

Discipleship: The Purpose of Small Groups

Focus on the why of groups, and the rest will fall into place.

Joel Comiskey

Simon Sinek, popular speaker and author of the bestselling book, *Start with Why*, often shares that having a proper motivation is critical for success. He knows from personal experience. Though he was making a lot of money, Sinek lost his passion and motivation for doing business. He was focused on *what* he was selling and then trying to figure out *how* to sell it. When he started studying great innovators, leaders, and companies for inspiration, he learned they had a different approach that proved critical: they started with the *why* of business. By focusing on the *why*, their companies and ministries found success because the workers understood their purpose, and that purpose motivated them in their everyday work.

In the early days of my small-group journey, I focused more on the *how* questions. I wrote about how small groups worked and how they could help churches grow. While it's important to know how to lead small groups, I've learned that the most important consideration is the *why* behind doing it. If their motivation is faulty, we will become discouraged over time, lose the joy and excitement of leading small groups, and often quit. The *how* and *what* of ministry are needed, but without the *why*, vision fizzles.

So what is the *why* for small groups? What's the value of meeting together? Jesus answered the *why* question over 2000 years ago when he gave a clear command to his disciples to make other disciples. We read in Matthew 28:18–20:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

In Matthew 28, Jesus is telling his small group of disciples to develop more groups of disciples. Jesus developed this group for three years. In the atmosphere of the group, these disciples were molded, shaped, trained, and then sent forth to multiply and infiltrate the surrounding communities (Luke 9 and 10).

The word *disciple* simply means pupil or learner. In biblical times, philosophers were surrounded by their pupils who were called disciples (e.g., John the Baptist's followers were called his disciples in Mark 2:18 and John 1:35). So the disciples were followers of Christ, people who learned from him. After Christ's resurrection, the word *disciple* was replaced by words such as *believer*, *saint*, *Christian*, *brother in Christ* or *sister in Christ*. Why? Because after Pentecost, God established the church, the gathering of believers, to be the main place where discipleship occurred.

The early church followed Christ's pattern and changed the world house by house. Michael Wilkens says, "Discipling today is always undertaken as an outgrowth of the life of the church, whereas prior to Pentecost it occurred with Jesus personally. . . . We may go so far as to say that in many ways discipleship is the overall goal of the church, including evangelism, nurturing, fellowship, leadership, worship, etc." God chose the church to make disciples—both today and in New Testament times.

Discipleship Happens in Community

In preparation for writing my book, *Making Disciples in the 21st Century Church*, I scoured all the books I could find on discipleship. I expected the authors to highlight Christ's call to make disciples in a small group as well as the early church's commitment to follow that pattern through house-to-house ministry. I was amazed, however, at how many books skipped over Christ's call to discipleship in a group. Most, in fact, emphasized personal growth and the one-on-one variety of discipleship found in individualistic western cultures, like North America.

Most books focused on personal spirituality and individual practice of spiritual disciplines like having a quiet time, fasting, praying, and Bible reading. Usually there was some mention of belonging to a local church to aid in discipleship, but it was not the focus. Most authors failed to explain the group context of discipleship in the New Testament and make it seem like the individual variety is the biblical way to make disciples. I doubt this is what Jesus had in mind when he told us to go and make disciples. It seems we're applying our individualistic Western culture to the text. The emphasis on the individual simply is not reflective of church history or the majority of cultures today.

Discipleship According to Jesus

In Matthew 28:16–20, Jesus is talking to a group of disciples. He taught them important life lessons as they lived together. Much of the crucial character development came as they worked through conflicts and overcame difficulties with one another. Jesus called these disciples to join a new community and become part of a new spiritual family. David Watson, Anglican evangelist and author, writes,

It is equally striking that Jesus calls individuals, not to stay in isolation, but to join the new community of God's people. He called the Twelve to share their lives, with him and with each other. They were to live every day in a rich and diverse fellowship, losing independence, learning interdependence, gaining from each other new riches and strength.

The disciples certainly had a personal relationship with God, but that personal relationship needed to be molded and shaped in community where the one anothers of Scripture were prioritized. Jesus said to his disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

Jesus used the home to gather his church, the new family of God. When Jesus went from village to village healing the sick, he was actually ministering in homes. The following offers a glimpse of Christ's home ministry:

- Jesus in the house of Peter (Matthew 8:14)
- Jesus in the house of Matthew (Matthew 9:10)
- Jesus in the house of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)
- Jesus in the house of Lazarus and his sisters (Luke 10:38-42)
- Jesus in the house of Jairus (Mark 5:35-38)
- Jesus healing two blind people in a house (Matthew 9:28-30)
- Jesus in the house of Simon the leper (Matthew 26:6)
- Jesus teaching his disciples in a house (Mark 7:17-18; 9:33; 10:10)
- Jesus forgiving and healing a paralyzed person in a house (Luke 5:19)
- Jesus in the home of a Pharisee (Luke 14:1)
- Jesus instituting the Lord's supper in a house (Matthew 26:18)
- Jesus sent his twelve and his seventy disciples to heal and teach from village to village and house-to-house (Luke 9:1-9; 10:1-11)

Jesus infiltrated the houses and families of his day to promote this new family of faith. He then sent his disciples two-by-two to minister in homes (Luke 9 and 10). After Christ's resurrection, the early church met in houses to continue this family mentality. Through house-to-house ministry, they turned the world upside down from the inside out.

Individual Expression in a Group

Concentrating on community shouldn't take away from the individual's worth but rather should enhance it. Individuals who are being molded within a small community of believers continue to grow in a personal relationship with God.

We need to distinguish between individuality and individualism. Individuality refers to an individual as a responsible person in community, while individualism exalts the independence of individuals and their private rights. Individuality can be good, while individualism breeds alienation and pride. C. Norman Kraus says, "The sin of humankind is not the assertion of individuality in community, but the assertion of individual self-sufficiency and independence from God and fellow humans."

The biblical alternative is the individual in community. It's having a relationship with God and also being in community with the body of Christ. Each group member depends on the others. This interaction enhances individual personhood and provides personal identity. We become strong as individuals as we relate to others in the group.

Practical Implications for Small Groups

In a healthy small group we maintain our individuality *and* realize that we are valued individuals with a God-assigned role to play. Discipleship in a group includes interdependent and reciprocal relationships. It's not an emptying of my own rights, aspirations, or goals. Rather, it's developing

those personal attributes in the group atmosphere. We become disciples as we learn to love one another and allow others to hold us accountable. This is the type of discipleship Jesus had in mind. Here are four suggestions for practically applying this strategy to your group:

Build Community

The small group leader needs to help small-group members practice the one anothers (e.g., love one another, serve one another, etc.) and work through conflict that occurs in those relationships. Someone once told me that small groups bring out more problems in the church—and this is true! Small groups allow people to share what’s really going on and receive healing in the process. They also bring out conflicts among members. When conflicts do occur, effective small-group leaders remind the members to go directly to the person rather than gossiping.

Focus on the Priesthood of All Believers

The best small-group leaders are facilitators, not preachers or teachers. They get everyone involved in the discussion. They ask group members to lead different aspects of the meeting including the prayer, icebreaker, worship, snack time, and even the discussion. They realize that participation leads to maturity and Christlikeness, so they offer this opportunity freely and help group members discover their spiritual gifts and the best ways to contribute.

Reach Out to Others

When small-group members reach out to their *oikos* (family, friends, and contacts), they grow in Christ. When Jesus told his disciples that they would be fishers of men, he had net-fishing in mind—fishing as a group. Outreach might include meeting social needs, special evangelistic events, or invite new people to attend the group meetings. Cover all evangelistic activity with prayer.

Start New Groups

Encourage discipleship by starting new groups. Multiplication is part of the discipleship process. Most churches prepare future leaders both within the small group as well as through a step-by-step equipping process. As new leaders are formed and discipled, the great commission is once again fulfilled to make disciples who make disciples in small groups.

—Joel Comiskey is author of [Making Disciples in the 21st Century Church](#) and an editorial advisor for [SmallGroups.com](#); copyright 2015 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. When you think about discipleship, do you first think about individual practices or group life? Why?
2. How might focusing on the Priesthood of All Believers help disciple group members?
3. How do you understand the difference between individualism and individuality? How do these come out in small groups?