**Session 4 Connecting with God (Discipleship)**

Healthy discipleship is reflected in how people love God, love others, and use everything the Lord has entrusted to them for his kingdom purposes. It springs from his grace bestowed upon believers, which gives them the desire to sacrificially share their time, treasure, and talents in order to impact the world for Christ and introduce spiritually unconvinced people to him.

# Choosing Your Group’s Focus and Curriculum

There are three general ways a group can decide what its focus will to be:

1. The Growth group leader decides before the group forms. This is more common with affinity-based groups.
2. Group consensus—the focus is decided after the group forms. (In general, it’s best to have 2 or 3 options to present to the group, as opposed to leaving it completely open-ended.)
3. The leader predetermines a list of options, which the group votes on after a few meetings. This third way is a combination of the first two, and is advisable for group leaders who are uncertain what they want their group focus to be.

Whichever you choose, first get a picture of what the Lord wants you to do in the group (a vision). Then choose curriculum that will serve that vision. Avoid curriculum that is long, has a lot of homework, uses fill-in-the-blanks, or uses “leading” questions. Always be flexible, and be prepared to scrap the curriculum if it feels like the energy of the group is waning. Packaged curriculum is meant to serve the group—not the other way around.

Find material that is relationally-oriented, manageable in size, and takes a creative, multi-faceted approach to communicating its content. Good curriculum will express a two-pronged goal of building relationships among participants in addition to learning content. The best curriculum uses open-ended questions designed to stimulate discussion.

# Practical Guidelines for Facilitating Discussion

Prayer is foundational to successful Growth group leadership. Before a meeting even begins, ask the Lord to impart his wisdom and pour out his peace and power on your group participants as they seek the truth in his Word. On that note, it’s wise to establish at the outset of a group that the Bible will be the authoritative source of truth (2 Tim 3:16–17).

When you are ready to facilitate an actual Growth Group discussion, follow the “**4 R**’s”:

* Respond to each person who speaks or expresses a spoken/unspoken emotion.
* Repeat what has been said in order to bring clarity for the group, and to be sure that you understand what the speaker is really saying.
* Relate to your group members by referring to common experiences and emotions—help them see that they’re not alone.
* Re-group the discussion periodically by summarizing the flow of conversation to that point, and by highlighting recurring themes. This is also a good way to bring meaningful closure to the group’s discussion.

As a Growth group leader, remember that you are a facilitator during group discussions. Don’t fall into the temptation to “teach,” and don’t feel like you have to deliver all the answers to all the questions that come up. Your job is to be a conversation starter, not a lecturer. In addition, everyone doesn’t need to share something on every question, but it’s important that every person be given an opportunity to contribute during the course of the discussion as a whole.

**Learning Styles**

Adult educators and trainers often refer to certain “learning styles.” There are three major types of learning styles utilized by members of your group.

**Visual Learners**

These people respond well to charts, diagrams, and other visual stimuli. They tend to like handouts and enjoy parables and stories. They are visual thinkers; that is, they respond well to word pictures and to stories that are vivid and descriptive and allow them to picture what is happening.

**Tips for Leaders:** Use handouts, newspaper articles and objects to keep the attention of your visual learners.

**Auditory Learners**

Auditory Learners enjoy learning by hearing. They would rather be in a discussion on an issue than read a book about it. Some of them may be avid readers, but in general, they would rather listen to a story than read one.

**Tips for leaders**: Use subgroups to allow full participation by all members in discussions. Allow members of your group to respond verbally to questions and decisions. Use background music during prayer times or at the beginning of the meeting.

**Kinesthetic Learners**

These folks like to touch and feel things. They like to participate in the action. They learn by doing. While a visual learner might be motivated to help the poor by seeing a picture of the poor, the kinesthetic learner would be motivated by a field trip to the inner city.

**Tips for the leader:** Utilize objects and experiences for your group. Plan outings and events that allow people to experience truth in action! Allow kinesthetic learners to learn by trial and error, rather than by simply telling them the answer to something.

**Biblical Discussions/Teaching**

Looking at the practical aspects of facilitating discussion on a biblical text, it helps to first read the whole passage slowly and out-loud. Sprinkle the discussion with a few brief insights or questions that arose in your mind, and be sure to leave space for the insights or questions of others. As you get into the meat of the discussion, ask questions like: What stands out to you in this passage? What impacted you during the reading? Did you encounter something that was new for you, reaffirming, confusing or challenging? How can we apply this text to our lives today?

When engaging in an in-depth Bible study, be sure to take your time—especially on challenging passages. Rely on the Holy Spirit to instruct and guide you through the insights others have to offer. Using tools like Bible commentaries and dictionaries can enhance your study, but don’t introduce them until *after* group participants have wrestled with the meaning of the text themselves.

Lastly, be aware of “talkers” and “teachers”—people with a tendency to monopolize or dominate the discussion time of your Bible study. When either type is allowed to run amuck, they will drain the life from your group. Learn to use their tendencies to add to the group instead of letting them aggravate the other participants. In other words, capitalize on their strengths and be proactive in minimizing, or even confronting, their weaknesses. If your group is repeatedly bogged down by doctrinal debates, reel the discussion back in by asking, “What relevance does this have to our lives today?”

# The Basics of Handling Conflict

Community is messy business. Differences, disappointments, hurt feelings, and frustrations are all part of moving toward a deeper maturity in community and Christ likeness. In fact, conflict can be the very thing that helps your group break out to new levels of honesty and freedom in Christ.

The key to handling conflict constructively is open communication. Ephesians 4:25–27 shows us the way: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ‘In your anger do not sin.’ Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” Notice how open communication involves speaking the truth, not stuffing down feelings, and doing so in love. Grace reigns over judgment. Love overcomes the temptation to condemn.

Open communication seeks mutual growth and takes steps toward reconciliation. It acknowledges difficult situations and feelings, and does not try to avoid or cover up conflict. Conflict-avoidance is easy, but has a way of decimating relationships and destabilizing the development of biblical community. Open communication, on the other hand, is hard work, but it encourages realness and respect, which are needed for biblical community to grow.

Matthew 18:15 is probably the most violated principle in handling conflict: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” The first thing believers are instructed to do when they have a problem with another person is to directly and privately address the matter with that person. When people skip this first step in favor of gossip—or to stew in their feelings—they tumble into trouble, and disagreements escalate into tragic relational fractures and fissures.

There are other guidelines you can apply that will help you diffuse the conflicts that so easily arise from miscommunication and misunderstanding. First, make it your goal to understand where the other person is coming from and what they are really saying. Begin by asking questions to clarify their perspective: “When you say \_\_\_\_\_, does that mean \_\_\_\_\_? Am I understanding you correctly?” If you are frustrated or offended, non-defensively share how you are feeling: “I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when you \_\_\_\_\_.”

Next, evaluate whether your disagreement is about something essential to your life and faith. In Romans 14, Paul reminds us that there few things that should create division between Christians. He also shares what believers should do after identifying differing opinions: acknowledge the most important areas of agreement and shared goals. This allows both people in a dispute to discuss possible solutions, which might entail compromising on negotiable items for the sake of fulfilling God’s purposes for the group.

When you feel like you have arrived at a solution, say so. Make sure the other person sees the solution the same way you do and feels that a resolution has been made. Finally, look for an opportunity to seal your conversation and decision through prayer.

# Biblical Principles for Dealing with Conflict

* Don’t tolerate gossip. Gossip is a sin that betrays another. It is divisive, destroys trust, and deeply affects even those who only listen to it. Therefore, its presence will significantly reduce the level of trust in your small group. (Proverb 18:8; 1 Timothy 5:19)
* Expose and eliminate dissension. If there is dissension within you group, get to the root of it immediately and address each person involved (Proverbs 6:16–19). The Bible says that hatred, a hot temper, perversion, greed, and anger all stir up dissension. If a member of your group exhibits any of these, go to them privately and get to the bottom of it. If that person doesn’t listen to you, then prayerfully consider involving your co-leader or another trusted group member. If you are sure that someone is creating division in your group, notify your coach or pastor immediately.
* Watch the joking. Don’t allow the enemy to gain a foothold through misplaced or misinterpreted words. Remember these three points when it comes to joking around: 1) “Just having fun” should not be used as a justification for making other people feel bad, or for using them as the butt of a joke (Proverbs 26:18–19). 2) Joking does not give someone license to use slander, gossip, filthy language, impure images, or obscene references (Ephesians 5:4). 3) Addressing inappropriate joking is a powerful demonstration of your love, both for the person making the joke and the audience (Proverbs 27:5). If something is said that another person might mistake as a personal attack or criticism, clear up the matter at once. Don’t let it fester.
* Watch the sarcasm. Even if sarcasm is delivered in good humor, it can rouse anger (Proverbs 25:23). If someone makes a slick comment about another growth group participant, ask the speaker to clarify what was just said. Sometimes this is enough to mend the matter; other times, situations may deem it necessary for you to mediate between people. In either case, deal with sarcasm immediately in your group before it deposits a virus that develops into a plague.
* Nip quarreling in the bud. Majoring on the minors is a habit for some, but don’t allow theological arguments over non-essential doctrinal issues to threaten the health of your group. This kind of quarrelling leads nowhere and only frustrates those who have to listen to it (2 Timothy 2:23–24).
* Don’t fall prey to “artificial niceness.” Keep in mind the distinction between quarreling and conflict. A healthy growth group does not mean an absence of conflict. If you sense anger stirring within your group—or between members of your group—don’t try to cover it up or avoid dealing with it. Call it out.