



# WHY YOUR SMALL GROUPS DON'T CHANGE LIVES ... AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Part two of two

By Bill Tenny-Brittian

**B**ack in the May–June issue we took a look at the primary reasons most small groups don't change lives. You may remember that the primary reason is because most small groups aren't designed to make disciples – they're designed to accomplish something entirely different. They connect, they teach, or they accomplish some task (like studying the *Purpose Driven Life* or the epistle to the Philippians). Although these are noble purposes, in the end, even those who have been a part of a small group for years are largely unchanged in terms of their discipleship practices. In other words, they don't pray more; they don't engage the scriptures more; they don't spend their time, talent, or treasure any differently; and most importantly, they don't share their faith any more than when they started. They may have made some good friends, read a number of excellent books, and even got their hands dirty in a ministry or mission, but when

it comes to the core of their life, they're still the same folks they used to be.

As a pragmatist, I see the Western church in a lot of trouble. I needn't go into all the details and statistics, but to

*North American Christianity has largely been embraced as a hobby rather than as a way of life.*

say the church and even Christianity in the Western world is on the decline in terms of both numbers and reputation is perhaps an understatement (if you want to see current statistics, check out Clegg's *Lost in America* and *Missing in America*, and Olson's *American Christianity in Crisis*). As I pointed out in the previous article, North American Christianity has largely been embraced

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as a hobby rather than as a way of life. It's something we mostly fit into our Sundays between 9 AM and noon (well, only 14.8 percent of us do the Sunday thing according to Olson) and/or we call upon in times of trouble. With that in mind, it's clear something's has to change, but it's not in our structure or our organization. The change has to move from the head to the heart to the hands. That's where Discipleship Small Groups come in.

### *Discipleship Small Groups*

The difference between a Discipleship Small Group and most other small groups is found in the purpose. Discipleship Small Groups are created for one thing alone: to make disciples. Although a whole article could be devoted to defining exactly what a disciple of Jesus is, let's

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simply settle on a simple definition for the sake of this article. A disciple is a Christian who not only believes, but is actively engaged in patterning their life and behaviors according to Jesus' teaching. The key word in that definition is "behaviors."

Once upon a time, our culture embraced a core belief and practice that information changed lives. This belief penetrated the church and we became almost obsessed with ensuring Christians had all the right beliefs and understandings about who God, Jesus, and Spirit were. We didn't just teach the Bible, we taught theological precepts and concepts from our pulpits and in our Sunday school classes because we were convinced that the more we know about God, Jesus, Spirit, and the Bible the better Christians we'd be. We expected the information to move from our head, into our hearts, and ultimately into our hands. Unfortunately, that doesn't work in this culture and, if you weigh the evidence by the state of the church today, it's unclear that it ever really worked. Simply put, the formula **head > heart > hands** doesn't work today. However, we've found that, when it comes to spiritual practices, what *does* work is **head > hands > heart**. That pattern is at the core of Discipleship Small Groups.

It turns out that learning about Jesus' commandments doesn't motivate us to obedience. However, when a disciple actually puts his commandments into practice they discover something wonderful. With obedience to Jesus' teachings, that "life to the full" stuff in John 10:10 becomes a reality. The heart isn't moved until the hands put into practice what the head has been taught.

Let me share an example. Sarah was a part of a Discipleship Small Group I was leading on Thursday evenings. During our first week, I taught the group how to do "Just in Time" prayer and I gave them an assignment: put this into practice at least once before we met again. On Sunday morning, Sarah bounced into the fellowship hall with a flushed expression of excitement. On Friday a young coworker had asked her for prayer ... his brother had committed suicide and the family was devastated. Sarah responded, "Sure, I'll pray for you." Then she put her hand on his shoulder and, she reported, she stammered through a very brief and inelegant Just in Time prayer. When she looked up, the coworker was in tears, thanked her, and said, "No one has ever done that for me before."

Ultimately, I'm not sure what the effect was on the coworker, but I can tell you that this event changed Sarah's life. She became one of the most committed prayer practitioners in the congregation. The last time I spoke with her, she was still offering Just in Time prayer on nearly a daily basis with both Christians and non-believers alike.

The **head > hands > heart** principle regularly changes lives whereas the **head > heart > hands** formula often does not. The key practice of Discipleship Small Groups puts this principle to work by introducing a little-used word in the church. Accountability.

### *The Disciple Development Questions*

Accountability has a Wal Mart shopping cart full of negative connotations. Accountability, and it's sibling Responsibility, are two practices that appear to be largely missing from our culture today, practices that are missing in the church as well. Accountability, in popular parlance, means to hold someone responsible for their behaviors. It raises its head most often at work when we're called on the carpet for something we've done or left undone. Being held accountable often means our head is on the chopping block and we're in danger of becoming a statistic in the unemployed column. On a

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“lighter” note, accountability conjures up images of finger wagging, guilt, and shame.

And yet, one of the key reasons the church is in deep trouble is because there is virtually no accountability. Most churches, especially those that are not growing, have their share of bullies and terrorists whose behaviors are both tolerated and excused: “You know, that’s just Leo. You know Leo, he doesn’t *really* mean anything by it. He’s just that way sometimes.” These behaviors wouldn’t be tolerated anyplace else in our society ... an employer would fire them, a store manager would “86” them, and even a service club would eject them. But not the church. Somehow we’ve got the impression that holding one-another accountable would be less-than-Christian. And so, bullies throw their weight around and terrorists take the church hostage with their “If you do \_\_\_\_\_, then I’ll \_\_\_\_\_,” and lives generally remain unchanged. (For more on how to deal with church bullies and their ilk, see my blog at [www.BillTennyBrittian.com](http://www.BillTennyBrittian.com).)

Accountability is actually the church’s best hope for real disciple-making and in our experience, the Discipleship

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Development questions can be instrumental in that endeavor. Whereas, most small groups rarely evoke behavioral changes in their members, Discipleship Small Groups not only evoke these changes, they expect them. That expectation is elicited by asking one-another the Discipleship Development questions in their gatherings.

There are five key Discipleship Development questions that are interwoven into a small group’s conversation [see sidebar]. At most, only two or three questions are asked during any individual small group gathering, but over the span of twelve to sixteen weeks, each question will have been asked no less than three times (in successive weeks – but more on that in a moment). The key to the success of Discipleship Development Groups is consistency, sometimes known as tenacity. At least one of the Discipleship Development questions is asked every week.

Of course, there is another pivotal issue that success rests on: how the questions are posed. Accountability in these

**Discipleship Development Questions**

- 1. What intrigued [confused, excited, challenged, puzzled] you the most in your Bible reading this week?**
- 2. What is the most significant word/message you heard from God in your listening time?**
- 3. How have you shared your faith this week? What was the result?**
- 4. Whose life is different this week because of your witness to Jesus?**
- 5. Who did you encourage in their faith journey this week?**

groups doesn’t mean that there’s someone who lords the questions over the rest of the group. Indeed, everyone is accountable to everyone else in Discipleship Development Groups – there are no “leaders” in this exercise ... only participants. There is no judge or jury here. These questions are simply asked of each person and each answers as they see fit. No one *has* to answer, and regardless of the answer, there are no follow-up questions. No prying inquiries. Not even a furrowed brow. The question is asked, answered, and the focus moves on.

In practice, it looks a little bit like this:

“Bill, what did you read in scriptures this week that intrigued you?”

“Well, it was a pretty busy week. I didn’t have time to read anything.”

“Yeah, I’ve had weeks like that. Kris? What did you read in scriptures this week that intrigued you?”

And so it goes. No recriminations. Ask, answered, and move on.

In our experience, the foundational and most basic question for life transformation is the Bible reading question: “What have you read in the scriptures this week that [intrigued, troubled, confused, excited] you?” For whatever reason, when people start regularly reading and reflecting on the scriptures the Spirit seems to show up and begins to work on the heart. But we’ve also learned that most folks, even life-long church members, don’t really know how to approach Bible reading and reflection.

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tion effectively. We often hear, “I tried reading the Bible once, but by the time I got to Genesis 11 I got lost.” And so we recommend our group members to begin reading the Gospel of Mark. It’s a short, quick read and covers the life of Jesus pretty well. Then we recommend either Luke or Matthew followed by the book of Acts. That way they get familiar with the life of Jesus and the life of the early church.

We also regularly hear, “I tried reading from the Bible my grandmother gave me. I just didn’t understand it, so I gave up.” And so we talk about translations. I personally recommend getting Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* because it’s written with today’s idioms, but we also recommend Today’s New International Version, Today’s English Version (the Good News), and we often discuss other versions. The point is to get the group reading the Bible on their own.

Finally, here’s what we’ve discovered when we ask any of the Discipleship Development questions. The first week we ask, “What did you read ...,” we get blank stares, shuffling feet, and a lot of excuses. Again, no recriminations. Ask, answered, and move on. However, during this first week invariably someone responds with one of the above

comments about how they tried once. But even if they don’t, we’ll talk about the two issues.

In week two, we ask the same question. “What did you read ...” Most of the time, no one will have read again. By week three, though, when we ask the *same* question, someone will have read something and they’ll share. Often they’ll have a question about what they read and it will launch a good discussion. By week four, almost everyone will be reading and we find that filling up an hour or more of discussion in the scriptures becomes a norm. It’s in that fourth week, or in the fifth at the latest, that we’ll add an additional question from the Discipleship Development questions. And, once again, few if any will have accomplished that particular spiritual discipline. But if you’re consistent, in three more weeks you’ll see behaviors starting to change.

What we’ve found in congregations across the nation, those small groups who engage in the Discipleship Development process will see their members becoming more faithful in their spiritual habits. But even more important, the participants themselves will begin to comment on the spiritual transformation they experience as they are encouraged to engage in those habits. 



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