

Ministry, Christian Living / Steven Lee

5 Common Small Group Myths (And the Truth to Help Transform Your Group)

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Small groups increasingly play a significant part in the body life of many congregations. No matter why your church has small groups, it's clear that not everyone in your church will enter into **these groups with the same expectations**. In fact, it's more likely that everyone will join a small group with **wildly different expectations**. Some join a small group to **connect at the church**. They're new to town and know relatively few people, so they join a small group. Or perhaps your church intentionally funnels people into small groups so that they can **better be cared for**. Your pastors and elders use the small group infrastructure to **shepherd the flock**. Or perhaps your church has small groups to **train your people to grow in godliness and to reach their lost neighbors and friends**. Those are all legitimate reasons to have small groups. Yet the church must be clear about the **vision, mission, and main purpose of their small groups**.

What you believe about why you are in a small group will dictate how you behave in that group. It's important for a church to be clear why small groups exist. Do they exist to **connect, shepherd, and reach unbelievers or to support one another**? Are they some combination of those different things? What you believe about your small group will dictate how you approach potential problems when they arise. For example, if you buy a house knowing it will be a fixer-upper, then you approach that faux wood paneling in the family room as an opportunity to upgrade and improve. Whereas if you buy your dream house and find out the basement floods, you're pretty disappointed and discouraged. Similarly, **be clear from the beginning about the vision and values of your church small groups**.

I would suggest that a healthy small group is **committed to studying and applying God's Word within the context of Christian community in order to grow as witnesses of Jesus in our respective spheres of influence**. At our church, we summarize this goal as "transformation in community for witness." But whether your small groups are mainly to help believers grow or mainly missional, here are five small group myths that I've encountered over the years that need correcting.



Myth 1. A successful small group will not be relationally messy.

While most people wouldn't explicitly say so, they expect their small group be without relational messiness. They go in thinking that these people will be their best friends (more on that later), and when they find out they're nothing alike they wonder if they're in the right group. When someone in the group is passive aggressive or talks way too much about politics, you're looking for the closest exit. Yet the reality is that small groups are composed of sinners all along the same journey of faith. They're going to get messy relationally, which is precisely why we have the gospel of grace that shows us how we ought to be long suffering and humble toward one another (Phil. 2:1-11).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*:

The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves.

Truth: Small groups are where the grace of God overcomes all types of relational messiness through the blood of Jesus.

Myth 2: Small groups exist for others to meet my needs.

Don't misunderstand. It is a wonderful blessing that our relational needs can be met by one another in small groups. It's a good thing that if you don't feel connected, or know anyone, you can join a small group and meet others at the church. But the overarching reality is that small groups exist for you to love God by loving his body, the church. Small groups exist for you to love others with the love of Christ. This is a radically different orientation than expecting others to meet your needs. And when we all have this aim—to love each other with the love of Christ—then we do meet each other's needs.

Truth: Small groups exist for you to love and serve others with the love of Christ.

Myth 3. Trust and transparency take many years to cultivate in a small group.

Consider Acts 2 and how the believers had all things in common, making sure none was in need, breaking bread together, praising God together. How long had they known each other? They probably had been in community for a couple of weeks or maybe months, but not much longer. The reality is that more time together doesn't always mean more trust and transparency. That just tends to be an excuse. Stepping into a small group, where the expectations are properly set, significant trust can be cultivated from day one.

What prevents you from opening up? Perhaps it's shame over your sin, embarrassment that your marriage is struggling, or heartbreak over your wayward children. This is precisely what the gospel addresses. Christ took the wrath of God at Calvary and with it took our shame, condemnation, and fear of man. We can in fact be open and honest about where we are with God, because God is actively at work in us to conform us to his image.

Truth: Trust and transparency are fruits of recognizing we are all recipients of God's abundant grace for the forgiveness of sins.

Myth 4. Small group members should become best friends.

Certain expectations are embedded into this myth—idealistic visions of taking vacations together, our kids growing up and marrying each other, attending each other's birthday parties. While it would be a wonderful blessing if members of the same small group did become lifelong friends, the New Testament is nearly silent on the importance of friendship as a basis for love. Rather, our unity in Christ is the foundation and basis for our sacrificial love for one another. Ephesians 2:11-22 is about how Christ demolishes the hostility between Jew and Gentile. Jews and Gentiles may not have been "BFFs" in the first century, but by the unifying work of Jesus on the cross they could be members of the same body. Is this not amazing? Similarly, the blood of Christ unifies us to be members of Christ's body, committed to encourage, build up, and love one another.

Truth: Small groups are united by the blood of Christ and members of one body.

Myth 5. Small groups should focus only on Bible study, not sharing sins or engaging in outreach.

Small groups that truly focus on Christ and his Word will inevitably get to how the gospel changes our life in all ways (sin, parenting, marriage, singleness, work, and so on) and to how we can share our faith. If your Bible study isn't helping you to change into Jesus's likeness you're doing it wrong. If your study of the Bible doesn't make you hate your sin more, ask for help in conquering it, and make you want to share your faith, you're doing it wrong. Unfortunately, some small groups hide

behind Bible study in order to avoid talking about the deeper heart issues that the gospel aims to address. If we truly allow God's Word to speak, it must speak into our lives so that we confront our sin, strive to serve one another, and make intentional efforts to share this good news with the lost in our spheres of influence.

Truth: Small groups focus on how the gospel of Jesus Christ transforms us as his disciples who grow in holiness and as witnesses of his truth.

These five common myths underline a greater goal: the gospel must be central in the vision and mission of your group. If your group exists to meet your personal needs, then when it begins to fall short you go looking for the next group. But if the group exists as a microcosm of the church, where people of all types gather at the foot of the cross, then challenges, sin, and brokenness are an opportunity to apply the gospel of Christ.

Keep the Gospel Central in Small Groups

Here are a few suggestions to get your small group on the right track.

- 1. Regularly reorient your small group to see that they are members of Christ**—rather than members of a particular church, denomination, theological tribe, Sunday school class, demographic (singles, married, people who adopt) or ethnic or racial background. Put Galatians 2:20 at the forefront of your group—we have been crucified with Christ and now Christ lives in us.
- 2. Help your group set biblical expectations for fellowship/community.** We may not all hang out all the time, and we may not become best of friends, but we encourage each other in our faith as we meet regularly to open his Word together and to help each other testify to Jesus in our spheres of influence. We can humbly and sacrificially serve one another because Christ has sacrificed in order that we might be brothers and sisters in Christ.
- 3. Help your group see the glorious privilege to love one another and how it witnesses to unbelievers around us.** Our love for each other confirms and validates the power of the gospel (John 13:35). The gospel takes wildly different people from every walk of life and transforms them to care deeply for each other. When your small group goes out of its way to love and pray for one another, you reveal the transforming grace of Christ and draw in unbelievers to witness this miracle.

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