

MY FIVE

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY • SPIRITUAL MATURITY • CARING RELATIONSHIPS • INTENTIONAL EVANGELISM • FAITHFUL STEWARDSHIP

Biblical Authority

Tips to Reading the Bible Together in Small Groups

Article by: Josh Hunt

(<https://smallgroupnetwork.com/articles/tips-to-reading-the-bible-together-in-small-groups/>)

My dad used to say: “You gotta know what the Bible says before you can understand what it means.” We have to get the text itself in front of them.

People are shockingly ignorant about the Word of God. We have to get the text in front of them.

People are transformed by the renewing of the mind. It is the truth that sets them free. We have to get the text in front of them.

But we must be careful. I have talked to people who have sworn they will never go back because someone embarrassed them in a small group. Someone asked them to read the Bible when they weren’t ready. We have to get the text in front of people, and we must do it carefully.

There is another reason we must do this with care. This is stereotypically the most boring part of the group. As much as we might hate to admit it, reading a chapter of the Bible together out loud is not always the most interesting part of a group.

We’ve got to get the text in front of people, but we must do it carefully.

Of course, there are easy solutions to these problems. Ask for volunteers to read rather than asking an individual to read. Once someone has volunteered, then you could ask them to read if you wanted. But taking volunteers is a safer route and should be the default mode.

Reading the Bible in small chunks is inherently more interesting than reading the Bible in long sections. Read in small chunks.

But there is a secret to reading the Bible in groups that every Effective Bible Teacher knows, and I want to talk about that now.

Give 'em something to look for

What made the Where's Waldo series of books so insanely popular? Why is the game "Hide and Seek" so perennially popular with children? What is it about looking for something that is just so much fun?

Well, I'll leave the philosophical answers to those questions to the philosophers. Let's talk about how we can put this basic human dynamic to work. We all love to look for things.

Here's the key: when you read the Word, give them something to look for.

Here are a couple of go-to examples:

- As we read this text, see what we can learn about God.
- As we read this text, see what we can learn about Christian living.
- This is a familiar passage. See if you can find something you've never seen before.
- It is always a good idea to read the Bible listening for emotions. I'd like half of you to listen for what David is feeling and the other listen for what Nathan is feeling as we read this passage.

The key point is variety. This is true in how you read the Word, and it is true in just about every area of teaching. Predictability kills learning. The best way to read the Bible together is any way other than the way you did it last week. Here are a few ideas to add some variety to your group Bible reading:

- If you have someone with an especially good reading voice, have him or her read the whole chapter. You might email ahead of time and ask him/her to be prepared to read that chapter. The right person will be able to read it with pizzazz and make the text come alive.
- If it is a passage with a good deal of dialogue, you might format it like a play and ask several people to read various parts.
- If it is a long passage, I have occasionally asked people to read the passage silently. Again, give them something to look for.
- There are great recordings of the Bible available. I have one where the Bible is read in dramatic fashion. Different actors read different parts. The disciples are on the lake, and there is a storm; you can hear the storm in the background. You might play an audio like this for your group. This will actually do double duty. It will read the text in a fresh way, but it will do something else. Someone in your group will have the idea, "Hey, I'd like to get something like that for my daily Bible reading."
- There is a cool app called Relax Melodies that has all kinds of neat sound effects – storm, waves, birds, rain on a roof, crickets, wind chimes, all kinds of stuff . . . iPad, iPhone, and Android versions, free and paid. If I ever have the chance, I will use it for background effect in Bible reading in a group. Such a great idea.[\[1\]](#)

- You might read short sections of the Bible together out loud. Of course, this only works if everyone has the same translation, but this is an easy enough problem to solve. Most translations are readily available online for you to copy, paste, and print for your group.
- It is not a bad idea to email your group from time to time and say something like, “We will be dealing with a great passage this weekend. But it is a little long. If you could read Psalm 139 ahead of time, it would be great.”

We have got to get the text in front of the group. Before we tell them what we think of the text, we need to get the text itself in front of the group. Don’t assume everyone knows the passage. Often the power of the Word of God is in picky details in the text. We must read the text together. But, we must do it in a way that is interesting and does not embarrass anyone in the group.

Spiritual Maturity

How to Pursue Spiritual Growth in Small Groups

by Bill Donahue

<https://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2015/how-to-pursue-spiritual-growth-in-small-groups.html>

The relationship between spiritual growth and small groups is a bit tricky. Ask a small-group leader, “Is spiritual growth important to our groups?” and you’ll hear an enthusiastic, “Absolutely!” But follow that with this risky query: “Okay, but is it actually possible for real change to happen in our groups?” Many would force the reply, “Of course, it’s possible.” But a hint of doubt would betray their real feelings. Even if it is possible, how do we as leaders work alongside the Holy Spirit to foster that growth?

Press further, though, and you’ll reach the question that gnaws at the soul of every small-group leader: “Is spiritual growth actually happening in our small groups?” Don’t be surprised if people respond with silence, confusion, shame, or doubt—or all four.

Spiritual Growth Is Communal

It’s hard to foster growth, but the Bible exhorts us in Colossians 1:28 to admonish and teach everyone with all wisdom, “so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” The Bible is clear on this, giving us over 25 “one another” statements exhorting us to pray for, serve, love, encourage, and comfort one another—just to name a few.

Church leaders remain convinced that people find hope and strength for their journey when they gather regularly with a small community for mutual support and wisdom. Among the many passages that connect spiritual maturity with community life, Ephesians 4:14–16 is exemplary: Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 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.

Spiritual growth assessments also confirm what the Bible teaches. The popular REVEAL survey, used by thousands of churches, confirms the essential role of community in spiritual development. Those most committed to Christ (“Christ-centered” in REVEAL terminology) had the highest participation rates in groups and in other forms of community such as spiritual friendships, serving teams, and spiritual mentors. Many said that the small group was still the core component of community life for them, even though they voluntarily participated in other expressions of community.

Even when churches no longer offer official groups or require participation in a group for membership, people “group” anyway, even creating their own. No one committed to walking with Jesus wants to do the Christian life alone.

Yes, intentional community is essential for life change, and it’s clearly taught in the Bible and confirmed with data. But privately we may fearfully wonder, “Can our groups actually produce disciples? Can we become radically transformed human beings who are nuts about Jesus, instead of just nuts?”

Spiritual Growth Is for Everyone

Admittedly, we expect spiritual formation success from people like Pastor John Ortberg—certainly his group can change. Or if we’d had intensive mentoring from Dallas Willard, it surely would have carried us to the threshold of heaven itself! And is there really any doubt that if Richard Foster and the Renovare team led our group ministry, we’d experience non-stop spiritual growth, 24/7, every week of every year?

That’s what too many of us believe—really, we do. For them it is possible. But not for us. They are transformational titans, but we are spiritual slugs.

But our spiritual heroes are not super saints. Trust me. I’ve seen Ortberg paralyzed in the pulpit and sweating in a staff meeting. And once I heard him say a really bad word.

What attracts us to our spiritual heroes is that they're pursuing a life of devotion, seeking to make themselves available to the transforming grace of God in every part of their lives. But in this they're neither unique nor specially equipped. Instead, they're doing something focused and intentional. And it's something we can all do. But lasting change requires the partnership and mutual engagement of others in the body of Christ. This is what the church is supposed to do and be.

Todd Hunter, in *Christianity Beyond Belief* puts it this way, regarding the need for a community to practice and proclaim the good news of Jesus to the world: "We are cooperative friends with Jesus, living in creative goodness, for the sake of others, in the power of the Holy Spirit" (emphasis mine).

Hunter affirms that it takes a community of friends living in the name of Jesus to change one another and transform the world. Thankfully, there are people throughout the ages who have experienced this kind of life and can serve as our guides. And, apart from a few mystics called to a more solitary, ascetic life of prayer and spirituality, our spiritual ancestors will all tell you that intentional group life—centered on communal living in the way of Jesus—is a major contributor to lasting progress and permanent change.

That is what people called the early church: people of The Way. Not people of the doctrinal statement. Not people of the political party. Not even people of the Book. Long before they were called Christians, they were called The Way. The remarkable love and lifestyle of this group of people was powerful, unique, and transforming.

Spiritual growth is both an opportunity and a possibility for every Christ-follower. And every team, prayer circle, and small group in the church has the potential to become a catalytic, change-oriented community of people in hot pursuit of a new way of life.

Spiritual Growth Takes Effort

But such growth will take effort, something we grace-focused people consider downright heresy when it comes to all things spiritual. I'm not advocating works—I am talking about effort. Go ahead and look up the phrase "make every effort" in the Bible. Peter, Paul, the writer of Hebrews, and Jesus all used it. Why? Because they had given up on grace? No. Just the opposite: Grace makes the effort possible!

The spiritual life takes effort. We don't drift into maturity any more than we drift into physical fitness, or academic excellence, or artistic brilliance. And we don't simply wander into deep, transforming community. Words like strive, labor, and effort are not foreign to the Bible, or to spiritual growth. In fact, they're used often, confirming the need for brothers and sisters to band together so we may "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24).

In interviews and meetings with Dallas Willard, I often heard him remark, “God is opposed to earning, but not to effort.” The difference is that effort is powered by grace, while earning is fueled by pride. The words of the Bible and the practice of committed believers through the ages bear this out. Becoming a Christ-like community that changes lives requires vulnerability, honesty, self-awareness, and the willingness to truly be changed by the Spirit and the Scriptures.

I am a big fan of Jean Vanier. In his book *Community and Growth*, Vanier describes what community does to produce change. I have used this quote in several resources because it so dramatically captures the spirit of life change in relationship, and the effort that will be required: Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get along with some people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective or sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy. While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, living with them all the time, we realize how incapable we are of loving, how much we denied to others, how closed in on ourselves we are. . . . Community is the place where the power of the ego is revealed and where it is called to die so that people become one body and give much life.

Dying to self and becoming people of The Way will not be easy. We must stand on our identity in Christ, remembering who we really are, and what the gospel is doing in us. We must understand how the Word has the ability to shape us as we commit to the transforming practice of community life.

So indeed we make every effort—persisting in prayer, working through conflict, listening with intensity, serving despite weakness, and leading with diligence. In so doing we will not earn God’s favor—we already have that—but we will grow in grace, sharpen our focus, and reap the rewards of faithfulness, as Scripture promises.

Whatever we do, we must not do it alone. In community we will discover what real transformation looks like: ordinary people like you and me, meeting in average small groups, led by reluctant leaders, fueled by the transforming grace of God, and empowered by his Spirit. It’s a messy process, this community thing. And it takes effort. But the church—this ragtag group of spiritual misfits—is called to live in a community of oneness for the sake of others. And I, for one, am continuing to learn more about how to enter this community with honesty, humility, and skill.

Caring Relationships

View from the Porch

"In the Midst of the Storm" – Part 1

I started writing this a few weeks ago. It was the morning that I woke up early to booming thunder and bright flashes of lightning. I had managed to brew 1 cup of my beloved hazelnut brew before we lost power. It was not yet daylight – so we stumbled together in the dark to light the kerosine lamp and stoke up the fireplace. (He built the fire; I lit the lamp.) The 2 efforts, combined, created enough light to weather the storm.

As I slowly sipped what might be my only cup of coffee, I took time to think deeply - to consider things spiritual and things going on in the world – in my life.

My thoughts kept ending up in the same place – “the 2 efforts, combined, created enough light to weather the storm.”

Let's apply that to our daily lives, because our lives can often bring us to a place where we feel like we are stuck in the dark during a storm. In this stuck space, it is hard to see light. For some, it feels like a never-ending gray space

As believers, we are encouraged to build and grow our faith with a strong emphasis on connection with others. Why? Because “the 2 efforts combined, create enough light to weather the storm.” Or as Proverb 27:17 says – **as one person sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.**

Easy to say, right? What does it look like when my personal storm is so dark that no one else will ever understand? How do I cultivate connection when I am failing at life? What if I am sinking in anxiety, depression, guilt and/or shame? Why in the world would I share my “junk” with anyone else?

For me, I had to begin with a mindset shift. I might even go so far as to say, I have had to DUMP my old way of thinking and consider a completely different map to navigate the possibilities this new terrain might bring. I have been involved in ministry for decades. I survived for years (survived being the optimal word) by presenting the perception that I call “I'm fine”. No matter what storm I was weathering, I believed the people around me only needed to see my “fineness” - rather than my humanness. That's what Christians do, right? Wrong. It was my belief, my truth, but it was not God's truth. His truth (2 Cor 12:9) paraphrased says – “in your weakness (humanness), I am strong (God)”. I had to dig deep into my beliefs and thoughts to find ways to build and grow my faith, to connect with and love (minister to) people differently.

I came to the realization that if I wanted to have influence for God's kingdom, and I did, I had to embrace my humanness. I had to recognize that being Christian didn't mean my life would be perfect, but rather that my life would sometimes be hard AND God is always good – even in the hard.

I made a list to help me to stay Christ - centered and connected in my own humanness. And yes, if you know me, you know that I love words. So, I have tried to make a creative list. It is a long list, so we won't get to the whole thing this month – but never fear – we'll get there!

My list looks like this:

CHRIST
CONSIDER
CONTROL
CHANGE
COME TOGETHER
COOPERATE
CENTERED
CONTEMPLATE
COURAGE
COOPERATE
COLLABORATE
COMMUNICATE
CONNECT
COMPASSION
CARE
CELEBRATE RECOVERY

CHRIST The very first “C” word on our list is Christ. In order to do life – we need to intentionally include Him – connect with Him. It will look different for each of us. It should - we are all different.

CONSIDER Take time to think deeply, to consider your life and your journey. We cannot heal and grow if we do not take regular time to consider our lives. Consider where you've been, where you are and where you want to be....

CHRIST When we take the time to consider our lives on a regular basis (this is not a one and done thing) we are choosing a journey of self-awareness. It is a choice only you can make for you.

CONTROL Let go of this beast!!! I am now imagining being in the room with all of you and when I begin speaking about “control” issues, I envision some of you nodding in agreement. I am also envisioning some of you diverting your eyes from my gaze in discomfort. Please know we ALL struggle with CONTROL – a desire to be in control, a lack of self-control or both. When I am in the midst of a storm, I can end up making choices and behaving in a way that I believe exudes control. And yet, the only one I am fooling is me.

CHRIST Are you noticing a pattern? He needs to be woven into our lives, into our choices - just like I have woven Him into our list of C’s. He is the reason we can make the decisions and choices that get us through our storms. CHANGE.

CHANGE Yes, Christ is the reason we can live out the change. It’s not good enough to just consider, we have to actually act on those considerations. You must choose to act before Christ can join you on your change journey.

This is a good breaking point for this month. The beginning of our list of C’s included: Christ->Consider->Christ->Control->Christ->Change->Christ.

We’ll pick up where we left off next month. build and grow our faith

Remember, “the 2 efforts combined, create enough light to weather the storm.”

Intentional Evangelism

This summer, we are working thru how to connect to your own gifts as you serve the church and community so that you can help your group do the same! Gifts Passion Story or GPS connects your gifts to your own story. It will help you identify how God has uniquely created you to serve His Kingdom.

Our gifts assessment is free to anyone and I hope you will take it. The assessment can be found at (www.thirdcityc.org/serve). It will take around 30-40 minutes to complete so make sure you clear some space. There are both multiple choice questions and long form questions. Share the link with your group and allow this to help you and your group members become much more intentional about how you will serve in the future!

Here is our second video of this series:
(Click on image for video)



Faithful Stewardship

Parable of the Talents

Article by: Keanna Leonard

In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30) Jesus talks about a master who was leaving on a long trip and entrusted three of his servants with his wealth. To the first servant he gave five talents, to the second he gave two talents, and to the third he gave one talent.

Throughout Matthew 25, Jesus is explaining to the disciples in terms that they could understand what the future held. In this parable, the wealthy, generous master represented Jesus. The servants represented the disciples, and in the future, you and me.

In the first century, talent did not mean one's natural abilities. It was defined as a massive amount of money. Each talent represented, according to some estimates, twenty years' worth of wages for the average worker. By using talents in this parable, Jesus gave the disciples a reference point and a better understanding that the master owned everything, and that he was entrusting them to take care and grow his everything, his kingdom when He was gone.

Today in the biblical sense, talent is more than our natural abilities. The term includes our unique opportunities, jobs, friends, family, finances, home, marriage, social station, etc. It is a term that means everything we have was given to us by God.

But why does the master give differing amounts of money to the three servants? He knew that each servant had unique abilities and gave to each accordingly. The servants all had the same opportunity to use what they were given to grow the kingdom.

When the master came back, he asked the first two servants how they used their money. Each said that they had worked hard, took risks and doubled what the master had given them. His response was 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' (Matt. 25:14 ESV)

But when he confronted the last servant, he became angry. This servant had been given the same opportunity to faithfully use his money for the master's kingdom. Instead, the servant decided to do nothing with the money and buried it. The unapologetic, lazy person saw the master as unyielding and unfair and blamed his failure on the master. He was concerned only for his security. As the servant made more excuses for his inaction, the master grew angrier. This servant had wasted his gifts and was rewarded by being tossed out of the kingdom into the darkness.

This parable is emphasizing that there is great reward when we take risks for Jesus. We see people throughout the Bible taking risks for the kingdom. Just think about the risks that David took to stop Goliath, Noah to build the ark, Esther to stand up to the king, the disciples to spread the Good News, and God to give his own Son to save us. The first two servants loved the master and took risks to grow his money and were greatly rewarded. But the third did not truly know the master and so stayed in his comfort zone, in his safe place, and ended up wasting his talents and his life.

As disciples of Jesus, we are also given the same great responsibility and opportunities to grow the kingdom of God. We are expected to use our God-given gifts at every opportunity to proclaim the Good News. It doesn't matter how much "talent" we have. It's how we use it that matters, because how you invest your life for Jesus today matters for eternity.

What will your answer be when Jesus asks how you helped grow his kingdom? Will you hear well done good and faithful servant?