start with prayer. Pray that the group becomes an evangelizing group. Then, when group members’ hearts are prepared to move forward in evangelism, the group can start praying for a few people to come to faith.

In order to emphasize that your group is one of the means that God uses to bring people to faith, consider praying for people that at least one group member has frequent contact with. This allows you to be updated by that person and to start acting in humility, love and confidence. It could also allow the group to “coach” the person(s) who are in frequent contact with the potential convert.

Next, you could use what Lyman Coleman of Serendipity calls the “empty chair.” In order to remind the group that it needs to grow, put an empty chair into the circle at each meeting.

The group could do a study together on either small group evangelism or evangelism in general. There are some wonderful resources on the market, including Richard Peace’s *Small Group Evangelism* training manual, the book and video seminar available through NavPress, *Your Home a Lighthouse*, and *Living Proof*, a video seminar also available through NavPress which works through the basic relational aspects of sharing your faith.

Along the same lines, you could memorize Scripture verses or work your way through an evangelism “technique” (like “Evangelism Explosion” or the “Four Spiritual Laws”). These will prepare you to give the objective message of the gospel.

You can also make choices about how exactly you plan to implement evangelism. Some groups will “disband” and re-cast themselves specifically as evangelistic Bible studies. These groups may choose to work through the Gospel of John or another Gospel by focusing on what can be learned about the person of Christ.

Other groups will maintain themselves as traditional Covenant groups that are always seeking to bring people into the group. These groups, while not always focusing on evangelistic themes, will choose topics relevant to all and will shower potential converts with love.

You and your group can have fun exploring these and other ways to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with people who need to find true hope. May God bless you as, acting in humility, reaching out in love, and demonstrating Christ in confidence, you share the message of Christ in its objective and subjective truth so that people respond in faith and become his disciples.

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**Questions for Individuals or Groups**

1. What do you think of the point Sam was making in the story at the beginning of this chapter?
2. Do you think his criticism has application to the church at large? Why or why not?
   - to small group ministry?
   - to your church or fellowship?
to your small groups?
3. How would you define evangelism?
4. Is evangelism something that you feel confident doing? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think the subjective message of salvation is placed before the objective message in this chapter?
6. What do we mean by “subjective message”?
   “objective message”?
7. What is God’s role in evangelism?
8. How can the one sharing his or her faith include God in the process of evangelism?
9. Who are people you are well acquainted with that you can start praying for now?
10. What is the most important thing that you learned from this chapter?

12

A MISSION-ORIENTED COMMUNITY

As they approached the river bank, it was obvious that the heavy rains had caused the river to become a raging torrent. Quickly conferring, the Indian guides decided that they would not attempt to cross until the river went down. Their decision was relayed to Granny Brand, the elderly missionary who was being escorted to a meeting on the other side.

Instead of concurring with their decision, she pleaded with them to cross the river anyway. She was determined to make the meeting at all costs, for her services were needed. The guides shook their heads and smiled. No, they would turn away and head for home. They turned and started to walk away, only to be brought back by a cry. She had tottered to the river edge on her walking sticks, plunged into the water, and was on her way downstream. The guides rescued her and, impressed by her indomitable spirit, found a crossing point and brought her safely to the other side.

The story of Granny Brand, missionary to India in the 1900s, is an exciting and challenging chapter in world mission. She had gone to India with her husband and started a family, only to lose him to an illness. Instead of returning home to England in defeat, she had continued, raised her children, and ministered to the five mountain ranges that she and he had targeted for Christ. She worked until she died, traversing the mountain ranges until well in her nineties, sharing Christ’s love with people who came to love and revere both her and her Lord. No river
could turn her back.

Then there is the story of her predecessor by a few centuries, William Carey. Appropriately named the “Father of Modern Missions,” he turned the eyes of an ingrown church to a world lost in darkness.

He lived in England in the 1700s, where he was a cobbler. He loved God and had a deep concern for people in the world who did not know Christ. At that time in history, the only major mission effort was from the Catholic Church.

He loved geography, and he fashioned a globe over which he could pray. It is said of him: “He had schooled himself to such fact-search that he might take due survey of the Church’s task, and feel his Lord’s full urging. His globe was his other Bible, a voice of loud appeal. He taught geography and his pupils sometimes saw a strange sight—their master moved to tears over a geography lesson. Pointing to continents, islands and peoples, he would cry, ‘And these are pagans, pagans!’ ”

This passion led Carey to India, where he preached, taught, translated the Bible, taught agricultural techniques, and put many of his other talents to good use. A fellow missionary gave this description of Carey near the end of his life:

The brethren in Serampore are men to be wondered at: I speak of Carey, Marshman and Ward; or, if you will, Peter, James, and John. The former is most remarkable for his humility; he is a very superior man, and appears to know nothing about it. The great man and the little child unite in him, and, as far as I can see, he has attained to the happy art of ruling and overruling in connection with the others mentioned, without his asserting his authority, or others feeling their subjection; and all is done without the least appearance of design on his part.” (E. Pritchett, Burman missionary, to a London friend, August 12, 1811)

What lofty descriptions are given this man, Carey! What beautiful determination we see in Granny Brand! They should be examples, not of heroes that we cannot be like, but of Christian people whom we can strive to imitate. For until every race, tribe and people group is evangelized, there is still work to be done. We need people of mission passion who can fuel such a work.

**What Do We Mean by “Mission”?**

Mission is engaging in God’s plan to redeem the world by extending his kingdom into every race, language and nation. This definition could, conceivably, also be used to describe evangelism. But the focus of evangelism is people you have everyday contact with. Many of the principles discussed in the last chapter also apply in this chapter as well, but the emphasis in this chapter is on those with whom you would not have ordinary contact. In other words, mission is cross-cultural.

There has been a lively debate in the last 100+ years about the relationship between the gospel message and social outreach. One group has tended to say that, if people are starving, they need first to be fed before being evangelized, so the church’s primary task in their view is to work for people’s good. Another group has said that material need is never as important as spiritual need, so we must first take the gospel, and then worry about feeding people.

This debate is irrelevant to mature disciples of Christ. It doesn’t matter who we are, or what we are doing, we must learn how to make disciples for Christ. A humble, loving, confident witness meets people’s needs while living the gospel story. So the goal of mission is evangelism,
but the means is compassion. Social concern and evangelism are not mutually exclusive. They are intricately linked together.

What Does Mission Have to Do with Small Groups?
Small group participants are members of a church who live in the same community or town. Mission involves reaching across cultures. So how do small groups and mission fit together? It is here that God’s plan can start to unfold in all of its beauty.

The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen 12:1–3)

God’s plan for reaching the world was very simple. He promised to bless Abraham (Abram’s name after God changed it to mean “Father of many nations”) so that Abraham could be a blessing to others.

And this is what happens in the process of discipleship. If you are growing in Christ and receiving the benefits of God’s blessing, sooner or later God will give you a burden for those who are not saved. There are between 2.5 and 3 billion people in the world who have not heard the claims of Jesus Christ. Thousands of distinct groupings of people which are scattered throughout the world have not even heard the gospel. They are called “unreached people groups.”

Paul shares his passion for mission to unreached people in Romans 10:14–15: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ ” Just as with Paul, discipleship causes Christians to identify with God’s plan for the world. And that leads to action.

In Ephesians 3, Paul describes God’s design for the church. “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vv. 10–11).

According to Ephesians 3, God’s plan for the world is to be made known through the church. And what is that plan? “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). In other words, the gospel will break through all barriers and bring together one worshiping, praying, loving body—the church.

And the result is:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellowcitizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (2:19–22)

God’s design is that the body of Christ will become a heavenly temple, inhabited by God and filled with tremendous joy.
When sin destroyed our fellowship with God, God sought to restore it by constructing a spiritual kingdom that would reclaim relationships one person at a time. And that is what the church must be doing. We are to go into every part of the world, reclaiming the earthly kingdom one person at a time by making disciples in community. As the church grows, we are filled with the very presence of God, becoming the “growing temple” that Paul spoke of.

And in this, we have come full circle. For you see, God’s plan is for evangelism and mission to be the result of his blessing that comes through study, worship, prayer and community. He has brought salvation so that we would offer salvation to those who are lost. He has given us grace so that we would be burdened for those who do not experience his grace.

Mission and Small Groups
So you see why mission is so important. But what are you to do with this knowledge? Should you uproot and move to the mission field? For many people, the answer is no. God will call people overseas whom he has prepared. For now, you are to be a faithful disciple where you are.

But then should we ignore study, worship and prayer in order to focus on mission and evangelism? The answer again is no. We need to be growing in our faith in order to be used by God. There are some groups that will want to form specifically for the purpose of praying for mission, or doing mission, but that’s okay as long as the group is making disciples of its members (more on specialized groups in chapter thirteen).

There are good things that a small group can do in order to get involved in mission. Here are a few ideas that you can use as you see fit:

☐ Learn. There are many wonderful mission books and biographies that the group can study. Also, the group could invite missionaries to speak to the group on occasion, and they could maintain correspondence with certain missionaries. The group might do a study on mission, learning about God’s activity in the world through the Bible’s eyes. In addition, they could participate in a mission conference (among others, Urbana is wonderful).

☐ Pray. Perhaps the most significant thing that your group can do is pray. There is much need in this area, and a faithful small group can do great things by releasing God’s power in the world. The group could participate in or sponsor a “concert of prayer” (See David Bryant’s Concerts of Prayer for ideas), or they could adopt a country, family or people group as their own group prayer concern. Then again, they could pray through a mission resource book like Operation World, learning about needs in different countries and continents. Like William Carey we can receive a vision for mission by using a globe and praying over the countries that we are studying.

☐ Support others. The group can get more intimately involved in mission by supporting others who are missionaries. They can “adopt” a missionary and pledge financial and prayer support. (Make sure that any financial arrangements are cleared with the church leadership first.) They could also raise funds for short-term mission projects, like those in which young people participate. They could support a national church project in the same way, or they could organize a church mission conference to raise awareness of the missionaries that are supported by your church.

☐ Go into the community. The most personal step that a group can take is to go. Remember that mission involves crossing cultures. Sometimes you can do that by merely driving across town.
Local mission could benefit from carpenters, lawyers, mothers who can teach parenting skills, and financial experts who can teach budgeting. Do you have something that could benefit a local mission? It is worth the effort to find out.

Your small group could also become a mission team, like those utilized by the well-known Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. People who join their church are placed into teams that do everything from providing low-income housing to running a thrift shop. Using mission teams, they have ministries throughout Washington, and their ministry is being felt by many. By choosing to carry out a particular ministry, your small group can help fulfill the Great Commission right in your own community.

- Go overseas short-term. Your church could send people on a short-term project, whether it be a church-planting project or a building project. Some or all of a small group could go. Think how much your small group would benefit if the whole group went away for a few weeks to serve God together!
- Go overseas long-term. A member or two of your small group might end up being called to the mission field. You could help them affirm their call, as well as assisting with fundraising, research, and the many logistics that must be dealt with before someone can enter the mission field. Then, when they go forth from your group, you could lend continued prayer and financial support.

I Will Bless You Again

God’s promise to Abraham could have easily been amended to say, “Abraham, I will shower my blessing upon you as you study, pray, and worship, in order that you can go forth as evangelists and missionaries in the world. Then, I will bless you even more deeply, for you are participating in the spread of my joy. I will add joy upon joy, blessing upon blessing, grace upon grace. You above all people will be blessed.” I can paraphrase this passage with confidence, because recognition of God’s plan and purpose leads to fulfillment of that design, and this leads to joy. It feels good to know that you are pleasing God!

Don’t ever lose sight of what you are doing and why you are doing it. Small group ministry is a way of extending God’s kingdom into the world. When your group starts evangelizing and becoming interested in mission, you are ready to see second and third generations of disciples being made. May God bless you as you attempt to respond in obedience to this task.

Questions for Individuals or Groups

1. Who are missionaries that you have heard of, and admired, for their obedience and passion?
2. How do you feel about mission?
3. How would you define “mission”?
4. How would you reconcile evangelism and social concern in mission if you were a cross-cultural missionary?
5. What is God’s plan for the church (Eph 3:10–11; 2:19–22)?
6. How, in this chapter on mission, have we come “full circle” from the beginning of the course (What Does Mission Have to Do With Small Groups)?
7. What are ways that you can get others in a small group interested in mission?
8. Why do we receive joy when we fulfill God’s plan for mission?