


GOSPEL-CENTERED SMALL GROUPS

5 Ways the Cross Shapes Our Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Every environment you enter into has a culture. Your workplace, a restaurant, a church – even your own home has a culture all its own. The culture of an environment is like the set of unwritten rules that people abide by while in that particular environment. It's not just about behavior – it's about how you think. How you feel. And then, of course, how you behave. The culture of a given environment is what lays below the surface; it's that which truly governs that environment.

The concept of culture is a little bit like rebar on a construction site. No one comes to a building in its early stages and marvels at the extensive nature of its rebar. Instead, we wait until the structure actually starts to go up; we don't want to see what makes it stable—we want to see what makes it pretty.

Even though rebar isn't pretty, it's incredibly necessary. Rebar gives a building its stability and strength. It's what holds everything together below the surface, making a structure resistant against the forces of time and nature.

Without rebar, a building crumbles, because rebar is what truly governs the shape of everything else that goes on top of it. The same thing is true of culture.

That brings us to an important question: What is the culture of the small groups in your ministry? What are the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and widely held suppositions that truly give shape to those groups? This is an important question to answer because unlike rebar, culture is going to be created with or without our help in forming it. Every one of the groups in your church is going to have a culture, and that culture will either be one of gospel-centered welcoming, hospitality, service, and mission, or it won't. But if it's not, it will inevitably be something else.

We would be wise, then, to recognize this fact and take an active role in culture formation in those environments in which we can. We should be concerned that the gospel is not merely a message we tout, but is actually providing the underlying framework for everything we do in our group life. That's what this little book is about - it's about understanding that the

gospel is not merely about the eternal destiny of those people we encounter, though it certainly is at least that.

But it's more. The gospel is a message we believe. It infiltrates our lives, our thoughts, our beliefs, and consequently, our groups so deeply that even the most normal aspects of what we do together in these groups takes on a different kind of significance and meaning. All those things become outworkings of the gospel, for the gospel has been drilled down deeply into the very construction of who we are. It is our rebar, and now it gives everything else its shape.

This book will hopefully help you see how the characteristics we mention are not only essential to group life, but how they all actually spring from a deeply held belief and love for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER ONE: GOSPEL-CENTERED HOSPITALITY

Hospitality. This was an important quality that characterized the New Testament church, one that the biblical writers saw the vital importance of:

- “Be hospitable to one another without complaining” (1 Peter 4:9).
- “Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality” (Romans 12:13).
- “Don’t neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

In fact, when Paul was laying out the characteristics for both elders and deacons in the church, hospitality is listed as being essential for both. Clearly, this is an important trait in the life of the church. Though important, hospitality is often not treated as such.

I am not sure how many times I have heard someone say, “I just don’t have the spiritual gift of hospitality.” I have even said it about myself. I don’t know about you, but when I think of someone who is gifted in hospitality, I picture Martha Stewart on the cover of a glossy magazine. Everything in the house is beautifully laid out and impossibly--over-the-top--perfect. That’s just not me.

Furthermore, there are probably a lot of introverts out there who have an overdeveloped sense of privacy. The very nature of hospitality is sharing what we consider to be “personal” with each other in a sacrificial way. True enough, there are some who gravitate more naturally towards this kind of sharing with others; they are bent towards a more “public” approach to life than others. The problem is, if you take the words of Scripture seriously, hospitality is more than a character trait that is easier for some than others to practice; it’s a command. Hospitality is to be pursued and not neglected without complaining.

And here is where the temptation comes in for anyone who is not naturally hospitable - we tend to think of hospitality as a single action that is pursued

occasionally, as if we are some kind of a quota system. We think that if we do something hospitable every once in a while that we have checked off the box for the month and are free to go back to our private life until we feel some measure of guilt again.

But for the Christian, hospitality is not just an act to be performed; it is a posture to be assumed.

To understand why that is, we need to first understand what hospitality really is. While there are certain acts, like making the casserole or opening your home, that are indicative of hospitality, the characteristic itself has a deeper meaning and implication than these actions. The word hospitality comes from the combination of two words: “love” and “stranger.” Literally, then, hospitality is the love of strangers.

This is a powerful description of what the gospel is. When we were strangers and aliens, God took us in. When we were without a home and family, God brought us into His. When we were without hope in the world, God adopted us as His children. In the ultimate act of hospitality, God provided a way to welcome us through the death of Jesus Christ. God is ultimately hospitable, and therefore hospitality is a characteristic built into the spiritual DNA of all those who have experienced this divine hospitality.

Hospitality, then, is that characteristic that compels us to put aside our own interests, to lay down our own desires, and to welcome the needs of others ahead of our own, just as Jesus did with His life and death.

Jesus, during His life, epitomized hospitality though He had no home. Though He did not have physical resources. Though He didn't have an oven or a cookie sheet or a casserole dish. Jesus practiced the core of hospitality, which is sacrificing something of your own to welcome others in.

Hospitality is not only for people with the full range of home canning equipment, but something to be pursued by every Christ follower. All of the actions and attitudes laid out in Romans 12 were exemplified by the life of Jesus. Because he first loved deeply, honored extravagantly and was patient always, we are commanded to do the same. 1 Peter 4:9 further commends us to “*Be hospitable to one another without complaining.*” All of these selfless acts are to be done with joy.

Because God has shown us hospitality through the gift of his son, Jesus Christ, we are to mirror that through our love for one another. This is the essence of the gospel. I don't know a better opportunity for displaying this kind of "love of a stranger" than in a small group of believers, so how do we practically live this out in our gospel-centered small group?

- Be open to inviting strangers into the group

This is not always the case for every small group. A few groups, like recovery groups, will need to stay closed for accountability and confidentiality, but most groups can be open to offering community to those who need it most. The expectation of group members inviting others into the group will need to be discussed at the start of the group life.

- Remember that everything speaks

Walt Disney was famous for insisting that everything in his amusement parks sends signals about what the organization values. This applied all the way down to how the pavement changed between the different sections of the park. He said, "You can get information about a changing environment through the soles of your feet." Our hospitality in the small group starts with how the environment speaks to the new member. Was there a smiling face at the door? Did group members welcome the new person in? Did the condition of the house show that we care about the comfort of our guests?

- Be the first to serve and the last to eat

In his book, *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek makes the case that good leadership is the willingness to put the people you lead's needs before yours. He says, "the true price of leadership is the willingness to place the needs of others above your own. Great leaders truly care about those they are privileged to lead and understand that the true cost of the leadership privilege comes at the expense of self-interest." This can be as basic as allowing your group members to always get their food first, to being physically and emotionally available when they are in a crisis.

- Pray consistently for the group

Extravagant hospitality begins with seeking God's favor and provision on the group members. Prayer sets the stage for life-changing moments to occur through the action of love toward friends and strangers.

CHAPTER TWO: GOSPEL-CENTERED AUTHENTICITY

What is real? Really real? Never before has this question been asked with greater frequency and fervency. That's because all of us have the opportunity now, as never before, to present our ideal version of ourselves to others.

We can pose our kids for the right picture. We can craft the perfect witty statement for hours. We can set the filter to capture the mood. We can, in other words, present a fabricated version of ourselves to others, and no one will know the difference. And that is what much of the world is doing. Consequently, much of the world has a new cynicism about these personas which is voiced over and over again by the simple question: Is this real?

There is a near paralyzing fear that comes with true authenticity. The thoughts bombard us every time we start to grow in relationship with others. If people only knew...

- The things I have done in my past
- My shortcomings as a spouse
- My failure as a parent
- My private thoughts
- Sin based in my insecurities

The Christian community has a unique answer to these hesitations. As Christians, we have the opportunity to present not a persona, but our authentic selves to others in our small groups. But we can only truly be authentic with each other - and the outside world - through a deep belief in the gospel. That's because the gospel reminds us that Jesus has fully, completely, and unequivocally borne our sin.

Because Jesus bore our sin, we can live in the glorious freedom of being in right standing with God. We can day by day live with the full knowledge that we are the righteousness of Christ, untainted by sin, and welcome into the family of God. Amazingly, mysteriously, even today when you and I sin, for indeed we will, we can know that Jesus has already born that sin as well.

Once and for all. It is finished. And because Jesus has borne our sin, we can own our sin.

Owning our sin is not the same thing as bearing our sin. Instead, owning our sin means acknowledging our sin without self-justification or equivocation. We can truly be our authentic selves and acknowledge our insecurity, our fear, and yes, even our sin in the most real of real ways because we are confident that Jesus has already borne the weight of that sin.

The Bible has a picture of this kind of authentic transparency. And in that picture, we are reminded that there is a greater end than simply “being real.” The picture is found in James 5:16:

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The urgent request of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect.”

This verse is transparency at its best. It’s a picture of someone who, convinced of the limitless grace and promised forgiveness of Jesus, confesses their sin. They lay themselves open and bare before others, not expecting shame or guilt, but instead expecting healing. It’s a crucial step on the road to holiness, but that’s just the thing – it’s one step on the road. It’s not an end in itself.

The gospel enables us to be truly transparent, but the gospel also compels us toward a greater end that lies beyond transparency. We confess to one another not so that we can be real with one another; we confess to one another because we have a desire to be made holy. To be healed. To stop sinning. And we are responsible and even blessed for aiding one another on that journey. James continues on in verses 19 and 20:

“My brothers, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his life from death and cover a multitude of sins.”

Our natural reaction to sin is to run and hide in darkness, but the power of the gospel frees us to come out into the light. Because of the blood of Jesus, we don’t have to be afraid of confessing our sin. Not because our sin is not present or that it doesn’t have consequences, but through the gospel

we can truly own our sin without justification. Not only that, but we can confess to one another not so that we will receive forgiveness, but so that the forgiveness that Jesus has already given to us can be pronounced again and again in our communities.

The work of Jesus makes confession and repentance more beautiful than burdensome. We can share “below the line of shame” because we already know that we are so broken Jesus had to die for us. But we also know that we are so loved that He was willing to die for us.

The only way for a small group to embrace this power of healing is for the leader to model and practice it from the beginning. Here are a few practices that will help your group begin to live in the freedom that comes from embracing gospel-centered authenticity.

- 1. Be willing to go first.** A good practice of facilitation is to ask questions and let the group answer before giving your opinion. But when you’re leading with a personal type question, it’s always good to model vulnerability by going first with your experience. This will help the group feel at ease about opening up, and set the culture of confession from the beginning.
- 2. Be prepared before the group meeting.** Go over the study for the group time and mentally prepare your answers for each question. This will help you feel more confident about sharing something vulnerable to the group. The group members will then quickly follow your approach to the openness of the discussion.
- 3. Ease into the personal questions.** Especially if this is a new group. It will take time to build the relationships and trust necessary for open conversation. A group that “goes there” too quickly will scare off members that need more time. My first men’s group experience was like this. I didn’t know any of the men that morning when we were asked by the leader to go around the table and confess our biggest struggle. That experience kept me from having anything to do with men’s groups for several years. Give your group the opportunity to form relationships before asking them to get too personal.

4. Keep the focus on Jesus and grace. Continue to point the group back to the message of the cross. Authenticity will come when we think about the amazing love Christ had for us by laying down his life for our sin. When the conversation turns to judgement, gently remind the group that we are all sinners in need of a risen savior.

5. Make prayer an integral part of the group experience.

Oftentimes, prayer is a forgotten or hurried part of the group time. We have spent so much time in discussion that prayer becomes the final check off to completing the official meeting time. James said that confession leads to prayer, and prayer leads to healing. In order for group members to get to healing, there has to be concerted prayer. This sometimes means the group time may need to be interrupted to pray for a hurting member in the moment of confession. Be open to where the spirit is leading the group.

CHAPTER THREE: GOSPEL-CENTERED SERVICE

One of the churches in which I served sat on an interesting place geographically. The side of the main road where the building sat was quickly gentrifying: grand homes were being restored and flipped for big dollars, and the neighborhood was becoming a desirable place to live again.

However, directly across the street was a completely different picture. Drugs and gangs were destroying families, and the crime rate was one of the highest in the entire city. While we felt pretty comfortable being on the “right side of the street,” we knew we couldn’t just sit and watch the pain occurring on the other side of our windows. This tension eventually led to a 24/7 Dream Center with a food pantry, dental clinic, after-school tutoring, free legal services, and much more, but it started with a handful of small groups who decided to love on and adopt a dying community. Those groups would consistently show up every month to walk the streets and offer basic needs, like lightbulbs, to as many houses that would open their doors. That community continues to change because those first few small groups decided to serve.

This is just one example of one church trying to take seriously the command Jesus issued, among other places, in Luke 10. In that passage, Jesus told a story of a man beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. The hero of the story is a Samaritan, one of the hated half-breeds of the time. Told in a Jewish context, Jesus could not have picked a more unlikely protagonist than this one.

While the man lay in the ditch decimated from his injuries, both a priest and Levite, two religious individuals, passed him by. These religious people left the man for dead. Perhaps they did so because they were committed to ceremonial laws of cleanliness. The punch comes in that we often miss the forest for the trees – we can be so religiously committed that we fail to do the good right in front of us.

The punchline of the story comes after Jesus described the sacrificial service of the Samaritan in verse 37: “You go and do likewise.”

Go, and be like the Samaritan. Go the extra mile. Sacrifice to serve those in need. Don't be so caught up in your agenda that you forget about the people in front of you. Anyone in need is your neighbor.

That's exactly right. But if we take it one step further, we can see how true and sustainable service is motivated not only by this singular command, but by the gospel. If we read back up in the passage a little earlier, we find this:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

The issue of love is a tricky one. I can *make* myself serve the man in the ditch, but can I make myself love him? I don't think so. You don't manufacture love. But perhaps the answer to this question is in the parable, too.

I might be seeking to become like the Samaritan, but I don't start off that way.

I'm not the Samaritan. Neither am I the priest. Nor am I the Levite.

I'm the man in the ditch. Beaten. Bloodied. Disregarded. And helpless. But at just the right time, when I am powerless, Someone passes by on the road and loves me. That Person, despite the fact that I've never done anything to earn His compassion, bends low on the road, binds up my wounds, and pays the considerable cost for my care. In light of the great kindness and grace shown to me, I now actually begin to feel real love for others.

Jesus is first the Samaritan. I'm the guy half-dead in the middle of the road. This is the reason why we serve in the first place, and the way that we keep our service centered on the gospel and away from being just another obligation for us to fulfill. We serve because Christ has already served us. We are the man hurt and broken on the side of the road and Jesus is the good

Samaritan long before we are to be the Samaritan for someone else. Jesus put it this way to His disciples:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

Serving starts with the good news that Jesus saw us, served us, and sacrificed himself for us. Once we comprehend that we are broken and needy first, then we can truly serve the broken and needy around us.

So, how do we begin mirroring the gospel of serving with our small group? Here are four steps to help your group live out gospel-centered service.

1. Serve your group first.

If you expect your small group to become a serving group, you have to first model servant leadership for your group members. Paul gave these instructions to the church in Philippi.

³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. ⁴Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,

– Philippians 2:3-5

Jesus left us the ultimate example of servanthood as he served his disciples and ultimately all of us on the cross. As you begin your group, make sure you serve group members unconditionally and tangibly. There are no expectations attached with true servanthood.

2. Empower group members to serve the group.

Even the disciples had to eventually turn over ownership to their quickly multiplying group.

In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

– Acts 6:1-4

You are discipling your group members by helping them discover their spiritual gifts in order to utilize within the group. Here are a few roles to start giving away:

- Hosting the group
- Providing the food
- Facilitating the discussion
- Handling the prayer time
- Planning events
- Planning missional opportunities

Spend a group meeting talking about where group members gifts and passions are, and then release them to own that portion of the group experience.

3. Serve together in the church.

There are always opportunities for groups to serve somewhere together in the church. A classroom needs to be painted. The church landscaping needs some extra care on a Saturday. The student ministry needs more bodies for an event. Take a few minutes at a group meeting to brainstorm ideas where the group can come alongside a ministry within the church.

4. Serve together in the community.

Just like our small groups saw a need across the street and met it, there are

needs around your community. A single mom who needs her yard mowed. An under-resourced local school that needs more supplies for the teachers. A local fire or police station that could use some encouragement through baked cookies. Whatever you do may seem small or insignificant, but you have to start somewhere. The only way a community is going to be transformed is through one block at a time, by one small group at a time.

CHAPTER FOUR: GOSPEL-CENTERED MISSION

It might seem obvious why living out the mission of Jesus is related to the gospel. After all, the final instructions of Jesus before He ascended into heaven were centered around this mission - that His followers should “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20).

And yet it is very easy for our groups to drift away from this mission. Most easily, our groups can drift into believing that their entire mission for being together is not actually the spread of the gospel, but the desire for community.

To be clear, community and the relationships that spring from it are not only good; they are essential for us as believers. That’s because we were created for friendship and community. You can see it modeled for us with the perfect relationship of the Trinity in Genesis.

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth” (Genesis 1:26)

Before time began, God existed in perfect community in Himself. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit lived in unbroken and perfect community from all eternity. When God created man, He created us in His image. Part of what it means to be created in God’s own image is that we, as human beings, have the unique desire, capacity, and need to live in community with other human beings.

But like all aspects of God’s creation, our relationships have been broken by sin. In our sinfulness, we use other people instead of live in God-honoring community with them. We use them for sexual gratification, for personal advancement, or to meet our personal insecurities. But when we believe the gospel, our relationships begin to be reshaped. No longer are people objects to be used; instead, we find that when our relationships are centered on

the gospel, that people become fellow workers in God's field. We, together, are meant to help each other follow Jesus more closely and, in so doing, to extend the gospel into all the world. This is our mission. This is the redeemed version of community - it's relationships that are centered on seeing the mission of God come to pass in our own hearts and in the world.

We see Jesus stating this in one of His final prayers before He would go to the cross:

"May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be one in Us, so the world may believe You sent Me" (John 17:21).

Community is important, but the issue comes when community is the destination of the group. A small group that gathers strictly around the desire to make friends will live or die on the strength of those relationships. If those relationships begin to shift or separate, so will the group. Without the imperative of being on mission, community on it's own is fragile.

We can look at the life of Jesus to see how community was used as the foundation for mission. As we saw in Genesis 1:26, Jesus had this perfect community with the Trinity, but chose to not just leave home, but to leave heaven on a mission to die for those He came to reach. Jesus was the first and greatest Missionary of all time!

John testified to the fullness of Jesus' mission in John 1.

¹⁶Indeed, we have all received grace upon[j] grace from his fullness, ¹⁷for the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. The one and only Son, who is himself God and[k] is at the Father's side—he has revealed him.

– John 1:16-18

Jesus left His community to come to earth and realign our priorities and make us new citizens. Because of sin, our priorities are broken but the gospel puts them back in line. The truth of this gospel was the sole mission of Jesus' life on earth.

When Pilate questioned who He was, Jesus replied, *"You say that I'm a king," Jesus replied. "I was born for this, and I have come into the world for this: to*

testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37) Jesus was born to share this truth.

As you begin to align your group around the gospel-centered mission of Jesus, remember that we had to hear the good news before we could share the good news. We had to be brought to life by the message before we could be its messengers. What this means practically is that we have to be open to living out the gospel in our group by inviting those who need the gospel the most.

It’s easy for our groups to become more focused on community and the study than the mission. Here are a few things that you can do to help your group be gospel focused from the beginning.

- Set the expectation early that the group is open to new people who might need what the group can offer. This can be done with a covenant at the first meeting that sets the foundation for the group’s existence. Covenant together that you will look for and invite those who need the good news of the gospel.
- Include studies that help the group understand the mission of Jesus. Groups will naturally drift toward their favorite subjects, but a balanced curriculum map will consistently bring the group back to the heart of the gospel.
- Participate in at least one missional activity every quarter. Again, include this expectation in the covenant so members know from the beginning that goal of the group is to be outward focused. Look for opportunities with organizations already making a difference in your community. Your church may have a list of organizations they have partnered with in the past.
- End each group meeting by praying for opportunities to live out the gospel that week. The mission is not just a group activity. Each one of us has a mandate to live as missionaries in our daily lives. Every person we come across is an opportunity to follow Jesus in his mission to share the truth to a hurting and dying world.

Remember community is an important piece of group life, but community should not be the destination. Being on mission should result from biblical community. Jesus does not want us to gather so that we can remain gathered. We are gathered to be sent out.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It’s no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled on by men. “You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

– Matthew 5:13-16

All of Jesus illustrations assume that we are in the world, impacting all the cultures we find there.

CHAPTER FIVE: GOSPEL-CENTERED BIBLE STUDY

The final piece of a gospel-centered group is a foundational Bible study that always points back to the centrality of the gospel of Jesus. Let me paint a picture for you to help illustrate this.

You are sitting in your small group, and things seem to be going pretty well. The discussion is robust, the group is sharing freely, and there is a spirit of good nature in your midst. And that's when someone starts sharing their opinion on some matter. Maybe it sounds something like this:

“I just don't think God would...” and you can fill in the blank. There's something uneasy inside you that starts to stir up. Though you can't pinpoint exactly why, that last statement that he or she made doesn't sit right with you. But you look around and you see that people all around the group are nodding their heads in agreement, giving non-verbal cues to the person to just continue on and share.

Later, you think about the incident and the implications of that statement, and you realize that what that person thinks is actually, truly wrong. And you know that no matter what they might think, their opinion is just that – it's an opinion. It's not truth.

But, hey – the discussion was great, right? And everyone left feeling good, right? Real, authentic community happened, right?

Right!?

And there's the rub, because community, though important, is not the most important thing we are involved with as Christians. As Christians, we deal in the truth first and foremost. That's not to say we don't have our opinions, and that it's not right for us to express them. But when we gather together as Christians, we must both implicitly and explicitly acknowledge that what we're after is not what we think, but what is true.

To that end, we must also acknowledge that all our opinions, just like our actions, our thoughts, and our emotions, must be brought under the lordship of Jesus. Share opinions if you want to, but the end you are looking for is not what I think, or what you think, but what God says and therefore

is true, even and especially when that contradicts our own opinions.

Secondly, I would argue that what we experience, if absent of the truth, is not actually true community. Friendships, as God intended them, are to be for His glory. That doesn't mean that we necessarily have a Bible study every time we are together with friends, but it does mean that the highest goal of all our relationships is to help each other follow Jesus. This goal requires that we tell each other the truth.

It requires that we are willing to wound each other, for wounds from a friend can be trusted, because we wound one another for the greater end of helping each other. This is true community – it's not only where we all feel welcome; it's not only where we all can share our burdens; it's not only where we have a good time; it's where we do all those things to the greater end of helping one another.

The implication is clear - no matter what else happens in your small group, you must consistently and essentially find your way to Scripture every single time. And if you do, you will consistently find that the overarching message of the Bible is centered on the glorious work of Jesus. Every story casts His shadow. Every word bears His testimony.

An effective Bible study will always, first and foremost, show Christ through the narrative of the text. Tim Keller says of this truth: *“You can't really reach and restructure the affections of the heart unless you point through the biblical principles to the beauty of Jesus himself, show clearly how the particular truth in your text can be practiced only through faith in the work of Christ.”*

We can see throughout Paul's writing in the New Testament that he continually points to Christ as the source.

¹When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. ²I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

—1 Corinthians 2:1-2

Tim Keller says of Paul's ministry: *“At the time Paul was writing, the only Scripture to preach from was what we now call the Old Testament. Yet even when preaching from these texts Paul ‘knew nothing’ but Jesus...”*

As we lead a study, we should also take note of Paul's pattern of teaching in the epistles of believe, become, behave. This is the work of the gospel - that we are reminded of what we believe, that because of the gospel we have become something different, and then our behavior is the process of bringing what we do into line with who we have already become in Christ. In our study of the Bible, we must keep this order in mind.

As you prepare to lead a gospel-centered Bible study, there are a few tools that can help you feel more confident as you work through the text.

1. Bible commentary: Commentaries are written by well-known and popular theologians, and aid in the study of Scripture by providing explanation and interpretation of Biblical text. Three commentaries the LifeWay custom content team use to write studies are:

- [The New American Commentary](#)
- [The Holman New Testament Commentary](#)
- [The Holman Old Testament Commentary](#)

2. Bible concordance: A concordance can help to locate important Bible references by indexing every verse that contains a particular word. This will help you assemble a list of Bible references on almost any topic.

3. Bible encyclopedia: These are often massive in their scope - they present, in an organized fashion, page after page of information about Bible times and customs, important historical periods and persons.

4. Bible dictionary: Arranged much like a typical English dictionary, it contains valuable entries which will help you to learn the proper pronunciation of obscure biblical words, will provide information on important biblical persons and summaries of various books of the Bible as well as its important teachings.

5. Online study tools: There are thousands of resources currently available online at no cost to you. Spend a little time searching for Bible study resources and you can bookmark your favorites.

In the end, though, one of the best things you can do for your group is to simply, and many times explicitly, bring them back to the truth of the

gospel. The question, “What does the gospel say about this issue?” should be well worn in our small groups. When we ask that question again and again, we will find that the gospel has much to say indeed about the varied and many issues we will discuss.

CONCLUSION

Most churches are full of different kinds of environments, each one providing a different kind of experience. There are large worship services, Bible study classes, small groups, accountability groups, affinity groups, and everything in between. While gospel transformation can, and does, happen in any and all of these environments, the small group in particular provides fertile ground for the growth of the gospel.

These groups are where it is very difficult to remain anonymous. These are the opportunities when we not just hear the gospel, but experience it through the way we relate to one another. These are the times in which we are forced not only to listen, but actually articulate how the truth of the gospel is compelling us to act. And these are the moments when the grace of Jesus is pronounced again and again when we fail to do so.

The small group is a powerful environment. We would do well to make sure that such a powerful tool is centered on the right thing. Because we know that the gospel alone addresses the true problem of humanity, which is our own hearts, then we should be doing all we can to make sure that every small group from beginning to end is centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

That's when we will see people truly transformed.



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