

# Handling Theological Conflicts in a Small Group

*Five approaches that will help you and your group deal with doctrinal strife*

1 Timothy 1:3–7

John was ready for the upcoming small-group meeting. Prayed-up and prepared, he was especially looking forward to seeing Tom and Nancy, a couple who had been attending the group for four months, but were not yet connected to the church. When the meeting started, the icebreaker was great, as was the worship time. Then the kids went to a separate room for their lesson, and John told everyone to turn to Matthew 28:18–20: Christ’s famous commission to make disciples of all nations. John shared his conviction that without Christ people are eternally lost, and that Christ expects all believers to evangelize and make disciples.

That’s when Tom blurted out, “I believe that Jesus only died for the elect, and that he predestines only elected people to be saved. God will bring to me those he wants me to talk with. So I don’t believe in witnessing.” The rest of the group froze in silence. The question on everyone’s mind was, *How is John going to respond?*

## Get Ready

Let’s face it, doctrinal conflict can and does occur in small-group ministry. Ideally, churches have structures in place that will answer most theological questions. But if such documents do exist, group leaders usually don’t have immediate access to them. Similarly, a lot of churches don’t have a workable coaching structure in place to help group leaders deal with doctrinal questions. All of this means that too many small-group leaders are left to address theological issues on their own.

Dealing with doctrinal conflict is a diverse problem, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Yet as the leader is armed with various options and responses, the Holy Spirit can more readily remind him or her which option best fits the situation. With that in mind, here are some possibilities:

## The “Can We Talk at Another Time?” Approach

This is often the best approach. Most small-group lessons last around 45 minutes—a time period in which the group can cover only a limited amount of ground. Consequently, one of the chief jobs of the small-group leader is to keep the discussion on track. When a doctrinal issue comes up, the leader can say, “Tom, your point about Christ dying only for the elect is a good one. Thanks for sharing it. But this is not the time to debate eternal security and predestination. Let’s have that conversation another time—perhaps we could meet afterwards. Right now, let’s look at what Christ clearly says here in the Word about making disciples. Now, let me repeat this question....”

At these words, the group will likely heave a collective sigh of relief. Remember that group members often feel uncomfortable and un-edified when wandering down the path of a tangled doctrinal discussion. Granted, there’s a time and place for such discussions, but it’s usually not in the middle of a small-group gathering. The “Can we talk at another time?” approach allows you to positively respond to the person with the doctrinal issue, yet firmly remind him or her that it’s best to discuss the matter outside of the group.

## The “I Don’t Know” Approach

Here is a blessed phrase: “I don’t know, but I will check on it and get back to you.” That is a phrase of honor, not disgrace. Small-group leaders are not supposed to be theological experts. They are trained in other professions. Pastors, on the other hand, go to Bible school and seminary in order to study theology. So when the small-group leader says, “I don’t know the answer to that theological question, but I’ll find out and get back to you,” he or she is manifesting the humble attitude of a learner.

Pride tempts many group leaders to act like they know the answer to any question. But the results of giving in to such pride can be disastrous. How often have you seen group leaders think they remember a Scripture verse that addresses a theological question, only to spend five or ten fruitless minutes hunting for it? And answers given under pressure usually ring hollow.

## The “Brief Answer and Continue” Approach

When a potentially conflictive doctrinal issue can be easily explained, and the leader feels the group might also be helped by the answer, he or she can give a brief answer and move on. This is a good approach when the

question comes from a sincere member who is known and respected in the group. Note that the leader should be sufficiently confident in the subject matter to give a brief answer—it's often harder to give a concise answer than a long, rambling one.

### **The “Go with the Flow” Approach**

I remember one meeting in my living room in which first-timer Mary, a nominal Roman Catholic newcomer, blurted out her frustration with the Catholic Church. She wanted to discuss what was boiling inside her heart—the doctrinal differences between the Catholic Church and evangelical Christianity. In this case, Mary sincerely wanted help. I allowed her to share her doubts, and we as a group answered her questions.

I chose this option because, first, she was the guest of a faithful member of the group. Second, she asked sincere questions that demonstrated a desire to know Christ—not just debate doctrine. Third, the maturity level of the rest of the group was high enough to warrant a free-flowing exchange with Mary.

We spent most of the lesson discussing her issues, and she came back week after week with more and more of her questions answered. Eventually she received Christ, was baptized, and even became a small-group multiplication leader. Sometimes the leader should see a doctrinal discussion as an opportunity to minister to doubting or seeking people.

### **The “Talk to the Person Afterwards” Approach**

My wife Celyce invited Lily to her women's small group with the hope that she'd become a believer. Unfortunately, Lily's doubt and unbelief disrupted the love and community in the group. She liked to bring up arguments for the sake of debate. Her constant doubt and questioning around doctrinal issues caused disruption and consternation. She attacked other group members if they disagreed with her. Celyce reminded Lily about the need to stick with the topic. She even tried giving a brief answer and moving on. Nothing worked.

Celyce decided to have a serious talk with Lily after the group. The direct approach helped for a while, but the contentious narratives continued during lesson times. Celyce was eventually forced to ask Lily not to come back. “I think it would be best if I talked with you one-on-one, rather than in the group,” Celyce graciously told her. “Next week, why don't we meet together for breakfast?” We later found out that Lily had a history of mental problems. Celyce made the right decision.

### **Conclusion**

Experience is often the best teacher when determining which approach to take with doctrinal conflicts. Small-group leaders should not be afraid of failure—it will occur. But there's no one who can help make sense of the diverse experiences better than the Holy Spirit.

I encourage small-group leaders to take time before each meeting to pray, meditate, and get in touch with God. Small-group leadership is an exciting adventure in trusting the living God for answers. He's the One who will give wisdom to make the right decisions in dealing with theological conflicts in your small group.

—JOEL COMISKEY; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

### **Discuss:**

1. Was the last doctrinal discussion in our small group a positive or negative experience? Why? Could the leader have benefited from any of the approaches above?
2. Have I tried any of the above approaches in my own small group? What was the result?
3. What steps can our church take in training our group leaders to address doctrinal conflicts and questions using these five approaches?