

# Something Worth Meeting For— A Biblical Vision for Small Groups



by STEVE MIDGLEY

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Few things in church life absorb quite as much time and energy as our small groups. Whatever we call them—home groups, fellowship groups, cell groups, Bible study groups, growth groups, community groups—their purpose is to get us involved with one another in a smaller setting. Like many, my first experience of regular church ministry was leading one of these groups. I didn't do it very well. And after fifteen years as a church pastor, I have come to think that it's one of the hardest ministries to do well.

Yet there is so much potential for these groups. At their best, they are wonderful. One of my earliest memories as a Christian is being in a student Bible study. We were such a diverse group—nerdy scientists gathered with creative arts students, while social introverts sat alongside the party crowd. I remember thinking that it was hard to imagine any other circumstances when that particular group of students would have gathered together. Yet our mutual faith in Christ gave us not just a sense of belonging, but also a real sense of invested involvement in one another's lives. There was something very special about that.

But small groups don't always work well. And my sense from talking to other pastors is that many of us carry a mild dissatisfaction with our small group program. Things may not be particularly bad, but it's nowhere near as good as we hope. Like many pastors, I have tried all sorts of ways to help: working harder at preparing study notes; supplying DVD courses; running training sessions and more besides. And yet...nothing much changes.

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I am increasingly persuaded that the problem lies in the *vision*. It would overstate the case to say that “without a vision, the people perish” (Prov 29:18). But without a vision, we certainly end up pulling in different directions. Group leaders need to be clear *why* they are meeting, and that vision needs to be communicated to everyone else.

### **Can Anyone Tell Me Why We Are Meeting?**

There are all sorts of good things we can do in our small group programs. For example, it’s good to grow in our understanding of the Bible and to reinforce the essentials of the Christian faith. I have often found myself emphasizing that to our group leaders. At other times, we have pushed the need to build strong relationships and to care practically for people in the group or the local area. And who can resist an occasional pep talk on the need for groups to make prayer a priority? And what about the evangelistic potential of our small groups? Surely we should make *that* our key aim! But small groups also help identify people’s gifts and nurture and train new leaders. That’s good to emphasize, too!

You can see where this leads. Pretty soon I’ve put so many tasks in front of our group leaders that they are just rushing around spinning plates. I sometimes think that if I were a small group leader in my church, I’d have resigned long ago. Or I would just have stopped listening to the new initiatives and gone back to what I’ve always done: lead a Bible study, drink some coffee, say a few prayers, and head home.

The small groups in our church began to change for the better when I realized we needed a much bigger purpose statement. We were fiddling with mechanics when what we needed was an overarching purpose that would guide the detail. A few years back, I happened to be working my way through CCEF’s School of Biblical Counseling courses and arrived at the module “Counseling in the Local Church.” One of the final assignments required a ministry project. What better than to inflict still more training on my long-suffering home group leaders? Yet as I put a training program together, I began to realize that the insights of biblical counseling provided exactly what we needed. I became persuaded that the vision for our groups should be one that centers on sanctification—on personal growth and change. Let me explain.

***Sanctification and the book of Ephesians.*** As I have tried to understand more of what God intends the church to be and do, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians has been a major influence. In fact, the more I read Ephesians, the bigger my vision of church seems to get. Much to our surprise, the church has a central place in God’s unfolding plan for his creation. It’s not as though he needs our help, yet

he chooses to involve us. It's something like a father taking his six-year-old son to the office with him. He gets to sit at his dad's desk and bash away on his keyboard and even answer his phone. Why does dad allow it? Because he has a particularly tough assignment and needs his son's help? Is there something that can't be accomplished without his six-year-old's brilliance? Of course not. He does it for relationship. He loves his son and wants his son to understand him. His love for his son means that the father wants him to be a part of his world and to share in the things that he does.

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That's it! There's our vision.  
*God wants us to grow up.*

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As we read Ephesians, we find that God's vision for the church is something like that father/son dynamic. God doesn't *need* us to accomplish his purposes, but he *chooses* to use us. Our participation in his work is one of his prime purposes. He has set the church to be at the very center of his wonderful unfolding plan for his world. Ephesians tells us that God's plan is to bring all things into unity under Christ (Eph 1:10). The local church is the first fruits of that new humanity. In fact, the church is so central to God's purposes that it even expresses God's glory before all the powers in the heavenly places (Eph 3:10). The church is how the whole universe gets to know God's wisdom.

And that's why Ephesians chapter 4 is all about growth into maturity. If the body of Christ is to display God's glory, it needs to be mature. Or, in the language of Ephesians, it needs to mature into the whole measure of the fullness of Christ himself (Eph 4:13). That's it! There's our vision. *God wants us to grow up.* He plans for us to be mature—to grow to be like Jesus—both individually and as a body together.<sup>1</sup> What bigger vision is there than to become like Jesus? By knowing and depending on him, we can become like him. With the Spirit's help, we can act like him, speak like him, love like him, pray like him, evangelize like him. This will grow us into maturity and enable the church to play its intended role. Once I got that clear, all the other ambitions fell into place. Taking Scripture to heart, caring for others, praying our concerns and joys, bearing witness, being

<sup>1</sup> The transformation of an individual into the likeness of Christ is what we refer to as personal sanctification. The vision of Ephesians 4 is corporate—the maturity of the body as a whole. Of course the two are intimately interrelated: the growing maturity of the individual contributes to the overall maturity of the whole and the growing maturity of the whole makes that body more effective in taking forward the process of sanctification in individuals.

wise—these are all expressions of becoming like Jesus. And they are all things that can happen in small groups.

***A new vision for small groups.*** So I set about recalibrating. Our vision for small groups could be simply (and gloriously) stated as a determination to bring glory to God by helping each other become more like Jesus Christ. That will sound vague at first, but the vision takes shape as the messy details of daily life and the needs and circumstances of group members become apparent. It works out when a group supports a single mother through the birth of a second child or when an elderly Christian explains justification by faith to a new believer and together they respond in praise to their God and Savior. The vision shows itself when, in the face of bereavement, a group meets and sings God’s praises and declares his goodness even with tears running down their faces. It’s apparent when a non-Christian visits the group and the scheduled Bible study is abandoned as the visitor is welcomed and cared for. These things demonstrate the gospel of grace. They bear witness to the way Christ’s people are becoming like him as he stirs them to love God and to love neighbor.

God is glorified when people grow into the likeness of Christ. It serves his ongoing work of building the church and growing his kingdom. As believers mature, relationships are built, evangelism gets done, people get cared for, prayers get prayed, and the Word of God gets studied.

Having a vision helps each person in the group connect the dots between what is being learned and how to live it out. Truly, there is a world of difference between asking a man to carry a load of bricks up a ladder two hundred times a day and asking him to help you build a pyramid. One man works for a reason he cannot see or understand. The other knows he is playing his part in the creation of something glorious. God tells us that we *are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory* (2 Cor 3:18). This is a vision worth showing up to home group for!

As I began to see that biblical counseling’s emphasis on becoming like Christ provided an organizing theme for our small groups, it remade my vision for them. We don’t meet together to “do a Bible study” or “to care for one another” or “to have a prayer time.” We meet together to be transformed into the likeness of Christ for the sake of his kingdom. Bible study, prayer and mutual care are all part of that much bigger aim.

To implement this new vision, I started with our group leaders.

### **How Can We Help Our Leaders Lead?**

Each small group leader is a powerful shaper of church culture, so I knew that when I decided to introduce this new approach to our church life that I needed to

start with them. As I hoped, once the leadership group got hold of the emphasis on sanctification, we were a long way down the line to implement it. But don't underestimate the difficulty of this task. Group leaders often think of themselves primarily as group coordinators or Bible study leaders. The idea that they should get involved in the details of the lives of others is often a daunting prospect. Here are the common objections.

- “We aren't trained for this.”
- “The people in our groups don't expect us to do this.”
- “We're already busy. We can't add any more responsibilities to our role.”

These are valid concerns. But they are not insuperable. If it seems that we are simply adding to an already lengthy job list then group leaders will, understandably, resist the change. The key is to help them adopt a radical rewriting of their role—a vision that focuses groups on the process of change.

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***Cast the bigger vision.*** Many group leaders have a traditional view of their role, which either tends to emphasize the organizational component or tends to limit the role to the leading of a Bible study. Helping leaders stand back so that they can see their role in a much broader context is a critical first step. You may need to spend a significant amount of time describing the Bible's agenda for change and exploring the dynamic of that change before leaders begin to accept a new perspective on their role.

But once leaders have a clearer grasp of the way in which God intends believers to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29) and transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, it will be much easier for them to see their leadership role in relation to the process of sanctification.

The next step is persuading leaders that when it comes to the business of change, they have to start with themselves. There is, after all, one essential qualification for being an agent of change in the life of another and it is this: to be experiencing change yourself. Nothing is more important than ensuring that our leaders (and that includes us) are serious about being con-

formed to the image of Christ. Leaders need to be open to God's work of personal transformation.

Why is a leader's own personal transformation requisite to the ability to lead? Because a leader cannot lead in something he or she does not know how to do. It is so hard to believe the gospel can and will make a difference with our besetting sins. The evils that we do over and over again make it hard to imagine ever being different. But trying to persuade someone else that the gospel really can affect change in *those* areas of life—the hard, stubborn places—is really difficult to do without *experiencing change in your own life first*. It would be like trying to train someone to windsurf without ever having been out on the water. Telling someone to lean back and trust the sail to hold you isn't hugely convincing when it comes from something we read in a book, not from personal experience. To understand something, you need to experience it. It's not enough to hear about it or to read about it.

If our leaders are not already engaged in this process of growth in Christ-likeness, then we need to find ways to foster an experience of personal change. Otherwise, we're no better than that armchair windsurfing instructor.

***Help leaders implement the vision.*** This means supporting our leaders as they pursue personal transformation. We need to provide help that doesn't just speak about the process of change but actually gets people engaged in it.<sup>2</sup> That, after all, is what the Apostle Paul expected for himself.

I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of me... one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. (Phil 3:10–14)

Paul was personally engaged. He knew what he was aiming for with his life. He wanted to know Christ and pressed on toward that goal.

So if growth in godliness is key, how can the ongoing support we offer to our small group leaders facilitate that? The main way my church seeks to achieve this

<sup>2</sup> One way to do this is to offer a course such as *How People Change* as part of the training process. These materials were written by Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2006).

is by holding occasional, smaller gatherings of our leaders. We have been running training seminars for years at our church, but we recently added smaller accountability groups. This is a context where leaders are expected to talk about their own Christian lives. Often people just need a context to practice sharing personally. So we create that space.

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We meet five or six times a year with the leaders from two or three of our groups at once (if there are more leaders than there will need to be multiple leaders' groups). An experienced pastor convenes the meeting. The pastor's job is to help the meeting stay focused on practicalities of spiritual change and growth and prevent the conversation from slipping back to group logistics and mechanics. The group attenders are asked to be consistent in coming. This helps foster trust as we follow up on situations in each others' lives and learn from one another. In advance, I ask one of the leaders to be prepared to speak personally for a few minutes about how God is currently at work in his or her own life. This serves two purposes. It gets leaders used to speaking openly themselves. It also reminds us to expect God's Spirit to be at work driving us toward personal sanctification.

I've found that it works best when I ask a leader in advance to share, rather than on the spot. The sharing is of a higher quality after a person has done some personal reflection and stopped to consider what God is actually doing. I also ask the leader who shares to invite others to say what they are noticing about his or her growth as well. This helps emphasize the community work of growth. We need one another to help us see our sin. But we need one another to help us see our growth, too.

We also spend time listening to challenges and sharing thoughts on caring well for group members. Younger leaders learn from older ones. Those who are nervous about discipling individuals see how others do it and borrow ideas.

So a typical agenda for these leaders' support meetings looks something like this:

1. *A devotional thought.* The convener sets the tone by speaking personally from a Bible passage about change and growth.

2. *A personal testimony.* For 5–15 minutes, one of the leaders speaks about his or her own sanctification issues, with a particular emphasis on lessons learnt and areas of growth and change.
3. *A time of prayer.* In response to what has been shared, we pray specifically for the areas where change and growth is needed, or we offer prayers of thankfulness and praise for how God has worked so far.
4. *A review.* We specifically discuss one or more of the groups. Leaders describe some of the issues they are facing both as leaders and as they support the individuals in their groups. This will often lead either to a focused discussion or a more general reflection on the issues raised. Often there are specific pastoral ministry lessons to be learnt as we discuss how people can best be loved and served.
5. *Further periods of prayer.* We follow each of the “reports” with prayer. Asking different group leaders to pray can help to train those who feel less comfortable praying about personal issues.

In my experience, the quality of these meetings improves steadily as time goes on. Even though we meet less than half a dozen times a year, there has been a steady growth in the sense of group identity. Leaders have been very good at remembering what others have said and follow up in helpful ways. The fostering of a sense of mutual support and learning from differences has been a particular strength of these “mentor groups.”

Getting the leaders on board and practicing how to implement it is important, but the new vision won’t go anywhere if the group members are not committed to it as well.

### **Are Group Members Agreed on Growing?**

It’s not enough to persuade only our leaders that sanctification should be the goal for their groups. Group members have to be on board with the vision, too. I knew that if the groups were going to work well, members and leaders alike needed to be in agreement with the goal of personal growth. Their buy-in would make the leaders work much easier, because everyone would be pulling together.

So how to achieve that? At the start of the year we asked each group to answer the question: “What are we meeting for?” We based it on Ephesians 4.<sup>3</sup> Some groups created a specific list of expectations and ambitions for themselves, but all of the groups were introduced to the concept of the goal of personal growth.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 12–14 or Psalm 1, 2 Peter 1, Galatians 5 or any other sanctification passage could be used.

We planned regular reminders of the mission for our small groups. Vision easily “leaks.” A vision that seems at first so clear and engaging and that provides new direction and energy has a habit of slowly fading away, replaced by old habits. Things eventually revert to the way they were before. Vision, therefore, needs to be revisited regularly if we are to keep it central. We encouraged our groups to return to their list of aims later in the year and take stock of how effectively they were being fulfilled. The arrival of new members proved to be another good time to revisit the group’s aims.

Eventually, bit by bit, the group develops a style and a character defined by this new vision for growth. What does that look like? It’s a group that expects change, talks change, notices change, encourages change. It’s a group where leaders have a much easier task engaging people on issues of personal holiness because the group expects it and has agreed to it. It’s not just the group’s leaders who are pursuing the agenda of personal change—everyone is. That helps with another concern: the increased workload. Once growth in godliness becomes part of the culture of a group it affects everything—the way we pray, study, talk and socialize. The ambitions for change get shared round. It’s not the leader’s job. It’s a concern for the whole group. Once people catch the vision, the group sees that they are co-workers for change in one another’s lives. That produces a sense of “we are in this together.” People share in one another’s struggles to grow and change. If this flies, the group leaders won’t feel they have acquired an extra job, but a group full of co-leaders.

The next step is to find ways of monitoring ourselves. It’s easy to fool ourselves that the vision has caught on and that change is happening, when in reality progress has been very small. We need ways to assess our progress.

### **How Do We Know If We Are on Track?**

It’s one thing to agree to pursue personal change and growth into Christlikeness, but it’s quite another to make it happen. Vision needs realizing and it helps to have ways of checking whether a group is staying on track. Leaders could use the following questions for personal review or in discussion with the group as a whole.

#### ***1. How blurred are our boundaries between group time and social time?***

Take a look at the moment when the “official bit” of the evening ends and the “social bit” begins. How much of a gear shift is there? A sharp distinction is a bad sign. It suggests the group isn’t big on one-anothering (Eph 4:32, Col 3:16, 1 Thess 5:11 and many other places). It’s as if growth in Christ can only happen in the “spiritual” part of the evening; once that’s finished, so is the work of the

Spirit. But in a group where mutual encouragement and concern for spiritual growth has begun to develop, the conversation *after* the Bible study is closer to the conversation *in* the Bible study. This would be an indication that our groups understand the point of a Bible study: we're not studying to become more knowledgeable but to become more godly. As brothers and sisters, we show love one for another when we are concerned for each other's growth. Nothing is more loving than to help one another grow in Christ—and that love can be expressed in all of our interactions. When we understand these things, what happens over coffee and what happens in a study will begin to blur.

This doesn't mean being pious and peculiar. It's not that at all, quite the opposite. Once a group learns to connect the everyday stuff with the gospel, they actually sound less pious. They stop dividing the world into secular and sacred. As Abraham Kuyper famously put it, they understand that there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry "Mine!" So whether you are talking about work, or films, or friendships, or hobbies, you do so in the light of Christ. Jesus is as interested in our holiday as he is in our study of Haggai. In the language of biblical counseling, the Bible is getting applied to everyday life.

**2. *How authentic are our prayer requests?*** Prayer requests are a great measure of a group's development. It's obvious really. Once a vision for growth in godliness takes hold, that will be what people pray about. What could be more obvious than asking God for the biggest thing—change into the likeness of Christ? So look out for prayer requests that major on change in self, not in circumstances. But understand that prayer requests like that are scary. Asking God to help your children behave better at bedtime is safe. It's much riskier to ask for help to stop screaming at the kids, banging the wall, and slamming their door. What makes that kind of vulnerability possible? What makes it possible is that others are also speaking of their struggles and weaknesses and failings. As the soccer players put it: it plays you inside.

Here is where leaders should give a lead. Previously people might have felt exposed and judged when they admitted struggle, but if you share *your* sins, the floodgates will often open. Once requests of this sort become commonplace, things change. A new culture is created: the group is now a place where less-than-fully-sanctified believers admit that that is what they are. They finally get to stop pretending all is well. And actually that is often a relief to everyone. It's certainly more honest.

I also look out for prayer requests and Bible study beginning to merge. It

goes like this. Say your group has been studying Philippians 2, which includes, “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose” (v.12–13). Now say that Tom knows that Mike is struggling with perfectionism and overworking. Knowing that makes a difference. Instead of a true, but bland, comment about persevering as a Christian, something very different happens. Tom says:

“Mike I’ve been thinking about what you said last week about overwork. I’m trying to think how this promise that God works in us could help alleviate that pressure you feel to overwork. What difference could it make that God promises to fulfil his good purpose in your life?”

With questions like that, God’s Word gets personal. It begins to do its job. It penetrates. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12).

**3. *How much listening is there in our Bible studies?*** I’ve started telling our leaders to study the Bible less. Saying that in my church is the proverbial red rag to a bull. Everyone gets twitchy. I intend to be provocative, of course. It’s a way to wake us up to a funny phenomenon. For some of our groups, studying the Bible has become more important than hearing God speak. Now I know what you’re thinking—that I’ve finally gone off the deep end. Surely studying the Bible is the very way we *do* hear God speak. Isn’t that the whole point? To which I have to say: yes, usually. . . . . but occasionally, no. Let me explain.

I’ve been in groups that spend so much time debating words and sentences and contexts that they never do much of anything else. Maybe that’s what Paul had in mind when he told Timothy to warn against quarrelling about words; it is of no value and only ruins those who listen (2 Tim 2:14). These studies never get beyond the quarrel. They certainly never get to implications for the way we live.

I’m all for getting to grips with the words of a passage (and structure, context, grammar, the works). But I am not for it if we end up muzzling the very Word we are claiming to study. That’s what I notice. Studying the passage becomes, paradoxically, a version of putting our fingers in our ears. I suppose it’s no surprise. Sharp two-edged swords are uncomfortable and if a detailed study of grammar dulls the edge, we may well do it. It keeps the blade at arm’s length. We examine it, but it no longer examines us.

The remedy is to speak personally. And with limited time in a busy evening, that probably will mean less time spent puzzling over grammar, syntax, alternative translations and the footnotes in our study Bibles (!). Instead, when studying a passage, we need variations on the “so what?” question. Once all the analysis is done, we need to

ask ourselves: what is the point? What would God have me believe or feel or love or do differently because I have read this part of his Word? The Bible isn't meant to top-up our informational reservoir. He speaks in order to make things happen. Studying the Bible without opening ourselves to change is like listening attentively to the doctor's diagnosis, but never actually taking the medicine we are prescribed.

Rebecca Manley Pippert tells a story about this. She had enrolled as a mature student in an undergraduate psychology class at Harvard. She noted that the students there were honest. They puzzled about life. They debated the choices they were making. They wrestled with big things. It was the candid, earnest debate typical of undergraduates. Then one evening on her way home from class, she dropped in on her church Bible study. The differences were stark. No one was talking honestly. No one was wrestling with how to live well. The psychology students had good questions—but no answers. The Bible study members had good answers—but no questions. They wrestled with sentence structure, interpretation and cross-references, but they weren't wrestling with life.

Could that be said of our Bible studies? Do we carefully dissect the truth yet never arrive at the point of actually applying it to our lives? Jesus had stern words for the Pharisees who studied the Scriptures diligently, but never let those Scriptures lead them to him (John 5:39–40).

When groups are listening to God, they will also be changing, and when they see that change, they will want to listen all the more. These three checks help us assess if our groups are keeping an agenda of change at the center of all they do.

### **Growing Up Together**

So how is a biblical counseling approach helping our small groups? Two main ways stand out. First, we are restoring sanctification as a central ambition for these groups. When this happens, God's great ambition for our lives and our churches is put in its proper place. God is glorified and his kingdom advances when we grow into his likeness and his church assumes the stature of the fullness of Jesus himself. Once we get that right, all the other things we seek in our small groups will begin to be realized, too.

Second, we are improving our ability to connect the truths of Scripture with the business of life. When these things happen, our groups become increasingly compelling places to be. We sense that God is speaking richly into our lives and we find that those around us are helping us to listen well. Turning up at our small group stops being a chore we feel obliged to fulfil and starts being a delight we can't afford to miss.

Small groups are hard to do well. But as we learn to do them better—to serve Christ's goals—we find we truly have something worth meeting for.

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