

3 Essentials for Disciple-Making Group Discussions

Expert tips for leading your group members to spiritual growth

Pat J. Sikora

I had been a Christian for exactly one week when some people at a church I was trying out invited me to lunch. Having been a very successful (read: worldly) pagan, I had no idea what to expect. What I met was a group of crazy, wonderful, dedicated people who welcomed me with open arms, despite my decidedly un-Christian appearance. Kathleen invited me to a coffee hour at her home that evening. Luree invited me to dinner later in the week. Susan invited me to the women's Bible study. And Monica offered to disciple me—whatever that was! And thus began my wild and wonderful ride of growing in Christ.

Monica and I were two busy professional women, but we'd meet for a quick dinner between work and meetings. In the beginning, she just answered all my questions. But in time, she began to shape my understanding of my new faith. She challenged my worldview and taught me how to think biblically. Monica became my safe person, one with whom I could expose my ignorance to her gracious correction. Eventually I did learn what discipleship was—and later I was able to disciple others.

Meanwhile, the women's group also welcomed and encouraged me. There I learned to study the Bible and apply it to my very tumultuous life. This group had rotating leadership, and though I was happy to be an observer, Susan asked me to try my hand at leading after I'd been attending for six weeks. She encouraged me every step of the way, and you know what? I did it! It wasn't my finest hour, but I led. And after that, they gave me more opportunities to lead, both in that small group and in the Sunday morning small groups—all because these women took seriously their responsibility to disciple me.

What Is Discipleship?

Discipleship is both modeling and teaching Christians the principles of Scripture—including doctrine, prayer, Christian living, and worship. But the key is teaching Christians to live out those principles. Ephesians 4:12–15 explains it well as equipping “his 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 fullness 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 people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” It's a lot like parenting: discipleship involves preparing a young Christian for Christian adulthood.

In discipleship we both teach and model what we want our disciples to learn, knowing that *who* we are is more important than *what* we teach. Monica, Susan, and the others taught me a lot, but it was their character that motivated me to grow up in the faith. I saw a maturity that I wanted, and I was willing to work for.

Over the years, I've learned a lot about discipleship. While discipleship happens in both formal and informal settings—and through all different techniques—I've found three keys to successful discipleship:

Good Questions

Whether you're doing a prepared study in a small group or simply handling new believer questions, it's important to ask good questions. Good questions move the conversation forward, call disciples to discover truth for themselves, require disciples to apply what they know of Scripture, challenge faulty worldviews, and keep disciples coming back for more. Of course, these are good tips for all small-group leaders. If you have baby or immature Christians in your group, though, good questions become crucial.

Avoid Yes or No Answers

Questions that require only a yes, no, or other one-word answer won't do much to facilitate conversation or discipleship. You'll learn a lot more about disciples and their thought processes if you ask questions that require longer answers. Then you'll be able to spot where their thinking goes off base, and thus be better able to offer insights.

Avoid Shaming

Any questions that could potentially shame disciples should be avoided—and watch your responses that could potentially shame. New believers, and even those who have been believers a long time, often have odd understandings of the faith. Rather than saying, "No, that's wrong" or "How could you think that?" try asking, "Hmm, what do you think Paul would say to that?" or "Where do we read that in Scripture?" Point them back to Scripture to discover the truth for themselves in a way that encourages and empowers them rather than shames them.

Meet Disciples Where They Are

In the beginning, I had little interest in doctrine. I needed to know who Peter's mother was (seriously!) and why I had to change my lifestyle. These leaders didn't push me. They graciously answered my questions and gently led me to the more important issues of the faith. Today when I'm discipling someone either individually or in a group, I usually know pretty quickly what their issue is and what they need to do about it. But I don't beat them over the head with it. I let them take the lead, and gradually ask questions that move them to the deeper issues.

Stress Application

It's understandable to want to use a prepared Bible study. They often require much less preparation time. But few prepared studies will meet disciples where they are, and they seldom stress application. While it's crucial to teach doctrine, teach it within the bounds of disciples' immediate needs. Make sure that whatever you cover, the disciples know what to do with it in real life: How can they apply it at home, at work, or in their internal lives?

Beyond Gaining Knowledge

A key skill we need to teach our disciples is how to apply biblical principles to everyday questions and needs. The world is ready with answers to every question, so Christians need to know how to

find the answers they need in Scripture. Of course not every answer is in the Bible, so disciples need to learn how to reason biblically—looking to Scripture rather than Dr. Phil.

Application is difficult not just because it sometimes doesn't seem clear, but also because it often means we must act counterculturally. We need to admit this difficulty to our disciples and walk with them through the challenge. Too many Christians prefer the wisdom of the world, assuming biblical solutions are old-fashioned, judgmental, or meaningless. We need to teach our disciples why and how to be countercultural.

Create a Safe Environment

Discipleship is personal, so it's important to create a safe environment where disciples can explore and grow. Here are three tips for creating safety:

Meet in a Safe Place

It isn't always easy to find physical space for small groups. If you have a family or roommates, your home may not have sufficient privacy. When crying or anger are involved, a coffee shop isn't a good option. You may need to be creative, but you need to make sure that your disciples have the privacy needed for intimate conversations.

Stress Confidentiality

Often in a small group, I share something of my past or even my present that I don't want broadcast beyond that setting. This actually goes both ways. You want to assure your group members that anything they say belongs to them and neither you nor anyone in the group will share it with anyone, anywhere. The only exception to that is if you believe the group member's life or another life is in danger. Otherwise, they must know they can trust you—and you must be able to trust them.

Avoid Condemnation

Often you will observe or hear of unbiblical lifestyle choices that your disciples are making. If you condemn or sound like Mom or Dad, your disciples will bolt and little will be gained. Asking good questions instead is helpful. Explore the rationale. Do they not know this is wrong? Have they twisted Scripture to make it right? Have they even thought about it? Is it an addiction, a deeply ingrained habit, or a family trait? Once you know those answers you can begin to address the issue. But do so gently and patiently. People don't change overnight, even if they want to.

Unfortunately, I learned this the hard way and lost a disciple who was dear to me because I came down too hard on her for a behavior that, in retrospect, wasn't that big of a deal. Now I'm more careful to honor the image of God in each person, and I attempt to love and woo them into a better choice, even if it takes longer.

Discipleship can be one of the most rewarding opportunities for Christians. What a delight to see a person grow up into Christ and the faith! What a joy to see them take on leadership or ministry and become all God created them to be. And we benefit, too. We get to look at things with fresh eyes, which is energizing. But discipleship in groups won't happen with intentionality and work. Are you up for the challenge?

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Discuss

1. How much intentionality do you put into your questions? How do great questions help disciple group members?
2. Is application stressed in your group? How often do group members follow through?
3. How safe is your group? What can you do to make it safer for sharing?