



THE FORGE



The Forge Initiative Inc. 2023

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Acknowledgements

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Soli Deo Gloria

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Background

Who We Are

The Forge is a Kansas-City based ministry that helps men form close friendships and spur one another on to godliness through activity groups and focused discussion settings. We provide training, resources, and counseling to support the church in helping develop men as mentors, husbands, fathers, friends, and ultimately as sons of God.

The Forge was established in 2021 by biblical counselors John Blackburn, Jeff Brabec, and Jeremy Giles. Through our combined years of experience in pastoral ministry, small group leadership, and counseling, we've worked with hundreds of men facing all kinds of challenging circumstances. No degree or resume can qualify anyone for ministry, however, because we ourselves don't do the true work of healing. Only the Holy Spirit can actually change a man's heart. We created The Forge to help more believers realize their calling and capability to go and make disciples, leaning on the Holy Spirit as they help men and women encounter Jesus in the complicated realities of their daily lives.

We use a model based around activity groups, which are often less intimidating for men who aren't used to talking about their personal lives. By inviting men to incorporate their faith into every part of their lives, including their interests and hobbies, this opens up frequent opportunities to develop caring friendships and helps men to see the importance of having community with other believers, which must ultimately be lived out within a local church.

Small groups at The Forge exist to help men develop close relationships with other Christians from every generation. Friendship is a deeply spiritual practice and one that is essential for every follower of God. It is only in the context of trust that believers will ever fulfill Scripture's clear commands to confess our sins to one another, repent, forgive, and love from the heart.

Guys struggle with feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and depression, but instead of working through those feelings, we often try to simply go it alone. The

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Bible, however, is filled with warnings against this mentality. Rather than rely on themselves, we must rely upon God and others who can provide encouragement (1 Thess 5:14), support (Luke 10:36-37), bear our burdens (Gal. 6:2), and call us out of a life of sin (Luke 17:3). Not only that, but we are also commanded to do the same for others! All men need trusted friends and mentors from diverse backgrounds and ages pouring into them to continue growing in their faith and reliance on the Lord.

A Ministry for the Church

From the beginning, the goal of The Forge has been to help men plug into the local church, not replace it. Everything we do is for the church. Nowhere in the Bible do we see the idea of people practicing faith outside of the church body; we are designed to live out our faith among a community of believers.

It is, therefore, vitally important to us to invest in churches, not just individual men. Two specific ways we do that is by offering one-on-one biblical counseling for church members at reduced rates, and equipping leaders of churches with some basic biblical counseling principles. Since Churches only have so much time and resources available to them, we want to come alongside them by training their small group leaders in basic principles of biblical counseling and effective group leadership so they can spur on the faith of their congregations.

While this material outlines some general leadership principles, mere theory or even a few sessions in a room aren't enough preparation for the diverse challenges of life. We have a vision for whole-life counseling that bolsters men in their marriages, parenting, friendships, and personal walk with Jesus. Men need counsel from all avenues, and we would love to help shore up men's ministries and provide additional resources as needed to help churches further invest in leadership development.

Mission

Our mission is to build trusted friendships, positively sharpen character, and offer sound biblical counsel by pointing to Jesus for forgiveness, hope, and help in overcoming habitual sins, personal struggles, fears, and addictions.

We believe this sharpening occurs through trusted friend and mentor relationships in which Christians spur one another on in love and good works (Prov. 27:17, Heb. 10:24). Not only do believers challenge one another in these trusted relationships, but they also celebrate together with Christ in times of triumph as they live out core traits of biblical character. They fulfill the law of Christ by bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2) and offering wise counsel and advice.

We also believe this process occurs through dedicated biblical counseling as people walk through difficult seasons of life or seek to overcome sin. Although sound advice and wisdom occur naturally between trusted friends and mentors, people are not always called or equipped to offer advice in every situation. In these times, it is important to remember that the Holy Spirit raises up teachers and leaders who use God-given gifts in the care of others. Whereas the world says that asking for help shows "weakness," particularly for men, pursuing biblical counseling to grow as a follower of Jesus shows strength and humility, emulating the heart of Christ.

Only through Christ, the Wonderful Counselor, can anyone truly find healing, purpose, hope, and freedom in his life and relationships. Only in Christ can anyone reach their full potential to live with faith, integrity, courage, honor, and compassion and fulfill the roles of a godly spouse, caring parent, loyal friend, committed employee, and dedicated member of his local church.

Our Approach

To carry out this vision, we utilize the following key strategies to foster trusted friend and mentor relationships and to break down barriers that prevent people from seeking out wise counsel:



Interest groups: Oftentimes close friendships and mentoring relationships are developed through shared interests and activities in sports, hobbies, and projects. With this in mind, combining shared interests with biblically based discussions and studies can be extremely beneficial in building and strengthening

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trusted relationships.



Equipping Leaders: To aid leaders of small group, we have developed resources that equip leaders in practical group leadership skills and biblical counseling principles to bolster and encourage them as they shepherd group members well.



Biblical counseling: The Forge connects leaders with one-on-one counseling for men from seminary-trained staff to offer hope and healing for the difficulties and temptations all men face.

Our Core Values

We believe all services and activities must glorify Christ and further expand His kingdom. Therefore, we seek to emulate and espouse the following core values:

Christ-Centered – Jesus Christ is the central focus in all we do (Col. 3:1-4). The only catalyst to true, lasting healing is faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Only by following His example of servant leadership can a person begin to find purpose and wholeness in his life.

God-Glorifying – Everything we set out to accomplish in life and in ministry is “for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). In accordance with this desire, we strive for the highest degree of quality, competency, and effectiveness within every endeavor we undertake.

Honorable – Honor is the quality of being honest and living out strong moral principles without compromise and without a need for recognition (1 Thess. 2:4). We strive to instill honor in believers, as it epitomizes our Christian ideals.

Courageous – Courage is the willingness to confront selfishness, pain, danger, uncertainty, or intimidation, no matter the circumstance. It means being committed to think and act according to biblical truths whenever faced with

the choice between right and wrong, good and evil.

Authentic and Confidential – We seek to be authentic in every interaction and to eliminate false pretense. Trust and growth will only occur within relationships if both parties are real, open, and transparent. In order to protect authenticity, all that is shared in groups or between individuals is held in strictest confidence, especially between counselor and counselee.

Servant-Hearted – Christ commands that “the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke 22:26). We seek to lead by example through service. Only when we live out humility by considering others greater than ourselves will we love one another as Christ loves us (Phil. 2:3).

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The Purpose of This Training

Who This Training Seeks to Address

Leaders play a prominent role in the life of every person, particularly in the formation of character and faith. For the purpose of this training, we consider a leader to be anyone who occupies some position of authority over others, including parents, coaches, teachers, managers, mentors, pastors, and friends.

When it comes to the formation of faith, pastors clearly play a prominent role in influencing the beliefs of their congregation. These men often receive formal education in the tenets of the Christian faith, how to clearly exposit scriptural truth, and how to care for the men and women in their congregation. Pastors have been commissioned by God and the members of the church for a defined role of leadership. However, since a pastor is incapable of engaging in every ministry of the church, this means that volunteer leaders from the congregation direct small groups, Bible studies, and other activities. It is these leaders who address a large percentage of the questions, comments, and responses members of the congregation have regarding their personal walk with Christ.

Although these volunteer leaders are faithful, servant-hearted, and godly men and women, they generally undergo minimal training on how to facilitate a group discussion, manage group relationships, or lovingly confront sinful motivations, thinking, and behavior. Their role is rarely defined, and they are often unsure about their responsibility to point out or correct unbiblical comments and behavior. Furthermore, many do not receive continual encouragement, advice, or accountability from others. As a result, many leaders feel inadequate, helpless, and alone. Ultimately, this lack of guidance leads to feelings of frustration, lack of motivation, and burnout.

Mission of Leadership Training

The mission of this training is to help those who aspire to be leaders define

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and accept their role in shepherding the members of their group. This training is intended to equip leaders with practical group facilitation skills and basic biblical counseling principles so they may encourage, exhort, and support members and foster trusted relationships within their group. Whether they realize it or not, these leaders have a considerable influence over the men, women, and children they lead. If leaders lack a clear understanding of their role and responsibility in providing wise counsel, countless church members will be left in the dark, with no place to turn as they ask big questions and go through hard times. This resource aims to bolster small group leaders' resolve while equipping them with the tools they need to support and shepherd the individuals who have come into their groups.

You may have chosen to do this training because you want to grow in a specific skill, like counseling those who are battling addiction, or you may simply be reading this because you thought it could be helpful resource for leading groups down the road. Whatever the reason, our goal is to provide basic group facilitation and biblical counseling principles as a foundation for your role as a leader. If you desire more in-depth resources regarding specific aspects of biblical counseling or small group ministry, please contact our counselors and leaders at The Forge.

How to Use This Material

While The Forge as an organization focuses on the discipleship of men, these equipping sessions apply to both men and women. The material is intended to be reviewed and discussed within small groups so leaders can share takeaways from each session with one another. Writing down and then discussing your takeaways will help you think through how to apply these concepts and transform theory into concrete action. Simply going through this material as a mental exercise may provide some benefit, but formulating plans and talking them through is more likely to promote application of these principles. Plus, you may hear great ideas from other leaders that provide encouragement and support as you lead your own group.

With this in mind, it is often beneficial to share your takeaways with one another at the beginning of the session instead of waiting until the end of a

meeting when you might be short on time. This can be a great way to jumpstart a meaningful discussion and get the most out of each session, while also making it more likely that you'll put these ideas into practice.

Also, while a few questions specifically prompt you to ask a trusted friend or mentor for feedback, feel free to discuss any section with a trusted individual. Many who have worked through this training found great benefit in asking friends for as much insight as possible about themselves. This helped them know what next steps they could take to maximize their strengths and grow in areas of weakness.

The Leader's Relationship with Christ

Finally, one of the most important actions you can do as you seek to grow in your ability to invest in others is to pause and evaluate your own daily quiet times and relationship with the Lord. It's all too easy to give a knee-jerk response and say that your relationship with Jesus is going well—but what do you base that on?

It's vital to assess your own spiritual walk and how you can press in closer to Jesus even as you encourage others to do the same (Session 2). Be honest with yourself in evaluating whether you're regularly reading the Word, seeking to understand Scripture, praying, worshiping, connecting with believers at church, living in obedience to God, and taking Spirit-led opportunities to love, serve, and speak to others about Jesus. It's all too easy to go through the motions of religious performance without even thinking about it. Without daily reliance on Christ and a growing relationship with Him we risk producing formulaic behavioral changes in ourselves and will impact those we lead. Only by remaining intimately connected to the Source of life can you be a guide others find true life as well.

Applying These Concepts to Your Small Group

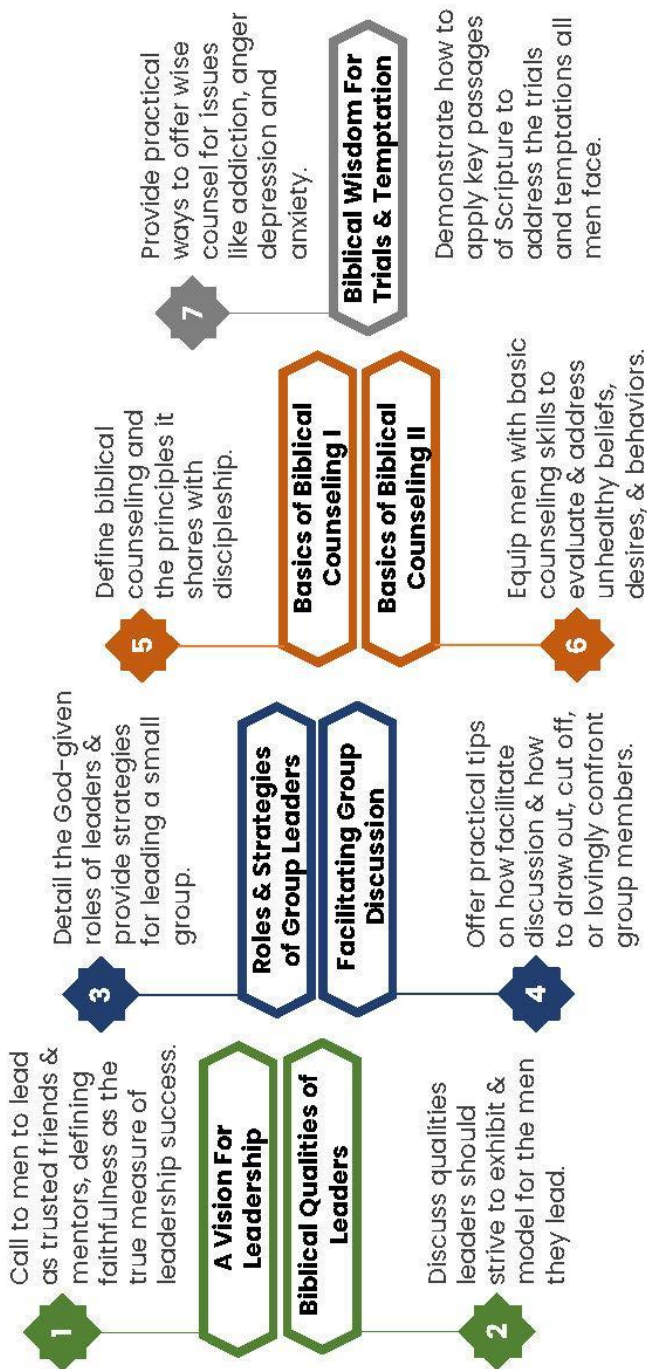
Every church is different, and our goal is to come alongside churches regardless of size, denominations, demographics, and styles. With that said, the specific structure of your small group and the way in which you apply this material will play out differently in your unique church setting. You may find

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that certain strategies fit your group's needs quite well, but other methods don't seem to be clicking with the personalities of the people you lead.

Our intention is to help you understand some key guiding principles so you know *why* you're doing *what* you're doing. Within this material we desire to demonstrate what we believe are the primary roles leaders should play within groups and some of the core spiritual, emotional, and relational realities that influence how people interact with one another. As you learn to grasp the heart of what drives your group members to either open up and grow or shut down, you can use that understanding to respond appropriately in each new season and stage of discipleship of those you lead.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING OUTLINE



Session 1 – A Vision for Leadership

Faith in Community

Romans 10:9 says, “[I]f you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Sadly, the example set by many Christians today is to confess with their mouths but be reluctant to make life changes in accordance with this declaration. The profession of faith is not a one-time event. It is the beginning of a restored relationship with God as our lives transform and are sanctified to reflect our desire to glorify Him (John 5:14). Sanctification, which is the process of living in holiness as defined by God’s design and commands, occurs throughout a believer’s life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Although the Holy Spirit is the agent of change in this process, He uses people to sharpen one another’s character and faith. Sanctification is not a comfortable process; it can often be difficult or painful. Consequently, we need other believers in our lives to learn from, receive encouragement from, and live in community with. While attending church is essential, simply sitting in services does not have the power to achieve the full measure of transformation God intends for us; we must also stay connected to other believers through intentional relationships. Numerous passages remind us that meeting together, sharing each other’s burdens, confessing sins, and forgiving one another are vital as we follow Christ.



Look up Heb. 10:25, Gal. 6:2, Jam. 5:16, and Col. 3:13. Describe a situation (past or present) when you succeeded or failed to live out these verses. What did you learn? How will this affect the example you set as you lead others?

Trusted Relationships

Session 1 – A Vision for Leadership

The Bible emphasizes the importance for people to be a part of a local church community, encouraging believers to share burdens and confess sins authentically with one another. In spite of this, however, many people feel obligated to put their best foot forward within church settings and refrain from sharing about difficulties, struggles, or doubts they have about life and faith.

Also, although Scripture is clear on the importance of continually spurring one another on in faith, many lack relationships where this happens at all. In fact, the percentage of trusted relationships in America has dramatically decreased over the past 30 years. In 2021, 12% of people reported having NO friends with whom they could share personal feelings or rely on for emotional support, while 7% reported only having one such friend. In 1990, these percentages were a *combined* 7%.¹ Among men, the lack of deep friendships is particularly prevalent, with less than half reporting that they are satisfied with their number of friends. Unsurprisingly, those who report having more friends also report increased levels of satisfaction. In fact, the levels of satisfaction are almost linear with the reported number of friends.

For this reason, deeper, trusted relationships must be cultivated within the local church. All believers seek out encouragement, direction, and wise counsel from trusted friends and mentors. These friends and mentors celebrate with us during times of success, challenge us in times of weakness, and provide hope and help during times of trouble. They offer guidance and leadership while playing a critical role in strengthening our walk with Christ.



How would you describe a trusted friend or mentor? How do they support, challenge, or lead you throughout life?

¹ May 2021 American Perspectives Survey



Do the statistics about friendship surprise you? Why or why not? Who would you turn to for advice if a new job offer comes up, your marriage is struggling, or you are anxious about money? Why?



Would you consider yourself a trusted friend or mentor? Why or why not?

Leadership as a Trusted Friend or Mentor

Performing an internet search on “leadership skills” yields a seemingly infinite amount of material. Books, seminars, presentations, and blog posts provide endless ways to become a better leader. Below are some titles that represent just a few of the thousands of results:

1. “16 Leadership Resources to Help Your Career!”
2. “10 Expert Resources for Honing Your Leadership Skills”
3. “The 25 Best Leadership Books of All Time”

Although the advice, skills, and strategies provided in these materials can be very helpful to leaders, they are typically formulaic in nature: “You will have success if you do these things.” In this way, great leadership is defined by how successful a project or business is according to measurable results that are

Session 1 – A Vision for Leadership

easily monitored.

It is much harder, however, to determine whether one is successful at effectively leading people, as opposed to projects. Although many of these materials speak about leading others, what they are really referring to is *managing* others. According to this mindset, individual growth within the people you lead is either simply a means to an end or a byproduct of achieving certain business goals.



How does leadership advice often treat people management as a means to achieve project success?



What comes to mind when you think of leadership at work, at home, at church, and in the community? Break into groups and provide a definition or example for each.

The key to success in leading others is sadly not formulaic, as any parent will attest to. Even if you manage to implement every tip, trick, and strategy you have been taught, the response of those you lead is out of your control. What if the person you are mentoring doesn't stop his outbursts of anger? What if he continues to be depressed with his work? What if he doesn't break free from addiction? What if his wife or kids don't forgive him? What if you are never able to develop a deep connection with him? Have you failed as a leader?

If you think the answer to the last question is yes, let's put it another way. Were the betrayals of Judas and Peter evidence that Jesus failed as a leader? Should He have used different methods, told more parables, or done more miracles? Is Jesus' leadership partially to blame for their actions? Of course not.

Leadership within trusted relationships must be viewed with a completely different mindset than leadership as defined within the business world. Although it is tempting to use behavior modification within a group as a way of measuring effective leadership, behaviors are out of any leader's control. It's important to start with a clear definition of what it means to lead others before moving on to provide any specific leadership advice or skills.

A Definition of Leadership

When referred to in the context of a trusted friend and mentor, good leadership is not the skill to organize people, achieve a goal, or unlock potential. Leadership corresponds directly to a person's faithfulness to love, serve, forgive, challenge, and provide wise counsel according to the example of Jesus Christ. A leader is someone who, like John the Baptist, is willing to sacrifice his own interests to bring honor to Christ (John 3:30).

This is not to say that skills aren't needed to lead effectively. Wisdom on how to encourage and challenge people depending on their personality or their spiritual and emotional state is enormously important. However, you shouldn't use the response of those under your care as the measure of your success as a leader. Quality leadership is instead determined by trust and faithfulness. A faithful leader leaves questions about the success or failure of his leadership in the hands of Jesus and rests in the knowledge that the Wonderful Counselor and King of Kings will use him as He wills. A faithful leader does not grow weary in doing good (Gal. 6:9) and trusts Christ with every outcome.



How does this definition of a faithful leader compare to the secular world's definition? How might your feelings about leadership change if success is more about your faithfulness than your ability to change lives?



Read Isaiah 6. How would you feel if someone asked you to lead a project or plant a garden you knew would fail? How can defining success by faithfulness help you remain dedicated even when everything you try seems fruitless?

Co-Laboring with the Holy Spirit - GRASP

The old adage “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink” is a great metaphor for why you can’t measure the success of a leader by the behavior of others. But you should not use this as an excuse to neglect your responsibility to continually teach, encourage, and challenge others. Although you cannot personally initiate life change, you have the privilege to co-labor with the Holy Spirit in bringing about heart transformation among those you lead. The main focus for small group leaders is to bring God glory by sharing the Gospel and encouraging those who follow Christ to fully grasp their true identity as children of God.

For this to occur, leaders should use every opportunity to inspire people to live out the transformational actions that lead to life change. We use the acronym GRASP to challenge believers to hold tightly to their identity in Christ. Each person should:

□ **Ground** his life in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

Believers need to realize that their true identity is not tied to their work, talents, human relationships, wealth, or prestige. Leaders encourage this by bringing to attention thoughts, desires, and behaviors that are counter to the Word. This includes a person blaming his failures or sins on circumstances or seeking to prove his worth through effort or achievement. No amount of blame-shifting or accolades will provide an excuse for his behavior when he is called to account before God. Only when a Christian is authentic with himself and finds his identity in Jesus can he find lasting significance, meaning, and value in his life.

□ **Refine** the motivations of the heart (2 Cor. 10:5).

Christians are to guard their hearts and minds by “taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” Leaders have a responsibility to challenge those under their care to put off old ways and live according to the commands of God. Leaders must urge others to live out their faith by asking questions regarding the motivations behind even seemingly insignificant decisions that may not be glorifying to God.

□ **Abandon** sinful thoughts and behaviors (Jam. 4:8).

Sinful thoughts and behaviors often fall into the categories of pride, selfishness, fear or anxiety, anger, and lust. Leaders must first and foremost pray for these sins to be revealed within themselves before they can humbly point out sins others are blind to. This is key in combatting the allures of money, power, a life of ease, and sex, as people seek to break free from habitual sins and addictions. Believers must instead think on things that are “true, honest, pure, lovely, of good report” (Phil. 4:8). Finally, leaders must not be afraid of personal conflict when God’s glorification is at stake!

□ **Store up** lasting treasure (Matt. 6:19-21).

Purpose, value, and security are vital to a man’s spiritual, emotional, and mental health, but many people seek to find these things apart from God. Leaders must always come back to the truth that only in the treasures of

Session 1 – A Vision for Leadership

heaven can believers find real purpose and lasting meaning. Although it is honoring to God for men to work and provide financial support for their families, this can often result in neglecting other commands in Scripture. God's purpose for a man's life encompasses his role at work as well as his calling as a sacrificial husband, a loving father, a generous member of the community, a trusted friend and mentor, and a vital part of his local church.

□ **Purify** earthly relationships (Prov. 17:17, Mark 12:31).

A healthy relationship is based on respect, trust, communication, transparency, and kindness. Leaders should always strive to instill these qualities in the people they lead. By encouraging people to restore their relationship with God, leaders help them develop healthy relationships with their spouses, children, and other men and women.

These actions help believer GRASP their identity as children of God and followers of Christ. This identity then serves as the foundation from which they will bring forth good fruit.

Session Summary

In review, below are the key points from this session:

- Everyone needs trusted friends and mentors to them to walk closely with Jesus.
- Mature believers must take on the role of a leader as a trusted friend or mentor within their group because leaders play an integral role in the formation of a person's faith.
- Effective leaders cannot be measured or evaluated according to the behavior of those they lead. Leadership is defined by a person's faithfulness to love, serve, forgive, challenge, and provide biblical counsel according to the example of Christ.
- Leaders must continue to do good even if their efforts seem fruitless. They must hold fast to the promise in Galatians 6:9 that they will reap a harvest if they do not give up.
- Leaders must invest thought and energy into leading others, constantly seeking to encourage and challenge them to live out the actions that make up the acronym GRASP.
- Leaders must take responsibility and ownership as shepherds of their group. They must have the end goal of glorifying God at the forefront of their thoughts, and they must keep an eternal mindset versus a temporal one. This goal and mindset will impact how they lead, comfort, exhort, teach, challenge, and admonish the members in their group.

Takeaways

Session 1 – A Vision for Leadership

Take some time to think about how the information in this session may impact your role as a friend or mentor and your mindset about leadership. Record your thoughts on how this session may change your leadership style.

Session 2 – Biblical Qualities of Leaders

Character Qualities of Christian Leaders

God’s desire for mankind to exemplify traits that align with His character is made abundantly clear throughout both the Old and the New Testament. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the righteous and holy attributes of God are recorded using parables, poetry, commandments, narratives, and personal letters. As if that weren’t enough, God provided His Son, whose life was a perfect example of God’s character and whose death brings all men life.

Scripture makes it clear that those who are called to lead and teach others must live in a manner worthy of being imitated by those under their care (Heb. 13:7). Leaders will ultimately be judged more harshly and have a greater responsibility to faithfully teach and exemplify the characteristics of God. Jesus Himself says, “If they cause one of these little ones to sin it would be better for them to be drowned at the bottom of the sea” (Matt. 18:6). It is therefore vital to reflect on the godly characteristics you are called to live out. Although you should strive to exemplify numerous characteristics, the following are especially applicable to leading others:

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| 1. Spiritually Mature | 6. Communicative |
| 2. Friendly/Kind | 7. Compassionate |
| 3. Transparent | 8. Encouraging |
| 4. Observant | 9. Committed |
| 5. Intentional | 10. Prayerful |

Spiritually Mature

A leader who is spiritually mature is knowledgeable in the Word and continuously applies this knowledge to his life. He is transformed daily into the likeness of Jesus through spiritual disciplines and godly influences. This involves serving Jesus by serving others and demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit in his conduct and his relationships, which are outward signs of inward maturity. Those who are mature in the faith are watchful over their lives and

their doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16), stand firm in the faith, and are courageous in their dedication to God's Word (1 Cor. 16:13). They GRASP their identity in Christ.²

To be actively and consistently maturing spiritually requires you to maintain a daily relationship with the Lord by learning from and memorizing His Word. You must pray continuously and be obedient to God, yielding to His will even in difficult circumstances. You should also recognize your shortcomings and human tendencies to sin, embracing both correction and encouragement from God's Word as well as from other believers.



What does your daily relationship with God look like? How often do you pray, and for how long? Which fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) require cultivating in your life, and what steps are you taking to grow in these areas?

Friendly/Kind

Friendliness means being receptive to the members of your group and treating them with warmth, respect, compassion, courtesy, and understanding. As a leader, you must be genuinely interested in the lives of those you lead. You should show no partiality to a specific member (Jam. 2:1) and seek to treat others as more important than yourself (Phil. 2:3). This does not mean it is somehow wrong to get along better with some group members, but it does mean you have equal regard for the good and the growth of each member.

Kindness means showing consideration and concern for others demonstrated by words and actions. Kindness helps members of the group see firsthand the

² See the GRASP acronym from Session 1 on pages 15-16

Session 2 – Biblical Qualities of Leaders

care you have for them. Service is a key component of leadership because it imitates the actions of Christ. To be consistently kind, you must seek the good of those you lead as more important than your own welfare. Be willing to sacrifice your comfort, desires, and importance for the well-being of others (John 13:1-17). The respect and admiration group members have for you as their leader is not something you actively seek to achieve but is simply a byproduct of your care and kindness toward them.



Record three words that describe the friendliest or kindest people you know. What do their interactions with others look like? How can you learn from their example?

Transparent

To be transparent as a group leader, you must lead with openness and integrity while engaging with all members of the group. Be ready to share insights from your life when they could benefit others and invite other group members to do the same. Every person in a group needs to know that the leader is genuine in his faith and authentic in his struggle against temptation, which is common to all men (1 Cor. 10:13). Members are more willing to be open about their lives and feel encouraged when they see their own potential for victory through Christ in the success of a person with similar experiences.

Authenticity means being honest about who we are and what we've done while keeping our focus on how great God is. God makes no mistakes when He calls leaders into their position, and He doesn't require perfection beforehand. Christ called leaders and teachers from among imperfect men and women and uses them to build up the body of believers into maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:11-13).

Authenticity does not mean going into detail about every way you have

sinned each week, but it does mean being open to discussing your failures and asking for prayer as the occasion arises. The Christian pattern of confession and repentance should be evident in a leader (Jam. 5:16). Don't present yourself as a model the people in your group should aspire to imitate, but rather as a fellow follower with your own failures who is seeking to be faithful to your Lord and Savior. It takes trust to confess our imperfections before others, just as it requires great faith and spiritual maturity to believe that God loves us despite our imperfections!



Why is transparency often a struggle within the church? How does transparency correspond with offering or seeking out forgiveness? What are some ways you can be more transparent in your relationships?

Observant

As an observant leader, you must be sensitive to the needs, concerns, temperaments, and dispositions of the people in your group. Watch carefully and listen intently for the thoughts and feelings others are communicating through their verbal comments, body language, facial expressions, and more. These observations will aid you in addressing potential disagreements, steering conversations, and drawing out members who may not be as forthcoming with their thoughts. Although it is important to make sure active speakers know you are understanding what they are saying through their words, it is equally important that you absorb and interpret what other members may be communicating nonverbally.



Watch the video in the footnote below and discuss the importance of being prepared by knowing what to look for to better

understand other people's thoughts and feelings.³ How can being observant help you better lead your group?

Intentional

Influential group leaders go one step further than being observant by also intentionally considering words they can say and actions they can take to promote the spiritual and emotional growth of each member in the group. To be intentional, you must seek to understand the personality and preferred leadership style of individual group members and tailor your leadership or questions accordingly. It isn't enough to simply organize the activity you lead; you must also pay close attention to and reflect on the emotional status and personalities of the people participating in that activity. You must then act upon what you observe by validating, exhorting, and seeking to address their needs, desires, concerns, and struggles.

Jesus, as our example, was intentional regarding how He addressed the needs of others based on their personalities and their current spiritual, mental, or emotional state. He used His eyes and ears to translate the meaning behind their words, actions, body language, and facial expressions (Mark 1:40, 2:5, 3:4-5, 6:34). Instead of pronouncing immediate judgment on all, as we deserve, He lovingly engaged with those who were open to hearing His message so He could hear their needs and concerns. He answered their questions, met their needs, and encouraged them along the way. Jesus cared about people's feelings. He wept just as they did and rejoiced just as they did. He asked people what they wanted Him to do for them, always respectful and firm without being overbearing. The intentionality Jesus demonstrated in His

³ This video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubNF9QNEQLA&ab_channel=dothetest) shows the importance of paying close attention to your surroundings. For more information regarding observation, see Session 4.

interactions with others showed them how much He cared about them and how much they mattered to Him. This is how you ought to treat the people who come to you for fellowship, guidance, healing, and hope.



List two to three ways you can be intentional as you interact with the people in your group, even in the busyness of life. For example, you might watch a game together, have their family over, help with house projects, etc.

Communicative

Effective group leaders articulate their thoughts and ideas thoroughly to the group. Good communication skills are necessary to convey information, instruction, admonition, and encouragement. Group leaders must speak with honesty, conviction, clarity, and compassion. This creates open lines of dialogue within the group, which will naturally improve communication among all members.

It should be noted that effective communication often doesn't require speaking. All of us have experienced a time when we have been comforted by the simple presence of another. No words were spoken, but we knew that person cared. You should employ multiple ways of communicating with the members of your group, including:

- ☐ Verbal communication such as discussions over lunch, intentional phone conversations, good-hearted debates, or loving correction.
- ☐ Physical communication such as facial expressions, body language, handshakes, high-fives, hugs, pats on the back, or an arm around a shoulder.
- ☐ Written communication such as emails, texts, and social media messages

of encouragement, congratulations, or exhortation.

Compassionate

Compassion shows strength and love. Jesus modeled strength of character and unwavering conviction, and He also demonstrated genuine compassion for others. He truly cared for those who were hurting, weak, poor in spirit, defenseless, vulnerable, or dejected. Many of the people who seek out mentoring do so to find answers to complex questions, healing from broken relationships, recovery from addictions, or friendship on the road to overcoming difficulties or struggles in life. You need to be a source of compassion as you interact with and influence others who may be struggling in readily apparent ways, or in secrecy and silence.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien masterfully captures how compassion and loyalty should look between friends when he describes Sam's actions near the end of the journey to destroy the ring. Although Sam is incapable of carrying the burden of the ring for Frodo, when Frodo collapses and is unable to go any farther, Sam declares, "I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you!"⁴ For your small group to be a place of healing and hope, compassionate leaders need to come alongside others as they carry the burdens of life.



Read John 11:1-44 and record the words, emotions, and actions of Jesus that reflect His compassion for the men and women in the story. Provide additional verses in the Bible that speak of the Lord's compassion (i.e. Mark 6:34).

Encouraging

⁴ Tolkien, J. R. R. 1892-1973. *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings*. New York, N.Y., Quality Paperback Book Club, 2001.

Everyone has felt inadequate in some area of life at one time or another. In fact, for believers, this is a central part of our testimony in coming to Jesus for forgiveness! Although these feelings may occur quite often, people don't often give voice to them. While we are children of God, heirs (Rom. 8:17), and new creations (2 Cor. 5:17) in Christ, we often dwell on past failures and continue to view ourselves as inadequate or unimportant. This mindset permeates all interactions in life and may prevent members from sharing in the group for fear of saying something stupid or appearing weak. You must be ready with encouragement when group members are tempted to focus on their failures or view themselves as inadequate.

Encouragement can be as simple as sharing words of affirmation, praying for or with group members, sending positive text messages, or interacting with

“

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

- Heb. 10:24-25

those
you lead
in other

supportive ways (look back at the section on being *Communicative* on pages 24-25). Offering words of encouragement can be the difference between a person shutting down and remaining silent in the group or actively engaging and sharpening others. The right words can be soothing to a hurting soul, uplifting for someone in despair, and motivating for the hopeless. To encourage means to inspire with courage, and that is exactly what you as a leader have an opportunity to do every time you meet.



Jesus constantly inspired and motivated His followers to action. Provide situations when Jesus encouraged His followers and record your thoughts about these instances.



Think of someone whose encouragement inspired you or helped drag you out of a state of despondency. How can you emulate that person as you lead your group?

Committed

Commitment includes both patience and dedication. You must be firmly committed to the group you oversee if you expect your group members to be committed to it as well. Commitment causes apprehensions in many people for a number of reasons, including fear of failure, fear of letting others down, feeling uncomfortable, or not being sure what they will get out of it. As a group leader, you will experience these feelings as well. At times, you will even feel like giving up. Taking the following steps during these moments will help you maintain your commitment:

- Speak to a trusted friend or mentor and ask for prayer in this matter. Venting or complaining is not godly, but sharing one another's burdens is (Gal. 6:2).
- Reflect on passages about perseverance such as Gal. 6:9, 1 Cor. 15:58, 2 Thess. 3:13, and Luke 18:1.
- Pray for each person in the group by name, asking for wisdom, guidance, and conviction of sin on his behalf. Praise God for putting him in your life!

As group leaders, you must not ignore a lack of commitment in group members or let it slide without addressing it. Those who are missing, physically or mentally, can't be ministered to, nor can they minister to others. Remind members that this group isn't just for them but also for others. The

goal of small groups is to build up believers in Christ by sharpening one another in trusted relationships. Every group member who remains committed to attending and participating in group meetings and events helps others grow in their walk with Christ while continuing to grow personally.

Prayerful

As a follower of Jesus and a small group leader, it is imperative for you to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). You should make known to God your deep desires while at the same time submitting to and asking Him to accomplish His work in and through you, “both to will and work according to His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

Through prayer, you can approach the throne with confidence and find grace in your time of need. God will guard your heart and grant you protection against sin, which you must be quick to confess, knowing that “He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Likewise, prayer allows you to intercede to God on behalf of those in your group regarding their sins, struggles, and troubles in life. It lets you celebrate with God as you see their growth and triumph over sin. To pray for others is both a great responsibility and a great privilege. Although sound advice and wisdom should occur naturally between trusted friends and mentors, leaders are not always called or equipped to offer wisdom and advice in every situation. Rather, less talking and more prayer is often the appropriate response during times of trouble. If someone asks for prayer, you must be sure to pray in earnest for him and to follow up with him about it later. Group members see your integrity and know you care when you follow up with them about their prayer requests.



Take five minutes to pray for those you are currently leading or who God is preparing for you to lead.

So, Do You Have What It Takes?

Do you have what it takes to be a small group leader? You can answer this question in the following ways:

- ☐ NO – You do not have what it takes... not on your own, under your own power, with your own intellect and abilities. This is why it is so vital to recognize that Jesus is the real leader of any discipleship group. Remember: “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10).

Or...

- ☐ YES – You recognize that Jesus often calls ordinary, sinful men to follow Him and then works through them to change the world. If you follow Christ, the world’s greatest group leader, He will equip you, empower you, and use you to do extraordinary things. So do not sell yourself short. Say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

The correct answer is BOTH: yes *and* no!

Session Summary

In review, below are the key points from this session:

- A small group leader is a disciple-maker who seeks to train future disciple-makers. Biblical multiplication requires modeling godly leadership in small groups.
- God desires His appointed leaders to possess certain character qualities. We believe ten of the most important character qualities a leader should possess are being spiritually mature, friendly or kind, transparent, observant, intentional, communicative, compassionate, encouraging, committed, and prayerful.
- Under their own power, leaders cannot hope to live up to God's standards of character—but with the help of the Holy Spirit, he can.
- Leaders should be humble enough to recognize their shortcomings but confident enough in God to understand that He is faithful to equip us for the good works He has planned for us, despite our deficiencies.
- Jesus calls ordinary, sinful people to follow Him while He works through them to change the world. Godly leaders must be ready to act when called upon.

Takeaways

Take some time to evaluate your life in light of the characteristics discussed in this session. Meet with your spouse, your pastor, or a mentor you trust to give you loving feedback on characteristics that may need growth. Record your thoughts and ways you can live according to Christ's example.

Session 3 – Group Shepherding Principles

Leadership in Activity Groups

Activities provide a key opportunity to help build and grow trusted relationships, and well-rounded friendships often involve more than just discussion. Hobbies, sports, games, athletic interests, and spending time in the great outdoors are just some of the dozens of ways men and women spend time together and build relationships.

As you lead a small group, brainstorm shared activities you could invite the members in your group to participate in together. This could be a great way for you to get to know each member, help reserved group members come out of their shells, and strengthen the sense of belonging among the group. Events and outings can also be opportunities to expand the kingdom, as nonbelievers who may not feel ready for a formal Bible study might be more open to engaging in a different activity. As they join in on the activity, your group will have many chances to talk with them about Jesus and invite them both to your church and to discussion time with the group.

Whether you form a group centered around one particular interest, try different activities at different times, or if the group is focused solely around discussion, you should always look to develop close relationships between the members of your group. Your church might already have other avenues for facilitating relationships, like service opportunities, mission trips, or regular fellowship nights. While we encourage you to be intentional about creating settings where men and women can get together to explore their interests, there's more than one way to cultivate the kinds of honest and committed friendships that ultimately lead to spiritual growth.

For men, an approach that has worked for many is to use a group centered around a particular interest as the vehicle to help develop trusted friendships. This provides the competitive, creative, or physical common ground men often look for among friends. However, these aren't just normal pickup basketball games, poker nights, or slow-pitch softball leagues. Although winning basketball games, achieving personal best times on your

bike, or finishing your classic car rebuild are certainly enjoyable pastimes, these events themselves are not the primary aim of these groups. Discipleship-centered activity groups exist to point men to Christ if they don't yet know Him and help those who do follow Him grow in their faith.

You must never lose sight of the true purpose of gathering together: the formation of a man's faith and the transformation of his life. Only the power of the Holy Spirit can produce a change in the mind and heart of a man—his core being—to that of Christ's. The ultimate desire for small group leaders is to bring God glory by sharing the Gospel and encouraging those who follow Christ to fully grasp their true identity as sons of God. For further discussion on encouraging men to grasp their true identity, see the GRASP acronym in Session 1 on pages 15-16.



Within discipleship, we view activities as catalysts for spiritual transformation. How have you seen interests and activity help build trusted transformational relationships?

Shepherd Mentality

A basic need that God instilled in all mankind is to be in community with one another. Scripture is clear that this community is vital for believers as they strive to walk faithfully with Christ (Heb. 10:24-25). Christ-centered groups and activities provide a person with the opportunity to find belonging in relationships that fulfill the desire to be part of something greater than himself.

The environment of each group should be one that encourages members to trust one another as they discuss personal topics and express the joys or frustrations of their lives. It is obvious that the individuals that make up each group play a major factor in group dynamics. Just because the environment

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feels safe doesn't mean each member will automatically share his life story. Without a doubt, however, the person with the single greatest influence on the direction and environment of the group is the leader himself. He has the responsibility and great privilege of guiding a group where members grow in faith facing fear, failure, and the uncertainties of life together.

In the Bible, the best leaders are mindful of their purpose in leading while remaining aware of the needs and attitudes of the people they serve. Jesus, as the ultimate example of leadership, calls Himself the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Later, men who sought to lead the church according to His example were referred to as "shepherds," alluding to the leadership and authority shepherds exhibit in the care of their sheep (Acts 20:28). In Scripture, this term typically refers to the relationship between pastors and a congregation of believers. Still, all leaders should strive to emulate these principles when overseeing a group.



Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

- 1 Peter 5:2-4

Although shepherding undoubtedly served as an excellent metaphor to describe leadership in Jesus' day, the majority of people today may only have a vague idea of what leading a flock of sheep entails. In this session, we will provide you with a few ideas about successful "sheep tending" principles and how they apply to group leadership.

How You Begin Matters

First, a successful shepherd understands that how you begin matters. A flock of sheep moves as a group, and it is important to get them moving in unison along the desired path right from the start. Similarly, setting the purpose,

tone, and trajectory of your group from the outset is always easier than trying to steer it away from previously established patterns.

Right from the beginning, you must create an environment where group members feel comfortable and safe to ask questions and share their ideas, opinions, and perspectives, especially in respect to spiritual matters. For this reason, leaders must never tolerate belittling, condescending attitudes, or gossip among the group. For men, giving each other a hard time or using sarcasm to ease tension or express emotion, belittling can create an emotionally guarded environment. Group leaders must treat any question or comment as important. When members share, leaders must guide the conversation in a way that demonstrates each person's value to the group.

Along with establishing respect and trust, leaders set the tone by guiding the topics that dominate the conversations of the group. For example, if a group has spent a lot of time chatting about current events, movies, politics, or sports, getting them to talk about challenges in marriage and parenting will be much more difficult than if these topics had been prioritized from the beginning. This doesn't mean that the leader is the "fun police" of the group, as conversations about sports and movies are often helpful for people to become comfortable entering into more personal discussions. It simply means leaders must be aware of how certain tendencies of a group could affect spiritual growth. Leaders must communicate the goal of the group from the outset and pray about how to balance fun conversations with discussions that sharpen character.



When is giving a hard time good-natured versus going too far? Give an example of a time when you felt the need to address unhelpful or negative comments within a group.



Why is it difficult to break established habits formed in groups?

What would you do differently if you started a group on sexual purity versus a basic Bible study?

Have a Plan

The shepherd must stay a few steps ahead of his sheep. He must think about his path—where is the water? How can he protect them from exposure to the elements? Just like a good shepherd, you need a plan. Your specific plan should be tailored to your own strengths and the needs of the members in the group as you understand them. In general, a good plan will allow you to promote participation, provide guidance, lead to discovery, and look for teachable moments.

- **Promote participation:** Develop within your group an expectation of participation from the beginning. Whether through a group activity or spiritual dialogue, be sure you allow every man the opportunity to participate without leaving anyone on the sidelines—literally or figuratively.
- **Keep the goal in mind:** Provide and clearly explain directions, plans, and expectations. Continually share the purposes, intentions, and objectives for your gatherings, going beyond the activity itself into the deeper, more profound reasons you gather together in the first place.
- **Lead to discovery:** Ask many questions as you dialogue with group members and facilitate discussion. Don't give all the answers, but instead encourage members to search for the answers themselves. For example, you can have them look up Bible verses and share with the rest of the group what they discovered and how they can apply the verses. Be ready

to use silence to draw out a response!

- **Look for teachable moments:** Watch for those “windows of opportunity” that naturally allow you to pass on a word of hope, share a spiritual truth, or offer a godly suggestion to the members of your group. This requires attentiveness not only to words that are spoken but also to body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions throughout a discussion.



Consider the four points described above. Which need improvement in your life, and which come naturally for you? Discuss your plan for how you will improve in certain areas and utilize your strengths in others.

Trust in the Work of the Holy Spirit

An old shepherding adage says, “An anxious herder makes a lean flock.” Rather than micromanaging every action, which only raises anxiety and lowers trust, the best shepherd leaders direct group members to the truth of Scripture, let them be themselves, and trust the Holy Spirit to bring about change.

People must be allowed to be themselves and conduct themselves in a natural manner if they are to grow in their relationship with God and others. What you do as a leader to help believers grow in their relationship with God and others can be difficult to define, as it is highly variable according to the needs of the individuals in the group. That being said, Jesus demonstrated that growth often occurs in group and one-on-one discussions about life and faith.

While activities help men build trust and develop relationships, spiritual conversations are the primary method by which your group members can share ideas, opinions, and emotions with one another. As a leader, you are

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responsible for facilitating these discussions while promoting an environment that quickly cuts through surface-level sharing. But you must remember that the Holy Spirit has ultimate control. Not only does this take the pressure off you as a leader, but it also promotes harmony in the group, as your attitude of peace spreads to others.

You can facilitate spiritual interactions with others by taking on these four overlapping roles:

- As a **catalyst** – you help group members think individually and then interact with one another communally.
- As a **guide** – you direct conversations and discussions while facilitating participation by all.
- As a **clarifier** – you clarify questions and comments in order to bring understanding and application of spiritual truths and to address any comments that may be contradictory to Scripture.
- As an **affirmer** – you encourage and listen intently as each person in your group shares, asks questions, and seeks advice.

There will be many times when you feel your questions, comments, or ideas are failing to bring others closer to Christ. You can clarify points and guide the members of your group to the best of your ability, but the heavy lifting of moving a person closer to the Father is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. You must make room for Him to do that work.



Which of these roles do you feel comes most naturally for you and which might you have to grow in? Ask a friend who knows you regarding which you take on the most.



When Jesus sent out the disciples, He didn't demand that they use the exact same methods or script to spread His kingdom. How might this example inform how you conduct yourself as a small group leader?

Correction and Leaning on Support

A good shepherd must be prepared to provide correction when necessary. An individual sheep will almost always scamper to keep up with the group, but groups of seven or more sheep will commonly break off from the whole. A wrong idea will gain traction when it is met with support from other group members.

In the same way, leaders must be willing to combat groupthink when it presents itself and respond with biblical correction. A group will naturally develop an identity over time, and members will come to know, trust, and love one another, but group consensus does not have the last word on truth. You must be prepared to gently and quickly correct group members when they have a thought or idea that contradicts the Word of God.

However, it is critical to clarify what roles you as a leader are not expected to fill to prevent you from becoming overwhelmed, frustrated, or disheartened. As a leader, you are NOT expected to be:

- ❑ A therapist or professional counselor
- ❑ A theologian or expert in biblical studies
- ❑ A perfect example

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- ❑ Capable of meeting the needs of every person in your group
- ❑ Solely responsible for the discipleship of your group members
- ❑ A professional or expert in the activity you lead
- ❑ Committed to your group above your family or to the detriment to your own walk with Christ

As a small group leader, your role does not require degrees in theology, psychology, or public speaking, nor do you need to prepare hours of material or sermons. Although we desire leaders to utilize the gifts and experiences God has given them, you are not on your own in discipling the people in your group. You should develop a network of support within your church, so you know who to turn to for help with coordinating and funding activities, providing material for discussion, and seeking additional wisdom and guidance.

Biblical counselors at The Forge are always available to talk about how to approach certain discussions or listen to concerns you have about a member who seems to be experiencing serious difficulty. Additional training, resources, and counseling are available from The Forge staff if you need them. However, your primary shepherding should come from within your own church body.



Have you ever been in a position where a friend came to you for help, and you did not feel equipped to help? How did you handle that? How will you handle it going forward as a group leader?

Train-up Additional Leaders

A shepherd should not take on the burden of leadership alone. Wise shepherds frequently work together and train sheepdogs to work at the back of the flock while they lead from the front. They also spend extra time with

specific sheep early on so these sheep will one day set an example for the rest of the sheep to follow.

Similar to shepherding principles, you as the leader need other believers who will help you lead as well as keep you accountable. It's essential to set up regular check-ins with your pastor or another church leader to answer any questions or respond to specific needs. You should take the initiative to establish a healthy rhythm for meeting up with someone who can pour into you. We have a specific approach for how we structure leadership check-ins at The Forge, and we would love to discuss with you how that could look like within your church.

As your group becomes established, it is key to quickly identify members who can aid in leading if for some reason you can't make a scheduled meetup. Once you have identified those members, take a few steps to prepare them to lead in your absence—you may even have them go through this training themselves! You should always be looking for your successor. Plan for opportunities to speak to members one-on-one about qualities you see that would make them a good leader, encouraging them to consider if that's a role God has called them to. These should be people who are eager to learn and who are actively taking steps to exhibit and grow in leadership qualities like those discussed in Session 2. As important as your leadership is, it should be your aim to identify a new leader after one year of leadership. Never forget, as part of the Great Commission, you are a disciple-maker looking to make future disciple-makers (Matt. 28:18-20). This does not mean your participation in the group should end, however, as there is always a need for more shepherds and leader sheep in each group!



In the New Testament, the disciples were often sent in pairs or groups to share the Gospel and establish churches (Mark 6:7, Acts 13:2-3). How can this model impact how you lead your small group?

Session Summary

In review, below are the key points from this session:

- Developing relationships around activities and interests is important, but the overall purpose and goals for the group should always be at the forefront of the leader's mind.
- We should strive to emulate the Good Shepherd and seek to understand what that means for our group leadership.
- It is vitally important to set clear expectations and direction for the group right from the start. Leaders must strive to promote a trusted environment where people feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging.
- Leaders should work to develop an overarching plan for the group as well as a plan for individual meetings so that the group does not get off course.
- The Holy Spirit is the only one who can change hearts. Leaders must be flexible and continuously listening for His promptings.
- Leaders must be prepared to correct as well as provide sound biblical advice when asked. However, they should not put unrealistic expectations on themselves and should lean on support from church leaders as well as from The Forge counseling staff when necessary.
- Leaders should always look to replace themselves. They should aim to train up and pour into key men who exhibit leadership qualities and who are excited about discipling others.

Takeaways

Take some time to think about how the information in this session may impact your role as a friend or mentor or your mindset about leadership. Record your thoughts and how this session may change how you lead groups.

Session 4 – Facilitating Group Discussion

Sharpening Skills for Group Discussion⁵

This session seeks to provide practical techniques you can employ to promote fruitful discussion in your group. Before diving in, it is vital to remind you that you must maintain a clear vision of the group's purpose when implementing these skills. Even the most effective group management skills are rendered useless if the leader is unclear of the overarching goal of the group. In fact, the techniques in this session may be a detriment if not used in a discerning manner. For example, although you should ensure group members don't stray too far from the task at hand by using the skill of *Cutting Off* (p. 54), you may be preventing potentially beneficial conversations or interactions if you are too quick to cut the conversation short. Having clarity regarding the purpose of the group and your role as a leader is just as important as your skills in facilitating discussion or offering guidance.

Session 4 seeks to build on the vision and principles for leadership established in Sessions 1-3. At the end of this session, you as the leader will be equipped with specific methods and actions to employ as you foster healthy group interactions and aid in spiritual growth.

Purpose and Planning

Proverbs 16:9 says, "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD

And by this we know that we have come to know him; if we
keep his commandments.
- 1 John 2:3

establishes his steps." The first thing you must do in preparing for a group meeting and defining its purpose is to pray for God's guidance. Clarity of purpose aids you in keeping members on the right track by coming up with relevant activities, asking pertinent questions, fostering fruitful discussion, and shutting down unrelated or unhelpful tangents. A group with no clear

⁵ Principles adapted from *Group Counseling Strategies and Skills*

purpose cannot be termed a sharpening group; this is simply a social gathering.



Although you may have the perfect discussion planned out, you must remember that the Holy Spirit has His own plans for how to shape a person's character. Only He can bring about true change in a man's life. You must therefore hold tightly to the purpose and goal of the group—but hold loosely to the exact questions and conversations you believe are necessary to get there. God will direct conversations in ways we could never even imagine by using the stories and convictions of others in the group to stir up deep discussion. He gives wisdom when we ask and don't doubt (Jam. 1:5), but this requires communicating with Him before, during, and after group discussion.

As you think about the purpose of the group and how this might impact the way you lead, consider these five questions while preparing for a meeting:

- **Objectives** – Holiness is the end goal for all believers. What does that mean for each member in your group, and how does the specific material or text work toward that end?
- **Interpretation** – How can you help the group comprehend the true meaning of the material or text?
- **Application** – How can you spur the group on to make specific applications in certain areas of their lives based on what they learn?
- **Engagement** – How can you facilitate meaningful discussions between each group member so that they learn from one another and know how to clearly articulate their thoughts and feelings on important matters?
- **Relationships** - How can you facilitate the group meeting in a way to help members grow in trusted relationships?



Pick one of these five questions and describe how asking this

question before each meeting would impact the way you lead.

Active Listening

Session 2 explained that effective leaders are observant. During group discussions, observation requires active listening, which goes beyond simply hearing someone's words. Paying attention to a person's tone of voice, facial expressions, eye contact, body language, and history as a group member can help you interpret a host of thoughts and emotions. What does it mean if someone rolls his eyes? What might someone be feeling if he is fidgeting during a certain question? How can you draw out the person who seems lost in his own thoughts as he stares off into space? Skilled leaders closely observe the people they serve and ask themselves these types of questions. Even while listening to the thoughts of individual members, continue to observe all group members as much as possible.

The Gospel shows us that Jesus was a master at active listening. When He looked at the crowds, He was moved to compassion because He saw they were like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36). Jesus made observations like these by being in tune with the Holy Spirit while observing the actions, words, and body language of others.

This skill takes practice and intentionality. Our tendency is to want to look people in the eye when they are talking, as this demonstrates interest and respect. While this is generally true, in a group setting, we don't want one-on-one dialogue to occur only between a member and the leader. The members should be engaging with one another! For this reason, you must look for ways to foster discussion between group members by observing their behaviors and finding ways to get them to engage with one another (see the skill of *Linking* on p. 51).

If you focus on maintaining eye contact with each person who speaks, you risk missing key opportunities to address issues and engage the quieter members of the group. For example, if someone says something others disagree with, they may cross their arms or shake their heads but never speak up on their own. Failing to observe and address these members will have a negative impact on the entire group.

When first implementing this new skill, it might feel awkward to be constantly looking around the table or room. Don't be discouraged. It is extremely helpful to see the many ways people communicate when you are looking for it, since you use this knowledge to impact the flow of a discussion. Finally, if you think group members may feel disrespected by not giving them your focused attention, it may be appropriate to forewarn them about what you will be doing and why, so they are not put off.



Identify nonverbal cues you have observed as people interact with one another (gestures, facial expressions, posture, body language, etc.). Pick three and describe what they might mean.

Clarifying Statements and Questions

Although it seems easier to lead when group members actively participate in discussions, an overly talkative group isn't necessarily healthy. For example, if members are adamant to get in their two cents during a conversation, the leader can't ask follow-up questions to one man's comments before someone else jumps in. This creates disjointed conversations and prevents dialogue where believers sharpen one another. You as the leader have a responsibility to both encourage members to get involved and steer the discussion so that it

Session 4 – Facilitating Group Discussion

benefits everyone. One of the key methods of doing this is by clarifying vague, confusing, overly negative, or potentially controversial statements.

Clarification can be useful when:

- Members seem confused about a particular question.
- A member doesn't elaborate on a vague or evasive answer ("I am having trouble with..." "It's hard when..." etc.).
- A member shares a story that seems unrelated to the topic.
- A comment is made that seems to go against God's Word.
- A member makes frequent negative or hurtful comments toward himself or others ("I'm such a failure..." "That guy is such a jerk..." "My wife always gets on my case..." etc.).

Clarification can benefit you as a leader or the entire group if you observe confusion among the other members (recall the skill of *Active Listening* as you observe other members' reactions). You as the leader will often make clarifying statements, but it can also be helpful for the group if you allow or call on one of the other members who seems to be tracking with the speaker to clarify or contribute.

Inevitably, groups members will say something that you don't agree with or that seems to go against Scripture. When you need to address a potentially controversial topic or false belief, it is important not to accuse the speaker outright but to ask a question in a way that offers an out or alternative perspective. Give the benefit of the doubt rather than jumping to conclusions.

If you have clarified with the person and he is clearly articulating something unbiblical, you have the responsibility to spell out biblical truth. Since the goal of a group is to sanctify and sharpen members, sinful thoughts and behaviors must be confronted at some point! While it's best to avoid arguments regarding non-essential issues, as they can potentially divide

believers within the group, it is vital to clarify and confront statements contradicting God's Word.

Jesus modeled this aspect of leadership many times, most notably after Peter rebuked Him regarding His declaration that He would die (Matt. 16:22). Although Jesus minces no words with Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" He explains to all His disciples the reason for His vehemence (Matt. 16:23-27). Leaders can learn from Jesus how to stand firm when necessary while using the opportunity to help members of the group grow. Potential phrases to help with clarification could include:

- Tell me if I am off-base...
- Are you saying...
- Can you explain...
- What do you mean by...
- I want to make sure I understand...
- Has anyone else had similar thoughts/experiences...

Examples:

Member: "I have been struggling with being a good dad lately."

Leader: "What do you mean when you say you are struggling? Can you explain what a 'good' dad is?"

Member: "If things don't change, I might have to do something."

Leader: "What do you mean by 'do something'? What are you going to do?"

Member: “I think that God helps those who help themselves.”

Leader: “I want to make sure I understand. Are you saying that God only helps people if they do certain things, or are you saying that God helps us as we seek to live out a God-honoring life?”



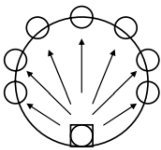
As a group, list some generic statements you may hear regarding how someone is doing (“I’m ok,” “It’s hard,” “I feel like a failure,” etc.). How can you frame a clarifying statement or question to dive deeper?

Linking

Perhaps the most satisfying group meetings are when members are encouraging, challenging, and learning from one another while the leader generally listens and learns. This is the ideal outcome when using the skill of linking, which refers to the process of connecting people together to form bonds and spiritually sharpen one another.

You can use linking to tie together ideas, experiences, or feelings that two or more members share. This is particularly helpful for members who are more reserved and don’t often share due to anxiety, feelings of inferiority, lack of commitment, or having something else on their minds. Linking is ultimately helpful because it brings cohesiveness to the group and increases the overall engagement and commitment of its members. Rather than acting like a classroom where students come to learn from the leader, the group becomes a place where believers grow in fellowship and holiness together.

This diagram is a helpful way of visualizing the skill of linking.



□ **Not ideal:**

Leader does all the talking.

□ **Not ideal:**

Members only respond to the leader.

☑ **Ideal:**

Leader guides, but interactions between members dominate the discussion.

Avoid answering your own questions, as that detracts from group engagement. If needed, repeat or re-phrase questions until the group clearly understands them. A group quickly changes from eager to passive and silent if members think the leader will do most of the talking. Also, don't be content with just one answer to a question. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" or, "Anything else?" until multiple people have answered the question. Finally, although discussions causing division among the group should be cut off, don't be afraid of some controversy. This can often stimulate great conversation and can even help members bond. If the issue isn't immediately resolved, don't be discouraged. Explain that the group will move on and God may enlighten all of you in later sessions.

Phrases and responses to aid in linking include:

- There seems to be a common theme among the group...
- From what I hear, you two have had a similar experience...
- Sounds like you two agree about...
- I would imagine many of us can relate to...

Session 4 – Facilitating Group Discussion

Examples:

Leader: “Matt, it sounds like you and Jack have experienced something similar. Do you think that is fair to say, Jack?”

Jack: “Yeah, I can see some similarities.”

Leader: “What are some of the similarities?”

Leader: “Bob, that’s a great description of your experience. John, it sounds like you went through something similar. Does Bob’s description sound familiar?”

Summarizing

While actively listening, it’s often easy to determine which members are distracted, processing, trying to formulate a response, or chomping at the bit to say something. When this happens, their brains register only a portion of what is being said. In these instances, summarizing is a great tool to help members and the group as a whole refocus.

Group members often approach a particular topic from a wide range of viewpoints. Some have longwinded answers. Others tell a compelling story with several important points. Sometimes an intense discussion breaks out with multiple people chiming in with opinions. When this happens, people often miss details or fail to recall important points as the discussion goes on, and it may be beneficial for you to jot down a few notes. Thoughtful and concise summaries can help you pull together content from the whole meeting and sharpen the focus of the group.

They are particularly useful when:

- You’re starting a new session and want to review the last one.
- A member has spoken for too long.

- It's time to transition to a new topic or question.
- Many opinions, thoughts, or stories were shared.
- The discussion or meeting time is wrapping up.

Example:

To summarize, let's talk about applications we said we'd like to implement in our lives. Josh and Cameron spoke about how they want to change their attitude about their jobs. Bob said he wanted to serve his wife with a thankful heart. Someone mentioned desiring to be grateful for his parents—I think that was Bill—while Frank and Joe said they wanted to show more appreciation and love to their kids. Now let's take a minute to think about what an application would be for these convictions. What is one thing you will change or give up in response?

Cutting Off and Drawing Out

Cutting Off

If there is one skill that you as the leader should be prepared to use in every session, it is learning how to effectively cut off members. In spite of its importance, cutting off is typically the skill leaders feel the most uncomfortable using. Leaders might avoid cutting someone off due to a natural desire to avoid conflict or out of fear of upsetting or offending a group member. Although cutting off can sound hurtful or controlling, there are many instances when interrupting is necessary to protect the group or move it in a more positive direction. Typical reasons for cutting off include the following situations:

- One person is rambling or storytelling without a clear purpose.
- A member is discussing something inappropriate.

Session 4 – Facilitating Group Discussion

- Someone hijacks the conversation.
- A member is dominating the group time and not allowing others to share.
- Members are arguing in an unkind way.
- Something inaccurate or unbiblical is being shared.

Sometimes there is no easy way to go about cutting someone off, but a few strategies can help this process go smoothly. The first is to time it correctly. You can often recognize when a story, joke, or discussion is getting off topic, and heading off these situations is easier than digging out of them. Listen for phrases like:

- “This might be a rabbit trail, but...”
- “That reminds me of this one time when...”
- “Your story reminds me of when I...”

It might even be beneficial to talk to members who have a habit of making comments like these one-on-one outside the group. If the situation has already taken a wrong turn, you must be ready to jump in quickly. At the same time, make sure you are not interrupting comments, exchanges, or stories that could be beneficial to the entire group. Seeking out feedback from a few trusted members can help you identify if you are cutting off too much or not enough.

Another strategy is to use both verbal and nonverbal cues when you cut someone off. Tone, voice, and body language are important. Your goal should never be to humiliate or criticize members but rather to firmly and gently stop unhelpful comments. Nonverbal cues include avoiding eye contact with an overly talkative member or looking at others while finishing a question to

convey that you want someone else to speak. Visibly drawing in a breath or using a gesture to signal that you are going to speak will warn the speaker that you are about to jump in. This may help him realize that he's rambling and result in him cutting himself off, which is better than you having to do it. The following phrases or questions can be useful when cutting off:

- If you had another minute or two to talk about this, how would you sum up your response?
- I want to make sure I understand your point as well as get some of the group's feedback...
- Before you go much further, are you just wanting someone to listen, or are you asking the group for help?
- Let me stop you here for a minute. The reason that I'm jumping in is...
- Hold that thought for a moment; we may come back to it.
- I'd like to stop you at this point and go back to...

Examples:

Talking Too Much

Leader: "Joe, do you mind holding that thought? I want to get some others' perspectives on this."

Rambling

Leader: "Joe, let me stop you for a second. I want to make sure everyone understands your overall point. Can you sum it up in a short sentence?"

Inappropriate/Incorrect

Leader: "Before you go into too much detail, Joe, I want to be careful in this area..."

Session 4 – Facilitating Group Discussion

Leader: “That sounds like a very trying situation, and I would love the chance to speak more about that outside of the group. Does anyone else have something to contribute to our discussion?”

Argument

Leader: “We are getting pretty heated, guys, and I want to shift the focus for a second...”



Why do you find it hard to cut off members? How have you seen a group be impacted negatively when cutting off isn't employed? How could cutting off benefit the group?

Drawing Out

Drawing out is the skill of encouraging people to share their thoughts, which in turn makes them feel like an integral part of the group. This skill is vital to getting everyone involved. Although some have no trouble participating in group conversations, many people are reserved for a variety of reasons.

These may include being occupied with something else, feeling unknowledgeable, feeling inferior, feeling superior, coming unprepared, being naturally reflective and careful with words, or simply being accustomed to sharing only what's on the

surface. For all these reasons, drawing out is a vitally important skill to employ.

You should draw members out early and often during the first few meetings of a group. The longer a reluctant or reserved person stays hidden and waits

to make his first contribution, the more reserved that person may become. Early participation also helps build relationships between members because everyone feels like his opinion and ideas are valuable to the group.

Methods for Drawing Out

Below are some helpful methods for drawing out and a discussion of some of the most frequent reasons men remain quiet in groups.

Direct Methods

A direct method of drawing out simply means calling on a specific member to comment or share. You must often put thought into how to do this delicately so as not to alienate that member. Try to frame it as an invitation, not a command. Comments like, “We haven’t heard from you tonight. What are your thoughts on this question?” are great in many situations, but you should ask them only after you have first observed the member and his mood or behavior during the meeting.

Using your eyes can be particularly helpful in drawing people out directly. Focusing on a member when asking a question may encourage him to speak, though looking at him for too long may come across as a spotlight. By glancing at a member for a brief moment, possibly right as you finish the question, you can invite that person to speak without saying anything yourself.

Indirect Methods

Two of the most common indirect methods to draw someone out without addressing an individual member are called dyads and rounds. A **dyad** is when you pair up two members of a group to discuss a particular question or topic. In this way, everyone gets involved, and those who may feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the entire group still have an opportunity to share. A **round** is when a leader asks a short question and then has each person around the room share. This forces everyone to comment. Using a round may eliminate feelings of inadequacy, since the quiet member is simply sharing along with the rest of the group.

Common Reasons for Reserved Members

Members have anxiety about sharing.

Remaining silent in a group is often wise, as Proverbs 17:28 states, “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.” In many cases, however, it isn’t wisdom that keeps people’s lips closed. Some members remain quiet because they are afraid of judgment from others or because they feel inadequate. Leaders need to use care when drawing out these members, as they can easily feel picked-on or criticized. You can draw these people out by using dyads or rounds, followed by asking for encouraging feedback about their response from others in the group.

Members are more reflective by nature.

Some members simply take their time to formulate their answer. According to James 1:19, the entire group should seek to emulate these people because they demonstrate a tight rein on their tongue. To encourage them to share, it is helpful to ask a question and then ask that members reflect on it for 30 seconds or so before answering. Although silence can be uncomfortable, this may be necessary to engage reflective members.

Members are occupied by something else.

Occasionally members will be reluctant to share because they have something important on their minds. Though they are present physically, their minds are somewhere else. It is helpful to allow time at the beginning for these members to share what is on their minds so they can then focus on the group. Use active listening to discern when this is the case.



Describe what you feel when members are not sharing. What about this section on drawing out gives you hope?



What do you think the right balance is between drawing out and letting the Holy Spirit convict men to speak?

Session Summary

In review, below are the key points from this session:

- Many skills and methods are important for cultivating a vibrant group, but the overall purpose and goals for the group should always dictate the flow of a meeting.
- Leaders should listen to the words of members and also pay careful attention to body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions as they seek to guide the group.
- Leaders should strive to bring clarity to the group as members share. They should be prepared to clarify and confront unbiblical comments and advice.
- Group members' relationships and interactions among themselves are vital for a healthy group. Members will be more committed and willing to share if they have lively discussions with one another.
- Leaders must be prepared to cut off members whose answers are longwinded, inappropriate, or dominating. This is vital to an effective and healthy group.
- The views and ideas of all members are important for the group, and leaders should strive to draw out comments from quiet and reserved members.

Takeaways

Take some time to think about how the information in this session may impact your leadership role. Record your thoughts on how this session may change your approach to leading groups.

Session 5 – Biblical Counseling Principles Part I

Perceptions of Counseling

Since group members come from diverse backgrounds, they will inevitably have different preconceived notions about mental health and treatment. For some, words like *counseling*, *coaching*, *therapy*, *psychology*, and *psychiatry* may have positive connotations, but most men generally view these practices negatively, associating the need for counseling with weakness.

This view, however, is at odds with how counseling is described in Scripture. The word *counsel*, used frequently in Scripture, is typically interpreted to mean advice, guidance, or wisdom. Although there are certainly bad examples of counsel depicted in the Bible (Gen. 3:1-5, Col. 2:8), counsel is usually portrayed in positive terms:

- ❑ Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of **counselors** there is safety. – *Proverbs 11:14*
- ❑ I bless the Lord who gives me **counsel**; in the night also my heart instructs me. – *Psalms 16:7*
- ❑ For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called **Wonderful Counselor**, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. – *Isaiah 9:6*



When you think of the words *counseling* or *counselor*, what immediately comes to mind? Do these words have a negative or positive connotation for you—and why? What experience do you have with counseling?

What Is Biblical Counseling?

The problems people face today are infinitely complex and vary in intensity. No cookie-cutter solutions exist that apply to everyone. Before you can use any counseling methods, wise counsel must begin with an understanding of man's purpose in life and a clear picture of what solutions counseling should seek to achieve.

We define counseling as what happens whenever someone with questions, dilemmas, or troubles seeks help or comfort from another, wanting this person to listen and sympathize with his difficulties while providing answers, solutions, and guidance.

Biblical counseling offers compassionate care and spiritual insight to help resolve difficulties, comfort sorrow, ease pain, confront sin, and provide guidance for making wise decisions. It reorients unhealthy or disordered desires, affections, and behaviors toward a life aligned with God's design for man. Biblical counselors comfort the suffering, encourage the weak, guide the lost, and direct sinners toward the path of repentance, speaking the truth of Scripture in love and understanding. The goal of counselors in small groups is to prayerfully guide believers toward a genuine faith in Jesus Christ and reliance upon the Holy Spirit's power, leading to the heart change necessary for a Christ-centered life of peace and joy.⁶



What problems does biblical counseling seek to tackle, and what solutions does it provide? How does this compare to your understanding of counseling or therapy?

⁶ Adapted from the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

How Group Leaders Offer Biblical Counsel

It is not feasible for group leaders to address the specific needs of each member as you would one-on-one. However, the basic functions of a counselor still apply to group leaders. These functions include:

- ☐ Listening to and learning about those you lead, seeking to discern their underlying thoughts, motives, desires, and beliefs.
- ☐ Demonstrating compassion and care by following Christ's example, regardless of members' circumstances or sin.
- ☐ Offering guidance and biblical truth to help resolve difficulties, ease pain, confront sin, and make wise decisions.



How do the actions listed above change your perception of who a counselor is? As a group leader or in other settings, how have you provided counsel in the past?



Have you ever viewed yourself as a counselor before? Why or why not?

Four I's of Relational Connectedness

Every opportunity to provide counsel, comfort, and advice is a privilege because it shows that you have earned a priceless gift from those who come to you: their trust. As a friend or mentor whom people know they can rely on, it's important to continue building trust in those relationships. Below are a few basic principles to aid you in forging relationships of mutual trust with the members of your group.

Identify

You must be intentional in your approach to identifying and connecting with the people God would have you influence. This starts with prayer. Just as the Apostle Paul requested prayer in Colossians 4:3 “that God would open to us a door for the word,” so you as a small group leader should pray that God would open a door of opportunity to identify, connect with, and minister to those in your group. A story from John's life perfectly illustrates the importance of identifying the doors of opportunity God provides.

Early on in John's marriage, his wife needed a car. Although they were diligent to live on a budget, John wanted to buy her the nicest car they could afford. He searched and searched until he found a small, affordable Datsun. He prayed about it and felt it was the right choice, then dipped into their savings to make the purchase. A great car for a great price! God had provided.

As it turned out, however, the car was a lemon, breaking down time and again. Finally, after several costly trips to the shop, the Datsun broke down once and for all, and the mechanic was unable to do anything else to repair it. John had no choice but to junk it.

“Lord, why?” John prayed. “I felt so sure You were leading me to buy this car.”

A little while later, John met up with a man wanting to purchase the car for parts. The man came by to get the car, and as they chatted, the man mentioned that he was fixing up a car to give to his teenage daughter. John asked how old she was and how she was doing. The man said she was going

Session 5 – Biblical Counseling Principles Part I

through a rough time. Although John was eager to get rid of the car and continue with his day, he pressed in and asked the man about his daughter's struggles. The man opened up, sharing about how their relationship had become strained over the years.

"Does she have faith?" John asked.

"No, we're not religious."

"Would you consider yourself a praying man?"

"Well, no," the man admitted. "But she sure needs it!"

"What about you?" John gently rerouted the question back to the man. "Do you need prayer?"

"Yeah," he admitted, "I bet I do."

They ended up talking for two hours on John's driveway. The more they discussed his daughter, the more the man opened up about *himself*. He shared how he feared that his daughter's rebellion was his fault and that he had failed as a father. John invited the man to come back tomorrow and talk more. The next day, as they sat in his living room, John shared the Gospel, and the man prayed to receive Christ.

In awe of God's sovereignty, John declared, "*Now I know why God had me buy that car.*"



What are two or three principles of biblical counseling you see in this story that you could apply as you talk with believers about their difficulties or struggles?



Describe a time when you earnestly prayed, and God opened up a “door of opportunity” to share your faith or make a meaningful connection with someone. What opportunity will you pray for this week?

Invest

To reach and connect with other people, you must have love and compassion for them, sympathizing with their struggles. This doesn’t mean you should pity them, ignore serious mistakes, or condone sins they have committed. Instead, you should follow Jesus’ example when He encountered the rich young ruler. Though Jesus saw and corrected the man’s idolization of money, He first looked at him and loved him (Mark 10:21). This is especially important for those who are hurting, disillusioned, addicted, or spiritually lost.

In order to care for others as Jesus did, you must invest in them. This includes freely giving away your time, attention, energy, talents, and resources to connect with them on a deeper level.

Relational Connection + Investment = Influence

The formula above means that to influence group members spiritually, you must build a warm relationship based on genuine love and invest quality time, engaging with members on the issues that interest and concern them most. This requires intentional conversations that go beyond superficial topics into greater relational depth.



Why is it often difficult to develop deep connections with men?

What are some common barriers to connection? How might you overcome these barriers as you lead?

When men gather, they tend to shy away from talking about their feelings or personal issues. Though many come to a meeting eaten up inside due to a firestorm at home or work, no one would ever know it from their lively talk about politics, money, or sports. Even when a man does open up about something he is wrestling with, other men in the group often respond by freezing up, venting about their own lives, providing a one-up story, or offering empty platitudes before quickly changing the subject. None of these responses provides help or hope to the man who spoke up; they just cause him to think twice before he shares the next time.

One story drives this point home well. Early one morning, I (Jeff) overheard several regulars talking over breakfast at a diner. One man observed that another member of their morning crew appeared a bit sullen and quiet.

“Everything alright over there, Joe?” he asked.

Joe looked up from his coffee, a pained look on his face. “I’ve had some trouble with my wife the last few days,” he said with a grimace.

After a chorus of groans and grunts from the group, the first man put up his hand and declared, “Enough said.” The conversation quickly moved toward politics, the weather, and sports, and Joe’s problems at home were ignored or forgotten by all but him.



Why do you think Joe’s friends responded the way they did? Although there may not have been a “counselor” in the group, how could one of Joe’s friends have stepped up and offered a helpful response? What ways can you invest in the men in your group as

they open up?

Instruct

As the old adage goes, “More is caught than taught.” The best instruction happens by modeling biblical character through actions, words of encouragement, and everyday conversations that point men and women to the Savior, rather than through formal lectures. People seek counsel from leaders who live out their faith in all aspects of life. For this reason, you must be intentional about initiating deeper conversations to turn these moments into discipleship and setting an example of godly living.

This is the strategy that our Lord used to influence and instruct His disciples. Jesus didn’t rely solely on lectures or formal discussion to teach them. Instead, He artfully wove His teachings into the events and activities of daily life, always modeling His message through His attitude and actions. His instructions naturally flowed from His lifestyle and the influence He gained by establishing close relationships with His disciples, or the men in His group.

My (John’s) dad never instructed me on how to do a quiet time. But as a child, I saw him kneeling in prayer with his Bible open and his face in his hands almost every morning. That spoke volumes to me about the practice and priority of prayer and Bible study. Influenced by his non-spoken example, I now practice the same style of morning devotions that I watched him model.

In the same way, you have the responsibility and opportunity to influence and instruct by modeling words of truth, Christian disciplines, healthy attitudes, and a righteous lifestyle before the members of your group.

Are you in God’s Word yourself? How do you prepare for each day’s challenges? Are you enthusiastic and excited about your faith? How’s your

Session 5 – Biblical Counseling Principles Part I

prayer life? How influential might your attitude and actions be over the believers in your group? Take a moment to honestly evaluate your daily lifestyle.



Provide examples of times when Jesus instructed others about faith through His conduct rather than through lectures. How did Jesus use these situations for men's spiritual growth? List a few times when you learned from someone else's example or saw your example influence others.

Intercede

It's critical that you intercede in prayer on behalf of the members of your group. Interceding simply means to sincerely pray for and petition God on behalf of another. John Bunyan, the writer of *Pilgrim's Progress*, once said, "You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more



"You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed. Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan."

— John Bunyan

than
pray
until
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Pray
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prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan." Intercessory prayer gives you the spiritual vision to see the needs and concerns of those in your group. As you gain a clearer understanding of the needs and concerns people carry, you are better able to advocate for them to God, since only through His Spirit can people's hearts be changed.



1 Sam. 12:19-25 is a great display of intercessory prayer. Read

these verses and discuss their implications for group leadership.

By making a point to intercede in prayer for those in your group each time you meet, you further instruct, encourage, and motivate everyone in the group to intercede too. As members hear you pray on their behalf, they're learning from your example. They will notice your "posture of prayer" as you take problems to God first before trying to fix them yourself and will be impacted by your conduct. With time, many of these members will likely seek to pray in the same manner (more is caught than taught!). This was true of me (John) after years of observing my father's example of daily prayer and devotion to God.

As we close out this session, take a moment of silent reflection on your role as a counselor and group leader. Ask God if He has any specific direction or instructions for you as you step into this role. Pray for help and discernment as you guide and counsel others.



Write down one action step you can take related to intercessory prayer that will better prepare you to lead a group. One example might be to record notes about each person's life or requests and use them throughout the week.

Session Summary

In review, below are the key points from this session:

- Biblical counseling relates to listening, showing compassionate care, and offering guidance or advice to help people resolve difficulties, ease pain, or make wise life decisions.
- The main goal of biblical counseling is to help others find appropriate biblical solutions to everyday problems and guide them to rely on the Holy Spirit, resulting in heart change and Christ-centered living.
- ▣ The root of all struggles that people face is first and foremost spiritual in nature, not merely emotional, mental, or physical.
- Within small groups, counseling most resembles discipleship that prioritizes close relational connections as leaders seek to deepen their own relationships with Christ and with each person they serve so they can help others grow in their intimacy with Christ.
- ▣ The “Four I’s” of relational connectedness are to Identify, Invest, Instruct, and Intercede. Each leader should take these actions as he connects with the members of his group.

Takeaways

Take some time to think about how the definition and description of biblical counseling may assist you as a group leader. Evaluate your strengths and weaknesses in light of this session and record your thoughts about ways you can grow and develop as a relational man of God who counsels and influences the men in your group.

Session 6 – Biblical Counseling Principles Part II

Providing Help, Healing, and Hope

Offering and receiving counseling are integral parts of every human relationship. Though many picture counseling as a professional activity, most people seek counsel from parents, teachers, mentors, friends, and fellow church members who lack formal qualifications. In fact, only a tiny fraction of counseling comes from those with fancy offices, distinguished degrees, or state licenses. Even those who meet with a professional often still seek out further comfort or advice from others they trust.

When people share serious hurts or problems with you, they're giving you an opportunity of incalculable value. One of life's most sacred occasions is when believers receive a chance to respond to pain or confusion shared in a moment of vulnerability. It takes trust for a person to open up about something intimate, profound, or difficult in his life, and now he is waiting for a response. By speaking up about his struggles, he is inviting you to share his burdens (Gal. 6:2).

At first, you might feel like you don't have the right words to say. You may be afraid of messing up or not having a solution. Whether you consider yourself a counselor or not, God has placed you in that conversation. How can you use this situation to bring Him glory? Those moments should make us realize the responsibility and privilege we have to offer wisdom and care.⁷ This session seeks to offer practical principles and steps to help you respond to each opportunity God provides with help, healing, and hope.



When someone opens up and shares something difficult with you, do you see that moment more as a daunting responsibility or an exciting privilege? Why?

⁷ Adapted from *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* by Heath Lambert



Describe a time when someone opened up to you and you felt afraid or powerless to help. What did you do?

Steps to Take When Providing Biblical Counsel

Establish a Solid Foundation

Every person facing overwhelming guilt, anxiety, sadness, addiction, anger, or relationship troubles is in a struggle that is primarily spiritual, not just mental or emotional. Though these difficulties coincide with urgent concerns and tough decisions, you must seek to resolve these issues without losing focus on the state of a person's soul. Even well-reasoned strategies or plans to change thought patterns and behaviors offer merely temporary solutions that will eventually fail unless they are founded on obedience to Christ (Matt. 7:24-25). For this reason, the primary role of a biblical counselor is to guide people to trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Our aim should always be to provide immediate comfort and care for any hurting soul. Before giving advice, instruction, or correction, however, biblical counselors must first ask about a person's relationship with Christ. A simple way to discern this is to ask, "Do you know with assurance where you will go when you die?" Clear understanding and belief in the Gospel—the only source of ultimate hope and healing—is the foundation of all effective

counseling.



Do you agree that life issues are primarily a spiritual struggle rather than an emotional or mental one? Why or why not?



Why is guiding people to Jesus as their Savior essential to counseling? Provide scriptural support for your answer.

Gather Information

True hope and lasting change do not come from mechanically “fixing” behavior or speech. All behavioral changes must start by reorienting the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Matt. 9:13). When people confide in you or look to you for help or encouragement with some difficulty, it is vital to identify the core of the problem. Before drawing any conclusions, a wise counselor first seeks to understand the problem from multiple angles. This requires asking questions about aspects of the person’s past and present that may relate to the issue, including his family, job, relationships, or medical history. This process of data gathering requires intentionality, patience, and discernment. Asking some of the following questions may help leaders grasp the root of a person’s struggle:

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- How would he describe his childhood? What is his current relationship with his parents and family like?
- If he is married, how does he serve his wife? How does she serve him? Does he feel connected? Does she? If he has children, how does he show love to his kids? How does he discipline them?
- Does he find satisfaction in his work? How many hours does he work a week? What are his relationships at work like?
- How does he recharge? Does he have a group of trusted friends?
- What is his background with religion? Does he spend consistent time in the Bible? What does he do during that time? How often and how long does he pray? What does he pray for?
- Has he been to the doctor recently for a physical exam? How often does he exercise? How many hours does he sleep each night?



Think of a specific issue someone has come to you with in the past. Pick from the list above and describe how the answers to these questions could impact the counsel you give. Are there any additional questions not on the list that you might ask?

Focus on the Heart



The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

- Luke 6:45

When gathering information about a person's life, counselors should ask questions about the *seen* (such as circumstances, significant life events, the person's actions, and the actions of others) as well as the *unseen* (such as thoughts, motives, desires, and perceptions of a situation). Emotions and perceptions about life's difficulties often indicate in whom or in what someone has placed his trust. The following questions can help you discern the heart needs under the surface of each interaction:

- What is the spiritual state of this person—does he seem to be lost or saved, confused or trusting, rebellious or faithful, fainthearted or courageous, immature or mature?
- How does he view his situation or problem? Are any erroneous ideas or beliefs contributing to the issue?
- What is his motivation for change? What solution does he hope for, and would it address the root issue?
- What steps has he taken to resolve the issue?
- What environmental factors may be making the problem worse? For example, does he perceive some benefit from his behavior? Are others encouraging it, intentionally or not?

The answers to these questions get to the heart of the matter. Does this person seek fulfillment from the opinions of others? Does he prayerfully prioritize his life according to Scripture so as to bring God glory? Many people

don't realize that they are at the mercy of whatever they look to for security, approval, or fulfillment. What someone prioritizes ultimately controls how he lives and reveals where he believes peace and joy can be found.



Which of the “heart” questions above do you think will help you counsel most effectively when people open up to you about some struggle? Why?

Guide a Process of God-Honoring Change

After listening to the problem and asking clarifying questions, it's time to take action. This step involves using the knowledge and insight provided by the Lord to comfort, encourage, exhort, teach, correct, and admonish with patience (1 Thess. 5:14, 2 Tim. 3:16). Biblical counselors give “homework” in the form of recommended action steps designed to help men reorient their thoughts, desires, motivations, and behaviors.

These action steps depend on the spiritual state of the person receiving counsel, as well as on the issue itself. For example, encouraging a man to reconcile with his wife over a dispute caused by his sin would be inappropriate without clear evidence of his genuine repentance.

Recommending steps to take sounds somewhat formal for a small group leader. However, the following examples of action steps show how straightforward and intuitive this process can be:

- Read and record your thoughts about a passage of Scripture or helpful book corresponding to a specific topic.
- Memorize key verses that focus on restoring hope, calming fears, easing

anxiety, combatting anger, or fighting temptation.

- Identify practical steps and find an accountability partner who will hold you to a plan to overcome addiction.
- Keep a log of every time throughout the week you experience temptation, jealousy, or anger. Record the time of day, where you were, what happened, and any other details that could help you understand your habits and reactions better.
- Seek reconciliation and forgiveness from anyone you may have wronged or who has wronged you. This may include sharing hidden sin to ease guilt, if appropriate.
- Regularly write down your prayers for your wife and children. Share these with them through notes, emails, etc.
- Serve the vulnerable or needy in your church and society.

Prayerful discernment is key when recommending action steps. The purpose of these steps is to provide hope, teaching, conviction, awareness, or reconciliation, based on what you have discerned is the heart of the matter. The Forge offers *Quick Reference Guides* that are particularly helpful when choosing action steps for specific issues believers face.



Suppose someone comes to you struggling with addiction to alcohol. He or she is convicted of this sin but has not yet experienced freedom. What action steps would you recommend?



Consider another specific issue that many people face. Come up with a few action steps not listed above and share them with the group.

When to Enlist Outside Help

It can be stressful, frightening, and intimidating to interact with people experiencing severe spiritual or emotional struggles or who show signs of mental instability. At that point, you must pray about whether it is necessary to ask someone else to weigh in with additional biblical advice. It is a sign of wisdom, not weakness, to recognize personal limitations and enlist professional help.

At the same time, since this person has confided in you, sharing his story with others should not be your default response. God will often give you the right words to say, working through you to bring about restoration. If we hope to break down barriers to people seeking counsel, we must recognize that it can and should be provided by ordinary Christians willing to trust the Lord and speak the truth in love.

Below are some instances when you should consult with or point others to a trained, certified, or licensed biblical counselor:

- They are suffering from manic episodes or potential psychological issues resulting in bizarre behavior, distress, uncontrolled thoughts, or troubling habits.
- He or she struggles with deep-seated depression, uncontrolled rage, abnormal phobias, serious eating disorders, gender dysphoria, same-sex attraction, extreme anxieties, debilitating feelings of shame or guilt, or

crippling grief.

- He or she shows or expresses tendencies toward self-harm or suicide. If he threatens to harm others, you should also contact the proper authorities.
- Addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex, pornography, gambling, or other damaging behaviors puts himself or others at risk.
- He or she is going through serious marital conflict or is dealing with other substantial marriage and family struggles.

Principles to Remember

Counseling is not a fault-finding process designed to dig up sin. Jesus assured us that troubles in life will come that aren't because of specific sinful thoughts or behaviors (John 9:3, 16:33). You should seek to redeem people out of love for God, not tear them down out of a sense of justice. To do this, you must value others above yourself and carefully examine your motives to avoid counseling from a place of selfishness or vanity (Phil. 2:2-4). An attitude of humility and genuine love is key as you seek to uncover and cast down potential desires or pursuits that may have become idols preventing God-honoring change.⁸

Listen for themes and provide opportunities for people to reply to your questions, insights, and proposed solutions. It takes time and good questions to get people to share. When they do, you must listen intently and see if you notice any of the following themes:

- Emotional Language: I'm angry. / I'm afraid. / I feel guilty. / I feel like nothing matters anymore. / I feel lost.
- Assumptions: This shouldn't happen to me. / I guess I'm getting what I deserve. / I deserve better. / I might as well give up. / I am just wired that way.

⁸ Adapted from *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically* by John MacArthur

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- **Self-Talk**: I am such a failure. / I can't do anything right. / Nothing is my fault. / I don't have what it takes. / I'm a waste.
- **Perceived Needs**: If I were more disciplined... / It would be ok if I didn't have to... / I just wish I would be treated with... / Life would be so much easier if... / What do I need to do to get...
- **Feelings toward God or their relationship with Him**: I thought I was doing what God wanted me to do. / I feel distant from God. / I wish God would give me a sign. / It's impossible to follow all of God's commands. / Why did God let this happen to me?

Instead of getting lost in the details, focus on themes and meet people in their struggles. Because it can be hard to see Christ in the middle of suffering, it's essential to embody the character of our loving Lord, bearing men's burdens and fulfilling the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). By serving as a tangible representation of Christ, you remind people of God's promises that He is with them, even in the midst of their troubles (Psalm 23).

Ask follow-up questions such as, "What do you mean by that?" Let the person know that you heard his struggle, complaint, or need. You can restate his comments for clarification, using his own words, to acknowledge that you understand what he told you.

Don't promise complete confidentiality before you hear what the person has to tell you. If his news isn't related to an illegal matter and doesn't pose an imminent threat of harm to himself or others, it's safe to give an assurance of confidentiality. Protecting confidences is a sign of Christian love and respect (Matt. 7:12). It discourages harmful gossip (Prov. 26:20), invites confession (Prov. 11:13), and encourages people to open up.

Don't overreact to shocking or unanticipated news. Remaining calm, levelheaded, engaged, and composed lets a person articulate freely without feeling judged, condemned, or dismissed. A harsh or extreme reaction can easily cause men to shut down.

Be slow to rebuke a wrongdoer. Before rebuking someone, you should first

exercise restraint, hear him out, show compassion, and offer wisdom. Afterwards, you can then move toward any necessary admonitions, reproof, or rebukes over sin or indiscretion.

Begin and end with prayer to set the tone and quiet people's hearts. Prayer connects you to divine assistance, guidance, and wisdom.

Recognize your limitations and know when it would be beneficial to consult with or point people to a biblical counselor or biblically directed licensed counselor.

Session Summary

In review, below are the key points from this session:

- Counselors' first priority should be to provide appropriate comfort and care to any hurting soul and their overall goal should be to guide them to trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.
- The root of all struggles that people face is first and foremost spiritual in nature, not merely emotional, mental, or physical.
- ▣ Counselors should identify the core of the problem by asking questions to gather relevant information and discern underlying heart issues.
- ▣ A wise counselor will prayerfully recommend specific action steps specific to each person's heart issue that promote God-honoring change.
- ▣ Small group leaders may need to enlist the help of professional biblical counselors in cases of severe spiritual or emotional struggles or mental instability.
- ▣ A Christ-like counselor's attitude is based out of humility and love for God and others, not judgment.

Takeaways

Take some time to think about how the counseling principles in this session may equip you in your role as a group leader. Record your thoughts and ideas on how you can be a resource for people in times of struggle.

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