

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT MAKES A GREAT LEADER?

MARK MULLERY

The golf course was right where the freeway should have been. I would normally enjoy finding myself at a golf course, but not under these particular circumstances. You see, my wife Lesley and I had been visiting a friend and gotten lost driving home. We didn't have a map. The more we wandered around the countryside, the darker it got. After enough wrong turns to frighten our children, we finally found the missing freeway (maybe somebody had moved it), and headed for home—way behind schedule.

So it goes when you've lost your way: tensions rise, time is wasted. Leading small groups really isn't very different. In order to be effective, the group must have a clear direction. More specifically, the *leader* must have a clear direction. And whether you are a group leader or one of the members, it's essential that you understand what the position of leadership involves.

Let's Start at the Beginning...

What is the small-group leader's purpose? As you look back on a meeting—or a year's worth of meetings—how will you know if you've been successful? What do your pastors want the group to accomplish? Without a clear understanding of its purpose, your small group will wander here and there without any sense of mission.

In our church, one thing we've done to avoid such aimlessness is to set forth a clear definition. Our small-group leaders are in place...

*to extend the pastoral ministry of our church...
by providing a context...
in which to apply God's Word...
so that growth, care, and relationships may occur.*

Meditate on Romans

15:14. Though pastors should handle difficult counseling needs, is it necessary to take every problem directly to the pastor?

Every component of this definition is significant, so let's look at each of them in turn.

To extend pastoral ministry. Scripture teaches that churches are like flocks of sheep with shepherds to watch over them. These shepherds, also known as pastors, are charged by God to lead, feed, and care for the people God entrusts to them. In all but the smallest churches, this immense task is too difficult for one or even a few people. Moses found this out when he tried single-handedly to solve the problems of a few million Israelites during their 40-year trek through the wilderness.

Moses' father-in-law Jethro came and counseled him,

What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out... select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves...If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied (Ex 18:17-23).

By Jethro's insight, which constitutes a primary biblical definition of leadership, Moses learned how to provide the Israelites with superior care, and live longer himself in the process!

It is God's design that every pastor identify and train trustworthy men who fear God, investing them with real authority and responsibility to extend the pastoral ministry of the church. As Moses learned (and New Testament examples show the same), this is done most effectively through small groups. Small groups serve a local church immeasurably by bringing each member into ongoing relationships with trained and gifted small-group leaders who can serve and equip them in many ways. In this manner, the pastors are better able to concentrate on the ministry of God's Word and equipping others for ministry. However, pastors should never become disconnected, and they should remain available to deal with the diffi-

1 In your opinion, which of the following problems are so serious that they should be handled by a pastor rather than a small-group leader?

- My husband watches four hours of television every night and never talks to me.
- I often find myself cursing at lousy drivers who won't get out of my way.
- Why can't I find the Book of Hezekiah in my Bible? I know it's here somewhere!
- I have never had a consistent prayer life.
- My cat is stuck in a tree.

cult issues as they arise. That availability releases the small-group leaders from any false notions that they are now expected to function as pastors. Their job is to *represent* the pastors, not *replace* them.

By providing a context. Recently, I was in a restaurant with a menu featuring beautiful, glossy, full-color pictures of chocolate milk shakes. I like chocolate milk shakes. I was psyched. When it came my turn to order, the waitress said—to my surprise—that she was unable to serve me a milk shake.

Now, in this restaurant there was milk, ice cream, chocolate syrup, and a hungry customer—every ingredient necessary for the sale and thankful consumption of a chocolate milk shake. Unfortunately for me, there was no way to bring all these elements together. The milk shake machine was broken.

Church life can be like this. You can have great preaching and teaching, trained leaders, and hungry Christians. But if you don't have a context where all the elements can be combined, you face disappointment.

Sunday meetings are obviously great times for God's Word to be preached, but where and how will the Word be applied? Sunday meetings are great places for people to

come together, but how will these people move from being mere acquaintances to becoming accountable to one another? Sunday meetings present great opportunities for the ministry of the Spirit but, logistically, how can everyone exercise their unique, God-given gifts? It just wouldn't work.

“ Union with Christ necessarily involves union with his people. The church is not simply a ‘means of grace,’ useful to our growth; it is a necessary part of Christian experience, to be taken with utmost seriousness.¹

”

— Bruce Milne

Small groups provide an excellent context in which to pursue many of the vital goals of church life that are difficult, if not impossible, to pursue on Sunday mornings. And the small-group leader provides an invaluable service to the church by facilitating that process.

To apply God's Word. The Bible is our guide for faith and practice. Only the Bible teaches what God requires of us and what we must believe about God. No other book is sufficient to equip us with all we need to live by God's grace and for God's glory. Accordingly, small groups in the church I serve are built around God's Word. The members often use meetings to explore more deeply the teaching they receive on Sunday mornings. For Christ to

Meditate on John

17:17. You have truth
itself (God's Word)
available to you
continually. Is there any
reason to depend on
other sources?

be formed in us we must apprehend God's truth and then apply it to our lives. Therefore our groups often feature discussions that help us to understand God's Word and apply it practically to our daily lives.

So that growth, care, and relationships may occur.

There are lots of small groups meeting these days. From Alcoholics Anonymous to your local chapter of Hell's Angels, folks gather for a variety of reasons. Scripture provides three good reasons to gather in small groups: to promote sanctification, to extend care, and to develop true fellowship. Small groups aren't the only places in the life of the church where growth, care, and relationships are furthered, but they are vital ones. They provide a context in which God's Word can be applied personally and practically, where friendships can blossom and grow, and where non-christians can experience something of the life of God's people. This truth affects our definition of what makes for an effective small-group leader.

Success in leading a small group isn't measured by how many are in the group, how fast it grows numerically, or how frequently it meets, but by whether the members of the group are increasingly dying to sin and living to righteousness. A great small group is not one where people are wowed by the Bible knowledge of the leader, but one where people take a genuine interest in the lives of others in the group. A model meeting isn't one that goes on for three hours because the leader lets the discussion range across a dozen topics, but one that ends with members confessing sins and applying biblical truth to everyday areas of their lives.

Four Easy Ways to Ruin a Small Group

Failure in leadership isn't difficult. For most of us it comes rather naturally. So here, with tongue planted firmly in cheek, are a few proven suggestions that will enable you to ruin your group in record time:

Tip #1: Do it all yourself. Training others is hard work. It takes time. Frequently those upstarts don't do things exactly the way you would, which of course is totally unacceptable. They might even try new things! Plus, asking people to help out can be intimidating. So wouldn't it be easier just to do it all yourself? If this doesn't work, here's another suggestion: do nothing at all! Save your preparation for the last minute...so it'll be fresh! Skim the reading while you comb your hair; work out discus-

For Further Study:
Read James 3:13-16.
What can a leader expect to reap if he is selfishly ambitious?

sion questions in your mind during worship. Nobody will know the difference.

Tip #2: Strive to become a self-contained mini-church.

Small groups can be a great outlet for the ambitious but frustrated leader. Instead of seeing yourself as part of a team—working in concert with other small groups to glorify God by fulfilling the vision God has given your pastors—imagine yourself as the only one who really understands God’s will and direction for your group. Make every effort to build into the group members a unique loyalty to you and your personal style of leadership. Keep yourself (your special charm and wisdom) at the center of everything that happens. Try to make your group self-sufficient so people won’t feel the need to participate in other aspects

<p>2 One of the best aspects of small-group involvement is knowing that you are serving your local church. Here are four questions to make sure that is the case:</p>	Yes	No
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Do you know your pastor’s goals and guidelines for the group?	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you seek your pastor’s advice when making long-range plans for the group?		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Are your group activities and outreaches designed with the church in mind?		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Does your group involvement reinforce your involvement in the church?		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

of church life. One great way to do this is to plan so many events that people are always busy doing group-related things. It’s especially effective to set up events that overlap with other church-wide events, causing members to have to choose pretty regularly between, say, a camping trip with your group and the church’s Sunday meeting.

Tip #3: Have all the answers.

During discussions, you as a leader can easily ruin a meeting by showing off your extensive knowledge of biblical, theological, historical, and sports trivia. When someone poses a question, jump right on it so everyone can be impressed with your keen mind. (If you wait too long, somebody else might take a shot at it and an actual discussion might ensue!) Above all, try

to keep the meetings in an “ask the expert” format. They should hang on your every word. If you don’t know the answer to a question, never let on. Just finesse it. Two effective approaches are either to insinuate it was a dumb question in the first place, or re-direct the question so that someone else is embarrassed rather than you.

Tip #4: Go easy on the encouragement.

As everyone knows, encouragement brings life into a meeting like springtime brings flowers. That’s why you want to avoid it at all costs. One effective strategy is to remain so focused on yourself and your “performance” as leader that you simply don’t notice anyone else. Another is to set up so many rules, guidelines, and expectations that no one can

Meditate on 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

Can you think of *one thing* to say to *one person* at your next group meeting that would build him or her up?

possibly *deserve* encouragement. Perhaps best of all, make time to point out people's faults and shortcomings, while overlooking the grace of God in their lives. If you do, I can guarantee you that failure is just around the corner.

Certainly there are many more ways to wreck a good small group. I trust the comic approach used here is a helpful reminder that God has invested leaders with a great deal of responsibility. Though you are not expected to replace the pastor, you do represent him, and your behavior will have more influence on the life of the group than anyone else's. This awareness should motivate you to deepen your foundation in God's grace, put to death the sin that still dwells in you, and cling tightly to the Holy Spirit who alone can give you the power to know God and die to sin. Further, in your role as leader you will set the pace for your group in humility. Be honest and vulnerable about your struggles and sins, and aggressively seek out evaluation both from your group and your pastor. Try asking these people, "How can I serve you better?"

MEMORABLE MOMENTS IN SMALL-GROUP HISTORY

I had been a small-group leader just two months when our meeting fell on Halloween night. A man in our group had been reaching out to his neighbor, a Catholic. Just before the meeting was to start, Tom called me. He said he couldn't come because he wasn't feeling well. But he'd seen his neighbor and she was on her way...dressed in a devil's costume.

She showed up in red—trident, tail, hood with horns—the works. I tried to head her off at the door. "That's an interesting costume," I began, "but we don't celebrate Halloween...."

"Oh, that's OK," she said, walking right past me. "I thought I'd come as Martin Luther, since he was a devil from hell."

Though we didn't rise to the bait—and continued our meeting as if nothing were out of the ordinary—this episode did put a damper on our outreach for a while.

— Gerard Snyder (Brookhaven, PA)

Qualifications for a Small-Group Leader

There was a time in our church when we had people leading small groups before they had been in the church long enough to become members. Later, as the pendulum swung back the other way, we believed the qualifications for a small-group leader were virtually the same as those for a pastor.

Somewhere in the middle are reasonable qualifications that fulfill the spirit of Exodus 18:21 (capable, trustworthy men who fear God and hate dishonest gain), Acts 6:3 (men from among you known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom), and 1 Timothy 3:8-10 (sincere men, worthy of respect, not indulging in much wine

nor pursuing dishonest gain, keeping hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience, tested with nothing found against them). In the church which I serve, we have come up with the following ten qualifications for small-group leaders:

Committed. An effective leader is wholeheartedly committed to *his* church, *his* pastors, and the goals they hold for that church. This means recognizing that God's hand has sovereignly brought him into *that* church and into leadership *there*. This gives him a platform of faith from which to support, encourage, and represent his church leaders. A leader who has caught this vision will pass on to his small group the same values, doctrines, and emphases his pastor would if he were there personally. He will seek to strengthen the group's commitment to the Lord, the local church, and their pastor(s) rather than to himself. Such a leader will actively seek to direct the people in his group into the ways of God and the unique expressions of God's grace operating in that church.

“ Leadership is not a title that grants you license to force others to knuckle under; it's a skill you perform, a service you render for the whole group.² ”

— Fred Smith

Of proven character.

When Moses or the apostles went looking for men to serve in key positions, they sought out those who were “among them” with proven character. Clearly, men must be tested before assuming a leadership role.

They must not be made leaders unless and until they have demonstrated sufficient character. If this principle is ignored, God's name will be maligned as leaders are exposed in various sins. *Character is imperative*—a non-negotiable. The ability to gather a crowd, demonstrate powerful spiritual gifts, speak eloquently, lead dynamic discussions or worship—none of these are sufficient for biblical leadership. Significant character must also be present. We're not looking for sinless perfection, but the potential leader should display the fruit of the Spirit, growing humility, a consistent ability to manage his time and responsibilities, as well as sufficient maturity to care for his own soul and still have enough grace left over to care for others.

Submitted. The Greek verb “to submit” (*hypotasso*) is a combination of two words. One means “under” and the other means “to put someone or something in charge.” Together they mean “to put under someone or something in charge.” Thus, the leader who wishes to be effective

For Further Study:

Read John 5:19. Jesus knew he could “do nothing” on his own; he was totally submitted to his Father's will. Do you exhibit the same type of submission to authority?

3 If you are serving as a small-group leader, rate your responses to each of the following questions.

How did you respond to your former leader?

←————→
Submitted **Not Submitted**

When your pastor gives you instruction, do you listen carefully and follow through?

←————→
Submitted **Not Submitted**

When the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin, do you resist or embrace his correction?

←————→
Submitted **Not Submitted**

At work, would your boss describe you as respectful, easy to lead, and eager to see others succeed?

←————→
Submitted **Not Submitted**

must understand both authority and submission—he must acknowledge that being *in* authority depends on his willingness to be *under* authority. As a citizen he is “under” the governing authorities (Ro 13:1); as a Christian he is “under” God’s authority (Jas 4:7); as a church member he is “under” the authority of his church leaders (1Co 16:16); if a husband he is “over” his wife (Eph 5:23); if a father he is “over” his children (Eph 6:1); at work he may be “over” certain employees (Eph 6:5). Jesus marvelled at the faith of the centurion who, because he understood himself as a man both in authority and under authority, was actively yielded to the authority of Christ (Mt 8:5-10).

If you are leading a group now or perhaps aspire to lead a group in the future, don’t dismiss this question: Are you submitted to authority? Are you a

good follower?

Having a love for people. As already noted, leading a small group means serving as an extension of the pastors in the shepherding of the church. It is essential that the man who takes this position have a growing love toward the people for whom he cares. The Bible describes as a “hired hand” the man who looks after sheep—and is thus technically a shepherd—but whose sole motivation is personal gain (Jn 10:11-13). While the small-group leaders in our church definitely couldn’t be motivated by the income they receive from us (long hours, no pay!), there are many selfish and ungodly reasons that might motivate someone

to lead a group. An effective leader must be motivated by love for God’s people and a sincere desire to serve them as they are conformed to the image of Christ. This love will be reflected in the way he prays for them, supports them through trials, and encourages them, as well as by the way he corrects, admonishes, and instructs them when appropriate.

““ Most people judge the counsel they receive by the way they receive the affection of their counselor. See that you feel a tender love for your people, and then let them feel it by your speeches and see it in your dealings with them...Let them see that all you do is for their own sakes and not for your own end.³

””

— Richard Baxter

Meditate on Psalm

78:72. Wouldn't you like to be led by someone with these virtues? David's skill in leading his people didn't just happen. He let God and others train him.

For Further Study.

Read Romans 12:6-8. According to this passage, what is ultimately required for effective leadership?

In a commendable marriage (if applicable). It's not hard to imagine why a man with a bad marriage would be disqualified to lead a small group. He's going to have some difficulty holding the group's respect if, as he is urging them to read the assignment, she pipes up, "Put your money where your mouth is, slick! You haven't read any of the last three assignments and you know it!"

Simply put, leadership begins at home. Anyone who is not leading his own wife into the ways of God's wisdom and grace is simply not qualified to lead a group—and he certainly shouldn't be encouraged to export his failures into the lives of others!

Trained. As we discussed earlier, the small-group leader's goal is to promote sanctification, care, and fellowship in his group. Specific training is generally needed to accomplish this. Training topics should include the purpose and practice of small groups in your church, as well as practical skills such as leading discussions, worshiping in small groups, time management, delegation, training new leaders, and so on. Further, each leader should receive training in basic and essential doctrines such as justification and sanctification.

Consistent in the spiritual disciplines. A leader must already be what he calls others to become. If he is calling others onward and upward in God, he must also be pressing ahead himself. Consistently practicing the spiritual disciplines not only helps make the leader a worthy model for others, it provides fuel for his own fire. How will he bring truth to his group if he isn't immersing himself daily in the only book that faithfully contains God's revelation of truth to man? With what will he feed his group if he hasn't been with God? How can he sense the leading of the Holy Spirit if he isn't cultivating a relationship with the person of the Holy Spirit? If his soul is not refreshed, how will he refresh others? And what else will refresh his soul but time in the presence of his Maker?

Able to lead. While character, training, love for people, and the like are all essential for the leader, so too is the gift of leadership. However, it is easy to overestimate the need for this gift. The small-group leader is not a "mini-pastor" who must spend 15 hours preparing a discussion, nor must he be able to counsel people through the most difficult crises. Still, he must be *able* to lead. People must be willing to follow him. He must know how to make decisions in a way neither dictatorial nor democratic. He must be able to sense the leading of the Spirit. He must have the self-control and discipline necessary to steer a

4 Which of the following seems like the best way to show someone a sin or character flaw?

- During group discussion ask, “Is anyone else fed up with the fact that Bill here always lies to everybody?”
- During worship on Sunday, pass the following note to Mary: “Thus saith the Lord, if you leave the building to smoke a cigarette, I’ll send fire down from heaven.”
- Invite Randall over for dinner and tell him he can’t have dessert until he repents of gluttony.
- After prayer and searching the Scriptures, ask Sarah when would be a good time to discuss what seems to be an area of sin in her life.
- Anonymously mail Jake photocopied pages from your Bible with applicable verses underlined in red.

discussion in a profitable direction and keep the group on course. He must have the courage to show group members their faults, and the wisdom to know when and how to do this. These are some of the things embodied in the gift of leadership—a gift which surely can be cultivated and developed, but which must be present just the same.

A tither. Not much need to explain this qualification. How we spend our money reveals our priorities. A man’s commitment to tithing reveals much about how he views God and his church. Would you want a man who wasn’t tithing to have the responsibility of leading your group?

Male. By now it has probably become apparent that we are assuming the small-group leader ought to be a man. This is our understanding of Scripture, though we believe it is appropriate for a woman to lead a

small group consisting exclusively of other women (Tit 2:1-5).

For some, male-only leadership may be a point of dispute or consternation. We live in a day when women are finding increasing opportunities, both in the church and the marketplace, to take on roles traditionally held by men. However, our conviction on this point does not derive from culturally prevailing views, but from the sound and clear teaching of Scripture.

Men and women have much in common. Both are created in God’s image (Ge 1:27). Both have inherited a fallen human nature (Ge 3:22-24). As believers, both may receive the benefits of salvation (Gal 3:26-29); share the expectation of full redemption in the day of Christ Jesus; enjoy equal access to God through their mediator Christ Jesus; know the joy of the filling of the Holy Spirit; and find fulfillment in being stewards of the Gospel. Yet standing alongside these equally shared benefits are clear biblical teachings which affirm the significant and wondrous distinctions in their roles and functions.

The God-breathed words of Scripture reveal that men and women are distinct in their masculinity and femininity. These distinctions were designed by God, are established in creation, and were affirmed by the Apostles (1Ti

2:11-14; 1Pe 3:1-7). These fundamental differences between men and women are not culturally derived. More significantly, they are not a result of the fall. At creation, God made Adam the leader and head in his relationship

WHAT ABOUT THE SMALL-GROUP LEADER'S WIFE?

A small-group leader's wife should support her husband by using her spiritual gifts to promote spiritual growth, care, and fellowship in the group. She should exhibit the same character qualities as her husband, including a consistent practice of the spiritual disciplines, commitment to the church, and love for people. However, her actual duties will vary based on her gifts, strengths, season of life, and time constraints. She is not the co-leader, nor should she feel the burden of that responsibility. Each leader's wife will function in different ways, yet each will demonstrate a commitment to serve the group in whatever ways she and her husband find appropriate.

with Eve (Ge 2:18-24). Even before the effects of sin, Eve was divinely given the privilege of glorifying God by being Adam's helper.

Men and women are equal in God's sight as bearers of his image, but we have been given differing levels of authority. This is not a concept that Bible-believing Christians of any era should find difficult, for we see the same relationship modeled in the Trinity: the Son joyfully submits to the will of his co-equal, the Father; and the Spirit is sent by both the Father and the Son.

It is God's design that the complementary differences between men and women be

evident in the home and church. In the church, governing and teaching roles are specifically reserved for men. Leading a small group is one such role because it involves oversight—caring for people, counseling them, and providing a sense of direction.

To some, these convictions may seem restrictive and wrong. From our experience, however, they release women to fulfill their God-given roles and functions. We trust that small groups who study these passages of Scripture will, in the words of Wayne Grudem, "discover true biblical manhood and womanhood in all of their noble dignity and joyful complementarity, as God created them to be, and will thus reflect more fully the image of God in their lives."⁴

For Further Study. For an example of differing roles in the Trinity, see 1 Corinthians 8:6; for an example of the Father's authority over Jesus, see Luke 22:42.

How to Have Dynamic Discussions

What makes for a great small-group meeting? Leaders, here are several tips. You want to provide a pleasant, clean environment for the meeting itself. Having a greeter

assigned to welcome people can help create a warm and friendly atmosphere, especially for guests. The spiritual depth and musical quality of your worship times may not rival what you normally experience on Sunday mornings, but if you keep the focus on God and his amazing grace, profitable worship times can be had even with *no* instruments or gifted singers. Encourage your group to eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy which can uniquely bring God's comfort, encouragement, and strength. Times of ministry and prayer for one another are a vital aspect of the meeting; these might take place during worship or after a discussion.

One part of the meeting that requires especially strong leadership skills is discussion. Let's look closely at four steps that will assist you in leading effective discussions.

Keep in mind that the goal is to apply God's Word.

This is what your group is all about—the working out of God's Word in the daily lives of your group's members. You must remain committed to this purpose. If you don't, discussions will gradually drift into being mere debates, story-telling times, or sessions of “can you top this?” Even when the discussion material is from an article or book, the leader's goal should remain unchanged: highlight the biblical truth in what the author is saying. Only Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, and correcting so that God's people may be equipped for every good work (2Ti 3:16-17).

Bring good questions. Developing good questions is hard work. Even if you've been provided a list of questions, there is still much to be done. A leader must carefully work through the meeting material in advance (i.e., more than 30 minutes before the meeting starts!). Consider the people in your group. What topics would best serve them? What truths about God ought to be brought out? Pray and ask the Spirit of God to guide you into truth that will benefit your group. This is not some religious formality, but part of our ongoing communication with and reliance on God.

Good questions cause people to interact with the material and apply it to their lives. A helpful pattern is to have the discussion begin with observation, proceed to interpretation, and end with application.

Observation: “*What are the facts?*” For example: What details does the author mention? What are the key words or ideas?

Interpretation: “*What do the facts mean?*” For example: What is the author trying to say to the people to whom

he is writing? Why did he write this? What is the main point? How would you summarize the author's purpose?

The goal of interpretation is simple and yet critical: to understand what the author intended to communicate to his original audience. A great deal of today's Christian study materials routinely ignore "original intent," and instead directs readers to focus on what the biblical text means to them—an approach we should categorically reject. Professor Walt Russell has written a brilliant article revealing the pitfalls of "what-it-means-to-me" interpretation. We have reprinted it as an appendix at the end of this book—don't miss it!

For Further Study:

Read Proverbs 19:24. Can you imagine a more pitiful picture of having a truth at your fingertips (so to speak), but failing to apply it?

Application: "What am I going to do about it?" For example: Why do you think we studied this material? What does this material tell us about God? What does it tell us about ourselves? How do you think God wants your life to be affected by this information? What is something you plan to do differently as a result of this?

During the discussion, keep your goals in mind.

When I lead a discussion, I desire that several things happen. I want everyone to participate. This means I must rein in talkative folks and gently draw out the quiet ones. As the discussion moves on, I keep in front of me the questions I've prepared and the critical points I've planned to cover. This helps me notice when we start "chasing rabbits" instead of moving in a productive direction. While holding on to my original plan, I also strive throughout the discussion to be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit, ready to adjust or change course when appropriate. Sometimes a seemingly trivial comment by a group member exposes the tip of an iceberg, and a sensitive response on my part may serve the person by giving him or her an opportunity to open up further.

Press to application. *The most challenging aspect of leading a discussion is trying to press the point home to application.* The leader who fails to bring application leads his group down a merry path into deception! James teaches us that merely listening to God's Word without doing what it says is self-deception (Jas 1:22). We think *knowing more about* God is the same thing as *being more like* him. Wrong! Information alone is insufficient. Transformation is required. (Demons know sound doctrine but remain unchanged by it.) We must respond. We must apply. By the power of the Spirit and for the glory of God, we must change. Indwelling sin is at work in our flesh, but we must put it to death. The imputed righteousness we received from Christ at the Cross must now, by God's grace, pro-

gressively become a functional holiness reflected in our thoughts, intentions, values, habits, decisions, actions, and words. What better place to do this than a small group? What better time than in response to a discussion centered around God's Word?

Leading and Motivating by Grace

In 1985 an earthquake struck central Mexico, bringing destruction to a wide area. The intensity of the huge quake—8.1 on the Richter scale—was greatly magnified in Mexico City because the metropolis had been built on a

“ Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God's grace.⁵

— Jerry Bridges

dry lake bed. When the earth began to shake, the soft ground beneath the city liquefied, amplifying the effects of the temblors. The absence of bedrock below ground greatly increased the devastation above ground.

The life of the Christian is designed to be built on the bedrock of God's grace. You were saved by grace alone. You are being sanctified and changed by grace alone. You will be received into glory by grace alone. The basis for your relationship with God was, is, and ever shall be *sola gratia*, grace alone! A capable small-group leader will be sure his life and his group are both solidly fixed on the Rock—the person and saving work of Christ our Lord.

Are you growing in grace? Here are some questions you can use to check your “grace meter”:

- Are you more aware of what Christ did for you at the Cross than what you have (or haven't) done for him lately?
- Are your weaknesses a point of discouragement or a place where you find God's strength?
- When you haven't properly prepared for a meeting, do you expect the worst?
- After a meeting, are you painfully aware of how things could have been changed or improved?
- Can you laugh at yourself?
- Are you quicker to notice a group member's spiritual growth, or his or her faults?
- After a good meeting, do you feel God is more pleased with you than after a bad one?
- Do you avoid trying new ideas for fear of failure?

Meditate on Ephesians 2:8-9.

Don't ever, ever forget the wonderful truth found in these two verses!

- When you have prepared well, do you feel you deserve a unique measure of God's presence and power in your meeting?
- Is the Cross a central focus in your meetings?
- Does your group have a growing confidence in God's sovereignty, holiness, and grace?
- Are your meetings characterized by joy or rules?

A small-group leader occupies a unique and vital role in the church. He serves the church's leaders by extending their ministry. He serves his group by providing a context where, by applying God's Word, they can grow in holiness, give and receive care, and develop godly relationships. He serves his God by growing in grace while pointing others there as well. ■

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In a single sentence, write down what you think is the purpose of this group, then compare your answers.
2. Why is a small group such a great context for growth?
3. What were your answers to Question 2 on page 49?
4. How well is your leader running your group? Rate him on a scale of 1 (no damage) to 10 (total devastation).
5. Why do you think the author placed such an emphasis on *applying* God's Word?
6. Here's your chance to lead by humble example, fearless leader: In which of the ten qualifications for leadership did you feel *least* qualified? *Most* qualified?
7. How long has it been since a discussion in your small group went *way* off course? What can you do to prevent that from happening again?
8. Is this group being led with a spirit of grace?

RECOMMENDED READING

A Passion for Faithfulness: Wisdom from the Book of Nehemiah by J.I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995)

Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991)

The Making of a Leader by J. Robert Clinton (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988)

Spiritual Leadership by J. Oswald Sanders (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994)

NOTES

1. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 249.
2. Fred Smith, *Learning to Lead* (Wheaton, IL: Christianity Today, Inc., 1986), p. 15.
3. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1982), p. 22.
4. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), pp. 467-68.
5. Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), p. 18.