

What Are The Ingredients of an Effective Small Group?

The life of the early Christian church gives us a good idea of special characteristics of small groups that the Holy Spirit can use to bring non-Christians into the fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Acts 2:42-47 [NIV] *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

These believes were devoted to four ingredients needed for vibrant Christian life.

Nurture, worship, community [fellowship] and mission.

Time each of these four components of the meeting to end on time.

Nurture

First, they were devoted to the apostles’ teaching, what we now have as part of the New Testament.

Through their devotion to the inspired words they received the spiritual food needed for healthy Christian growth into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 4:13 [NIV] *“until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ.”*

This is the goal of every Christian.

All Christians need a constant flow of the empowering words of God entering their minds if they are to maintain spiritual vitality and grow in fruitfulness.

Jesus taught by word and example how His followers should live and what they should believe.

The best method of study in a group is by allowing the group to make discoveries by asking good questions about the passage being studied.

Jesus Christ often used this discovery method of teaching.

Luke 7:40-43 [NIV] *“Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said. “Two men owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.”*

Luke 10:25-37 [NIV] *“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he*

asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Certain ground rules are needed for effective group study, these need to be stated at first meeting and reviewed periodically.

- 1 Approach The Bible with a fresh, open-to-learn mind, as you would any other textbook.
- 2 Avoid leaning on information from outside sources, allow The Bible to speak for itself.
- 3 Expect the text, not the leader, to answer any questions raised.
- 4 Stay in the passage of scripture under consideration, and stay on the point under discussion.
- 5 Give ample time to the main point of the passage of scripture.
- 6 Don't get bogged down in unimportant details, keep the discussion moving.
- 7 Be prepared and sensitive enough to depart from your study and deal with real personal problems brought up by the passage of scripture being studied.
- 8 Summarise from time to time and at the end of the study, by:-
 - a) State clearly and concisely the points the group has discovered.
 - b) Emphasise the main point of teaching found in the passage that the discussion brought out.
 - c) Emphasise the specific applications and plans of action which the group came to because of the study.
- 9 Help members make specific applications from the study to their own lives or to the group's life.
- 10 Allow time for sharing and prayer at the end of the study.
- 11 Before ending study, give a brief introduction to next week's study so all the group can be well prepared.

The nurture period should set the theme for each of the other three components of the group meeting.

Worship

The worship part of the meeting should spring from what has been learnt in the nurture component of the meeting.

The more we learn of God and His way of life we will follow the example of the early Church who with "*exuberance and joy praised God.*"

As one four year old said to her father, “Daddy, let’s sing songs that will make God happy.”

That is the clearest definition of worship I have ever heard.

A genuine sense of awe, amazement and excitement that a deeper understanding of our Creator God that scripture can bring us will cause us to break into spontaneous praising God in song.

Such worship unites people like nothing else can.

Community [Fellowship]

Devotion to inspired teaching and the natural response to God in joy-filled worship are closely related to the fellowship we enjoy in Christian community.

Community is the third essential ingredient for Christian small groups.

Christian community is far more than a feeling of belonging.

Christian community is a commitment of love and obligation to all others in our small group.

Christian community is a devotion to one another based on our shared experience of God at work in us saving us from the “*corrupt generation*” around us.

Acts 2:38-40 [NIV] *“Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”*

This knitting of us together will make us an effective team to become agents of God to bring about change in society.

Ephesians 4:11-16 [NIV] *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”*

The outcome of life in a small group Christian fellowship is that we are knit together in love and built up as a team of mature Christians.

This happens in our small group as we develop confidence to share needs, confess faults and weaknesses, bear each other’s burdens, encourage each other, listen with care and intercede for each other in prayer.

Christ has forgiven all of us in the fellowship as we confess our sins to Him and accept His sacrifice.

We are then new people who have this common identity in our relationship.

Because God has accepted me in Christ, I am free to accept others as His, in that same Love He has for us.

We may say of others

You do some dumb things.

I don't always approve of what you do.

But I want to be involved with you, and love you, because we are all in the same family maturing together.

Mark 3:35 [NIV] “*Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*”

Jesus' definition of His family.

Christ's family is more than being related.

Being in Christ's family means involvement with each other on an intimate level of spiritual love.

Mission

A Christian small group that is growing into a loving community through nurture, worship and fellowship does not exist solely for its own gratification and support.

In Christ's community [family] we are not to be cliquish.

We have a mission beyond our members.

Mission is the fourth ingredient of vibrant small group life.

Christian small groups exist to reach out and share the Good News of Christ's Love to people in need.

We are the Body of Christ, His avenue for extending His Love and Power to transform individuals and society.

As we touch the lives of those around us, the Holy Spirit puts them in touch with God and helps them grow into the likeness of His Son Jesus Christ.

The flow of God's Grace through us may first make an impact on the people closest to our group.

But like the ripple on a pond caused by a small stone being dropped in it, the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through us can extend to a far greater area.

John 7:37-39 [NIV] “*On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*”

The work of the Holy Spirit bringing Christian maturity to our small group must flow out to others.

We can never confine the Holy Spirit.

The concept of small group mission includes such things as evangelism and social action.

The concept covers everything from telling a neighbour of God's Love for them in Jesus Christ to taking a meal to a sick person.

The Small Group needs to have a clear mission statement.

The statement of purpose tells the group why it exists.

For example three key relationships:

Towards God in worship.

Towards fellow Christians to help them mature spiritually.

Towards society around us to bring to them redemptive power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Once the group has a clear statement of purpose, take a hard look at the main strategies it is using to ensure they are moving towards the goal of its mission statement.

God blessed the early church as they applied these four ingredients to their small groups.

Matthew 13:31-33 [NIV] *“He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.” He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”*

These are the parables of small groups and the great potential they have as God gives them growth.