

Leading Small Groups With Purpose, Lesson #3
Book by Steve Gladen; This Study Guide by Josh Hunt
Good Questions Have Small Groups Talking
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Chapters 5 – 6 Fellowship

OPEN

Let's each share your name and, when was the last time you group had a fellowship?

DIG

1. Colossians 2.19. What do we learn about how we grow spiritually from this verse?

When the real self comes into relationship with God and others, an incredible dynamic is set into motion: we grow as God created us to grow. It is only when you are connected to the Head (Jesus Christ) and connected to others (the Body) that “the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow” (Col. 2:19). A coming together of grace and truth in Jesus Christ is our only hope, and indeed it is a hope that does not disappoint.

Jake, a friend of mine and a recovering alcoholic, put it this way:

“When I was in church or with my Christian friends, they would just tell me that drinking was wrong and that I should repent. They didn't know how many times I had tried quitting, how many times I had tried to be a good Christian.

“When I got into Alcoholics Anonymous, I found that I could be honest about my failures, but more important, I could be honest about my helplessness. When I found out that God and others accepted me in both my drinking and my helplessness to control it, I began to have hope. I could come forth with who I really was and find help.

“As much as the church preached grace, I never really found acceptance there for my real state. They always expected me to change. In my AA group, not only did they not expect me to change, they told me that, by myself, I could not change! They told me that all I could do was confess who I truly was, an alcoholic, and that God could change me along with their daily support. Finally, I could be honest, and I could find friends. That was totally different, and it changed my life.”

Jake found that when he could be himself in relationship with God and others, healing was possible. Problems occur when the real self, the one God created, is hiding from God and others. —

Cloud, H. (2009). Changes that heal: the four shifts that make everything better...and that everyone can do. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

2. Ephesians 4.16. What does this verse teach about how our small groups can help people grow spiritually?

We have witnessed the power the body of Christ wields in the small group setting: “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” (Ephesians 4:16).

We have seen members of Christ’s body grow in truly amazing ways, past what we thought possible, when “all the parts” were doing their “work.” We believe wholeheartedly in the power of small groups, and every day we receive letters and testimonials from people who enter into the process with fear and trembling, but come out with new life.

Being the instrument God uses to connect people to himself and to his life is exciting. And not knowing how to lead a small group does not need to stand in the way any more than having only a few fish and a few loaves of bread stood in the way of the original leaders’ goal of feeding a large crowd of people.

It’s okay to be afraid, for the task can seem overwhelming. We have all been there. But it is doable, and chances are someone has already thought you could do it or you wouldn’t be reading this book! All you need is a few tools. So join us as we take a look at the “how-tos” you need to make your small group work, and we look forward to the results! — Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2010). *Making small groups work: what every small group leader needs to know*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

3. What is the difference between, “attending a group,” and, “being joined together” as described in Ephesians 2.22?

PROBABLY THE SECOND-MOST-OFTEN-ASKED QUESTION I encounter is, “How can I know how long it will all take?”

The first answer to this is that it generally takes more time than you thought (as Henry showed in chapter 1). Many of us get into the growth process hoping to get some quick answers and comfort and then resume “normal life.” However, this is not God’s way. For him, normal life is being in the growth process for life. Issues and struggles may and should change over time, but growth is not a season. Rather, it is at the heart of life itself: We “are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). So help your group get over the idea that because an issue has been resolved, they are “done.” They may just be beginning. — Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2009). *How people grow: what the bible reveals about personal growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

4. Ephesians 4.15. Why are both love and truth necessary to growth?

Grace and truth together reverse the effects of the fall, which were separation from God and others. Grace and truth together invite us out of isolation and into relationship. Grace, when it is combined with truth, invites the true self, the “me” as I really am, warts and all, into relationship. It is one thing to have safety in relationship; it is quite another to be truly known and accepted in this relationship.

With grace alone, we are safe from condemnation, but we cannot experience true intimacy. When the one who offers grace also offers truth (truth about who we are, truth about who he or she is, and truth

about the world around us), and we respond with our true self, then real intimacy is possible. Real intimacy always comes in the company of truth.

Jesus' treatment of the adulterous woman in John 8:3–11 provides a wonderful example of safety and intimacy. — Cloud, H. (2009). *Changes That Heal: The Four Shifts That Make Everything Better...And That Everyone Can Do*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

5. How can we be accepting of one another, even when we disagree?

DON'T CONFUSE ACCEPTANCE WITH AGREEMENT. When someone in the growth process opens up and becomes vulnerable, and another person gives her honest feedback, she commonly feels persecuted and wrongfully judged. She thinks, "That criticism proves he does not truly accept me." Many people will even leave relationships because they feel unaccepted. They will say, "That church/group/counselor is so unaccepting of people. I need to find a place where there is grace." What they are asking for, in reality, is license, which God forbids (Rom. 6:15; Gal. 5:13).

While some criticism can be judgmental, direct loving criticism is a necessary part of spiritual growth. In fact, where there is no confrontation, growth is seriously hampered (Eph. 4:15). Agreement and acceptance are not equal. You can and should be in an environment in which both total acceptance and clear honesty are operating. Use Jesus' stance toward the churches in Revelation 3 as a good model for confrontation in the context of support. Further, the Bible teaches that any relationship that avoids necessary truth telling must take on some responsibility for the results (Ezek. 3:18–21). Don't be afraid of truth; it hurts but heals. — Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2009). *How people grow: what the bible reveals about personal growth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

6. Why is it necessary that we connect with people in order to grow spiritually?

Jesus taught that we are changed as much by what we say as what we hear. Mark 7:15 (NIV) "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" "What comes out of a man"—what a man speaks is what makes him clean. We are changed by the truth when we speak the truth. When Peter declared Jesus to be the Christ, he believed ever more firmly that Jesus was the Christ.

This is why the Bible makes a big deal about "if you confess with your mouth." (Romans 10.9) It is not that God needs to hear. It is not even that others need to hear. It is that you need to say. When you confess the truth with your mouth, you are changed by that truth.

Jesus' brother, James, spoke about that. He said the tongue (what you say) is like the rudder of your life. Compared to the ship, the rudder is small, but it turns the whole ship. A bit in the mouth of a horse is small compared to the horse. But it can turn the whole horse. A match is small compared to a forest. But a well-placed match can set the whole forest on fire. Well placed words can set a whole church on fire. The words you use set the direction of your life. — Josh Hunt. (2012). *Teach Like Jesus*.

7. How do we move people toward the kind of connection described in these verses?

On the other hand, when you think steps, not programs, you will also discover ways to help people grow in their relationships. Every ministry environment you create should help build bridges relationally, and thinking steps will help you leverage your environments to work in harmony with the way relationships naturally flow. For example, people are acquaintances before they become casual friends, and they must spend quality time together before intimate friendships develop.

Jesus' command was to "make disciples," and after countless hours of debate among our leadership team we have concluded that discipleship happens most naturally in the context of meaningful relationships. And we have learned that meaningful relationships are most likely to develop through the dynamic of an active small group. We are not suggesting that a small group is the only place for discipleship to occur. It just seems to us that discipleship happens best with a group of friends who are "doing life" together. — Stanley, A., Joiner, R., & Jones, L. (2004). *7 Practices Of Effective Ministry* (p. 91). Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers.

8. How can we as group leaders keep the conversation from being surface and turn the conversation toward real, life-changing issues?

Think of how you walk in a park. Your walk has a direction. In your group, the direction is your material, content, subject matter, or structure. A divorce recovery group doesn't talk about the second coming of Christ or share recipes unless either topic somehow relates to the group purpose of helping people through the divorce process. But what if the group does wander? You might make a process statement about wandering off the path. This follows one of the most important rules of process: Use what is happening in the group to get more process to happen.

So you might notice the detour and say, "I notice that we were talking about how difficult it is to let go, and the subject changed to cooking. How did that happen? Why do you think that is?" As leader, you know something in this little process statement. You know that part of divorce recovery is to process the pain of divorce with others. When the pain grows too real, people sometimes change the subject. When you help the group see their tendency to avoid others' pain, they can talk about why they do that and what it means to their lives. — Cloud, H., & Townsend, J. (2010). *Making small groups work: what every small group leader needs to know*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

9. Why the tendency to be slow to open up and be honest?

Note these words by John Ortberg:

We live in a world where image projection and impression management is the rule of thumb, and it gets inside everyone of us. I know that as a teacher I want to be honest and open, but there is such a strong tendency to hide and to want to look better than I am. This truth about me comes out in unguarded moments.

There is a high cost to hiding. If I hide, sin wins.

Several years ago I was with one of my kids in Wisconsin. We were at a store and this particular child kept pestering me for a toy. Finally, my anger boiled over. “No, I’m not going to get you that toy. I’m not going to get it for you today. I’m not going to get it for you tomorrow. I’m not going to get it next month or next year. I am never going to get it for you! Do you understand? When you’re seventy and I’m a hundred years old, I’m still not going to get it for you!”

Just that moment the clerk looked at me and said, “You look awfully familiar. Do you teach at Willow Creek Community Church?”

I said, “Yes, my name is Bill Hybels.” I didn’t really say that, but I wanted to. I wanted to hide. It was awful. — Ortberg, J., Pederson, L., & Poling, J. (2009). *Groups: the life-giving power of community*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

10. What price do we pay for hiding, relationally speaking?

We’ll never fully experience community or significant transformation until we begin to acknowledge to others the truth about ourselves. Ironically, churches are often the last place this happens. Consider these words from Richard Foster’s book *Celebration of Discipline*:

Confession is so difficult a Discipline for us partly because we view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We come to feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. ... We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven. Therefore we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy. ...

There is a high cost to hiding. If I hide, my relationships become stagnant. If I hide, others are likely to hide too. If I hide, I can never know I’m loved unconditionally. If I hide, sin wins. If I hide, I lose the help I might receive for secret struggles and hurts. — Ortberg, J., Pederson, L., & Poling, J. (2009). *Groups: the life-giving power of community*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

11. What does James 5.16 teach us about hiding?

God says an amazing thing: “In my community, there should be no more hiding, no more masks. My community is just people—every one of whom struggles with sin and does stupid things and says foolish things and then comes to me and confesses, gets back up, moves forward and then fouls up again. People don’t have to pretend they’re something they’re not. I intend for people to live in the light.”

Humanity is no longer denied but transformed through community.

James says it this way: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). James is talking about living in authentic, open community. Confession involves acknowledging the truth about my life—the negative as well as the positive—to God, to myself, and, in appropriate ways, to brothers and sisters in the body.

Humanity is no longer denied but transformed through community. That is God's plan. Every time there is a great movement of God throughout the history of the church, one of the things that happens is that people get serious about this business of confession and they acknowledge to God, to themselves, and to other people the truth about their lives. There is enormous power when we come into the light. — Ortberg, J., Pederson, L., & Poling, J. (2009). *Groups: the life-giving power of community*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

12. Can this be overdone?

We must do this carefully. It is possible to share too much with too many too quickly and do more harm than good. There is a place and time to keep a secret. There is such a thing as too much information.

I was in a church service once where a gal came forward during the invitation. She was crying. "I just need to confess my sin to the body of Christ. I need to get something off my chest." The pastor handed her the microphone. Not a good call, in this case. "I just need to confess my sin to the body of Christ. I need to get something off my chest. I have been guilty of sexual immorality with John Smith." John [not his real name] was sitting about three rows back. I had the feeling he was not in the mood to have his sins confessed.

There is a line in an old hymn that goes, "Plunge in today and be made complete." Sometimes we do well to do that—plunge in. Sometimes, we do well to take a different approach—wade in slowly. Did you see the movie *What About Bob?* Baby steps. Baby steps. Baby steps. — Josh Hunt. (2008). *Good Questions Have Groups Talking*.

13. How big of a problem is sharing too much with too many too quickly? How big the problem is superficiality?

Most classes I have been in, however, err on the other side. They are too superficial. Too much pretending. Too fake. The key is for one person—normally the leader—to get real, take off his or her mask and get honest. — Josh Hunt. (2008). *Good Questions Have Groups Talking*.

14. Let's look over chapter 6 as a whole. There are tons of great ideas here. What is one idea that would not work for you and one idea you might want to try?

The point is just to get the group to think, evaluate, and ponder.

15. Can you think of other ideas that could deepen the fellowship of your group?

In an adult class at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Montgomery, Alabama, the hospitality chairman showed up one morning carrying an empty basket. A red bow was tied to the top.

"This basket represents an invitation to fellowship here in our group," he announced to the eight or ten couples. Handing the basket to one of them, he continued, "We'd like to have you come to our house one night this week for pie and coffee. I'll call you later to pick a day and time. Then next week, or as soon as possible, you can bring the basket and invite another couple to your home."

The basket moved through the group over the next few months, eventually reaching everyone, since no one was to accept more than one invitation during the program. Each Sunday morning, the class leader asked who had the basket and made sure it was moving along. “If you invite someone for more than just dessert,” he added, “keep it simple. We want to emphasize hospitality and not entertainment. This is a basket, not a silver tray.”

The class members thoroughly enjoyed this simple method of getting together. As one person said, “It helped us turn our good intentions into action.” — Merrill, D., & Shelley, M. (Eds.). (1984). *Fresh ideas for discipleship & nurture* (p. 163). Carol Stream, IL; Waco, TX: Christianity Today; Word Books.

16. How much do your group members connect with one another outside of class? What are some things you can do to facilitate this?

If everyone is on Facebook, this is a great place to start. You might also keep an updated list of phone numbers, email addresses, and mailing addresses. You might organize things like a “supper –six” where three couples are assigned to get together and have supper one time during the month. The next month, the rotation changes. As a teacher, you might try to get with everyone individually in your group at least once a year. I have long been an advocate of having a fellowship once a month and inviting every member and every prospect. It is great for both in reach and outreach.

17. In what ways do you personally interact with the people in your group between class sessions?

Has the teacher built a close personal relationship with the class? This friendly relationship is often built up through contacts between the teacher and members outside of class sessions, through visitation in homes, through social occasions, through personal conferences, through incidental contacts, and in many other ways. Do class members feel that the teacher understands and fully appreciates their problems, their doubts, their difficulties? The teacher who has developed this personal relationship has taken a long step toward creating a favorable learning situation. — Edge, F. B. (1999). *Teaching For Results*. Nashville: B&H.

18. What is the best group you have ever been a part of, in terms of the fellowship? What is the best community, the truest fellowship, you have ever experienced? What was it like? What made it special?

In Leadership pastor and author John Ortberg writes:

Psychologist Milton Rokeach once wrote a book called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. He described his attempts to treat three patients at a psychiatric hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Each believed he was unique among humankind; he had been called to save the world; he was the messiah. They were full-blown cases of grandiosity, in its pure form.

Rokeach found it difficult to break through, to help the patients accept the truth about their identity. So he decided to put the three into a little community, to see if rubbing against people who also claimed to be the messiah might dent their delusion. A kind of messianic, 12-step recovery group.

This led to some interesting conversations. One would claim, “I’m the messiah, the Son of God. I was sent here to save the earth.”

“How do you know?” Rokeach would ask.

“God told me.”

One of the other patients would counter, “I never told you any such thing.”

Every once in a while, one got a glimmer of reality—never deep or for long. Deeply ingrained was the messiah complex. But what progress Rokeach made was pretty much made by putting them together. — Larson, C. B. (2002). *750 engaging illustrations for preachers, teachers & writers* (pp. 72–73). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

19. Let’s think of how this relates to our society as a whole. Some have said there is an epidemic of loneliness in our culture. Do you think this is true? Why or why not?

In October of 1993, in the town of Worcester, Massachusetts, police found an old woman dead on her kitchen floor. This was no ordinary discovery—she had been dead four years. Police speculated she died at age seventy-three of natural causes. That’s when her bank transactions ended.

How can someone be so cut off from relationships that no one even notices when he or she dies?

To some extent, it was a mistake. According to the Associated Press, four years earlier, neighbors had called authorities when they sensed something might be wrong. When the police contacted the woman’s brother, he said she had gone into a nursing home. Police told the postal service to stop delivering mail. One neighbor paid her grandson to cut the grass because the place was looking run-down. Another neighbor had the utility company come and shut off the water when a pipe froze, broke, and sent water spilling out the door.

To a great extent, though, it was not a mistake.

One friend from the past said, “She didn’t want anyone bothering her at all. I guess she got her wish, but it’s awfully sad.”

Her brother said the family hadn’t been close since their mother died in 1979. He added, “Someone should have noticed something before now.”

The woman had lived in her house in this middle-class neighborhood for forty years, but none of her neighbors knew her well. “My heart bleeds for her,” said the woman who lives across the street. “But you can’t blame a soul. If she saw you out there, she never said hello to you.”

As this neighborhood shows, a spirit of community only results when all of us reach out to one another. Relationships take effort. — Larson, C. B. (2002). *750 Engaging Illustrations For Preachers, Teachers & Writers* (pp. 71–72). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

20. Summary. What are the benefits of a group experiencing true fellowship?

To live in community with others benefits one's health significantly. That is a finding reported in The Journal of the American Medical Association.

"Building on a dozen studies correlating friendship and fellowship with health, a new study has found that people with a broad array of social ties are significantly less likely to catch colds than those with sparse social networks," reported the New York Times News Service.

"The incidence of infection among people who knew many different kinds of people was nearly half that among those who were relatively isolated, the researchers reported. The lack of diverse social contacts was the strongest of the risk factors for colds that were examined, including smoking, low vitamin C intake and stress."

Researchers have found similar health benefits from community for heart disease patients. In one study Dr. Redford Williams, director of the behavioral medicine research center at Duke University Medical Center, "found that heart disease patients with few social ties are six times as likely to die within six months as those with many relatives, friends and acquaintances."

Reportedly, one of the main beneficiaries of a broadened network of relationships is our immune system. In another study, Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, director of health psychology at the Ohio State University College of Medicine, and her husband, Dr. Ronald Glaser, a virologist at Ohio State, "have reported that a person's immune response to vaccines increases with the strength of his or her social support."

As always, when God tells us how to live, those guidelines are for our own good. Church involvement contributes to our health! — Larson, C. B. (2002). 750 engaging illustrations for preachers, teachers & writers (pp. 73–74). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

21. What is one step you could take to move your group to better fellowship?

22. How can we pray for one another this week?