

Good Things Come in Small Groups: 25 Years of Discipling Men

by Steve Hixon

Hope for the deep-fried: an alternative to leadership burnout

I was only 24 years old. I had been a Christian for about 6 years and was close to burning out. I doubt I would've said so at the time, but during my summer pastoral internship at Peninsula Bible Church I desperately needed a reason to go on, ministry-wise. One day a staff member was innocently showing me a diagram depicting two different approaches to church work. "Wait a minute," I said. Before me was life and death, so to speak. In one picture the Christian "worker" (that would be me) ran around like a busy bee meeting every need, needing every meeting, being perfect, tirelessly teaching, planning, organizing, promoting – and then doing it all again the next week. The result? Some people were encouraged, helped, inspired – but mainly kept busy. The result for the "worker"? Exhaustion. I had assumed this was the only way to go; anything less was simply a lack of dedication.

As more than one person has pointed out, the church often looks like a football game: 50,000 people in the bleachers, desperately needing of exercise, watching 22 people on the field who are desperately in need of rest.

In the diagram, the alternate snapshot of ministry seemed too good to be true, probably illegal. It showed the "worker" doing relatively few things, but doing them well and enjoying them, and delegating the rest of the activities to the rest of the people, who were somehow supernaturally gifted to do and enjoy those things. The spectator-player dichotomy was gone; everyone was involved somehow. That was a defining moment for me. I can remember thinking, "If this is true, there's hope."

There's a famous scene in the movie City Slickers where Billy Crystal is speaking with the old, grizzled, wizened cowboy Curly (Jack Palance) and wondering aloud about what's most important in life. Curly

sticks up one finger and says with a knowing grin, "One thing." It's a classic movie moment, because it speaks to a need we all have. Find that one thing you're called to do, and do it with all your heart.

But – what's the one thing? Somebody please tell me!

Equipping: What leaders are called to do

Fortunately, Ephesians chapter four shows spiritual leaders what the "one thing" is. In verses 11 through 13, Paul writes that the reason God "gave" leaders to the church was to "prepare God's people for works of ministry." The original word is "equip." That's the one true thing. Leaders (often called "ministers," which perpetuates the misconception) aren't supposed to do the whole ministry. Leaders are given and called by God to *equip the body of Christ* to do ministry.

"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 [equip] 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 fullness of Christ."

- Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV

Now, finding out what kind of equipment people need, and how to give it to them, that takes some thinking. After all, what does an "equipped" person look like?

For most of the 80's my wife and I ran a fairly large singles ministry. (Not a group for fairly large *people*; I mean a fairly large *group*!) It was one of the best and richest times in our lives. Constantly looking for the latest, greatest, cutting edge social event, we decided to take a bunch of people backpacking in

Colorado. The sheepish volunteers met one evening and confessed that they had no more hiking equipment than their own youthful enthusiasm. We told them, fine – buy some boots and JSU – just show up. We drove all day and night from Dallas, Texas to Wilderness Ranch in Creede, Colorado, where we were herded into a huge lodge, and told to sit down in a big circle. Expecting a lecture, we were surprised that the Ranch leaders didn't really talk all that much. Instead, they simply dumped a ton of stuff in the middle of the floor and began methodically distributing pieces to us novice campers – backpacks, stoves, tents, utensils, dried-food packets, parkas. An hour later we weren't any more experienced – but we sure were equipped. And the good news was, we weren't expected to go “out there” alone – the leaders were going with us, thank God. They were used to hiking nine miles with a full pack, finding the trail, navigating to the elusive “Window” and “Pyramid” rock formations, detecting hypothermia, digging the BIFF (bathroom in forest floor). The leaders didn't do everything, and we didn't want them to. We would've been bored if they did. What we wanted, and desperately needed, was their encouragement, their expertise, and their training in how to use the equipment we'd been given.

What if spiritual leaders did the same?

One of the surprising things about ministry is how many leaders don't know about this life-saving principle. And what's even more surprising is that once they hear about it, once it's shown to them, their response is often, “That's nice, but I don't have time.” Speaking before a group of dozens of pastors in Romania, I talked about this concept and watched them nod their heads. But in small groups, they confided, “I'm responsible for four churches in four different towns. I can barely keep going. My wife says she never sees me. How can I possibly find time to mentor, to disciple men? And if I did, what would I do?”

How could a leader be “too busy” to do their most important job? I guess the same way that I as a parent was often too busy to spend quality time with my kids. I wasn't doing bad things, I just let the loud cry of urgent things drown out the whisper of the more crucial things. Let's be honest; have you ever been to a pastor's conference? It's often one of the most competitive gatherings imaginable. What sounds cooler and more impressive: “Yeah, we doubled our

budget last year, and now we're in the middle of a multi-million-dollar building campaign to accommodate all the people we're turning away,” or “I meet with a bunch of messed-up guys every Thursday, and it's the most exciting thing I do.” Don't get me wrong; the corporate side of church life is absolutely necessary. It's just that it's easy to be lured into a mindset where that's all there is.

Ron Ritchie & the Timothy Experience

During that same early internship, the summer of 1977, the first thing I was told was to go around and find out what all the staff people did. Just finding them was hard enough. That year PBC had 13 pastors, so the task pretty much filled up my day-timer. By far the most colorful and potentially deranged pastor was a guy named Ron, who ran the Careers ministry. He fit right into the 70's Bay Area ex-hippie culture: semi-long hair, beard, sunglasses, jeans. To be honest, he was a little scary. Hardly your Dallas Seminary type, (actually he'd almost gotten thrown out of DTS for being a bit too authentic, but that's another story). But he wasn't quite as hang-loose as he appeared. He seemed unusually busy, but not the normal hectic-busy. More like purposeful-busy. I asked if he would show me what he did to train his leaders, and he led me into a room that revolved around a carefully-set table. But instead of plates, condiments and food it was full of notebooks, handouts and Bibles. “This is where my Timothys meet every Wednesday night,” he said.

“What the heck is a Timothy?” I silently wondered, but nodded knowingly.

Sensing my carefully covered-up confusion, he explained. “Jesus prayed all night asking the Father which guys, which disciples, to invest in. He poured his life into those men, and eventually he called them friends and brothers. Later, Paul trained a guy named Timothy. So every year I start praying and looking for men who are spiritually hungry. When I find a bunch of them, I send out a letter describing what I want to do with them, and asking them to consider it and respond by a certain date.” (*You can see Ron Ritchie's plan for the Timothy Discipleship Experience in the Appendix.*)

“We meet here every week for a year. I teach them how to understand the Bible, how to dig and discover

truths for themselves, how to teach one another, how to find and develop their spiritual gifts, how to share their faith. They come prepared. We spend a couple hours in here studying, and then we all go out to dinner at a local restaurant.”

“Out to dinner?” I asked.

“Yeah. Because it’s more than just knowledge. It’s relationships. I want to see how they interact with each other, how they treat the waitress, if they actually care about people or just like to talk about it.”

“Doesn’t that get kind of expensive?” was my profound response.

Ron just stared at me.

That conversation pretty much stuck with me. Another defining moment, I guess you could say. So, when I had graduated from seminary and started into my first ministry, I thought, I think I’ll do what Ron did.

The first few years and groups were pretty bumpy, full of gaffes and goofiness, a catalogue of dysfunction, and when they were over, I was usually thinking, “Duh! Why’d I do it that way? Why didn’t we try this?” And then the next group would get a little bit better. And the next one a little better yet. That was 25 years and almost as many groups ago.

I gradually came to the conclusion that they were worth it. They were messy, they were frustrating at times, the results were hard to quantify, but I felt a deepening conviction: this thing is worth it. I began to realize that when I didn’t have a group, I really missed it. I also noticed that I was happiest getting in my car at 6am to drive to whatever restaurant my current group was meeting in. I loved watching the guys straggle in, sleepy but open to whatever God might do that morning, in that sacred time. And when I would drive away, I felt full of life. I couldn’t imagine not doing this.

Befriend & impart: the essence of discipleship

So, what is the essence of discipleship? Paul talks about passing on what we’ve come to believe, and “passing it on” well enough that the learner can pass

it on to someone else, and on and on through the succeeding generations.

You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.

- 2 Timothy 2:2 (NLT)

I’ve probably been on 50 weekend retreats, and the details tend to run together in my memory, but a few classic moments stand out. One autumn weekend we coerced most of the leaders in our church into getting away to the east Texas pine woods for a couple nights, and we asked Dave Roper, a seasoned pastor, to come and speak to us. Dave’s pretty low-key, but he commands respect with his unique blend of scholarship and wisdom, and something he said almost off-the-cuff has stuck with me ever since I heard it that day. In his unassuming style, he told us that the essence of discipleship could be condensed into two words: “befriend and impart.” Develop relationships, and then teach whatever you know that meets a spiritual need the other person has. I realized that often I did one or the other, but usually not both. I would try to teach someone spiritual truths without really earning the right to speak. As the old saying goes, people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. And then other times I would make friends, but not really speak anything significant into their lives. Befriend and impart. Is there any simpler or more accurate way to describe what Jesus did with people, especially the disciples?

Why small groups?

In the Great Commission, Jesus clearly told his followers that their main job was to make disciples (Matthew 29:28).

Then Jesus came to them and said, “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.”

- Matthew 28:18-20

However, like many New Testament commands, this one was left purposely vague in terms of exactly how it was to be applied. I think this is God's wisdom, allowing for different personalities in different times and places to be creative under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Should we make disciples simply by writing things down in documents and telling people to read them? I once had a seminary professor who, being critical of the "one-on-one" style of ministry that was popular at the time, said, "Yeah, I believe in one-on-one. One book on one man!" Needless to say, he wasn't the most relational teacher on campus.

Is one-on-one really best? Should an older, more mature believer meet individually with a novice Christian for spiritual guidance? This has been effective in many situations. Or should you add one more body, like the "triad" approach that some people prefer? In that case, an older leader doubles his or her impact by teaching two at a time.

You can probably guess that I will say that any of these systems are valid as long as they actually work. Personally, I prefer small groups. Perhaps it's because of my own personal wiring, maybe it has to do with some very positive early experiences I had with groups. I think groups have more potential for disaster and dysfunction, but like I said before, I'm convinced that they also have tremendous possibilities for growth, based on the sheer multi-faceted dynamics of interaction and activity. Learning is multiplied when I listen to six guys voice their observations on a passage of the Bible. I can ask a man to teach a verse of Scripture to the group, and he's not just talking back to me. We experience a microcosm of the Body of Christ in a small group, with a wide variety of personality types and a range of spiritual gifts. Plus, as a pastor I couldn't always carve out 2 hours a week for six different guys, but I could easily arrange to meet with a group of six guys for 2 hours.

Another reason I like groups is because new believers are impressionable. How often, in a one-one-one context, does the novice Christian assume, even subconsciously, that he should become exactly like the teacher, especially if the teacher has an A-type personality? What if the "learner" is a B-type? They can spend years trying to measure up to the stature of their omni-gifted "discipler." But in a healthy group, strong personalities lose some of their unhealthy

tendencies, as they are forced to serve and submit to others.

How big should a group get; what's the perfect size? What a silly question. Of course it's 13, because Jesus had 12 disciples. OK, just kidding. Again, it's up to you. For a while I didn't want anything larger than 6 or 7, but then one year we ended up with ten guys, and I loved it. Of course there are trade-offs, since time is limited, and the larger the group, the less time each person can speak, and shy people can have a tendency to hide. In a larger group, the leader needs to be more proactive about guiding the discussion, making sure no one dominates and no one gets lost in the shuffle.

One way to help this is by having a co-leader. Recently I started a group with another man for whom I have tremendous respect. We see eye-to-eye on our goals and values, but we have different gifts and approaches, making a good leadership team combination. But we need to stay in touch to stay on track, so we talk weekly about how we felt the last meeting went, what we want to do next time, how the time will be divided, etc. If we don't communicate, we'll frustrate ourselves or cancel each other out. But the camaraderie of it feels good to me. Like the Lewis & Clark expedition (a great study in leaders, by the way), I think everyone benefits from multiple leadership.

Covenant – negotiating for success at the start

Small groups tend to follow some very predictable patterns, most of which have been carefully studied and documented (see Growth Groups, by Michael Dibbert for example). They have foreseeable life cycle stages and relational dynamics. For instance, most of the groups I have been in have exhibited some or all of the following characteristics:

- Initial excitement in the first few meetings, creating an unrealistic and transient euphoria
- Several months into the group, unmet expectations surface, stemming from misunderstandings or never-expressed desires
- Waning energy starting in the middle stages of the group, people backing off their involvement or commitment
- In the end, the group simply fades away as members eventually have to leave

- Dominant personalities hog the time with long-winded off-subject diatribes
- Shy personalities only speak when they're sure of what to say, or who are afraid of being wrong
- People start not showing up, or showing up unprepared, leading more conscientious members to wonder if it's really worth it to spend time studying in advance
- Someone dares to share something really risky and vulnerable, and their "offering" is shut down, preached at, trivialized, spiritualized or worse, ignored – creating a glass ceiling which severely limits authenticity

How to solve these problems? Here's what I've found (everyone lean in to listen to the magic formula) - you can't! At least not completely, especially in a fallen world where people abound with idiosyncrasies, personality defects, defense mechanisms. As John Ortberg states in the title of his book, "Everybody's Normal Until You Get to Know Them!" And as pastors love to quip, "Ministry is great, it's just the people I can't stand." Ministry will always be messy. However, and here's the hope, apart from leadership skills, one helpful tool is the group covenant. It's not so much the document itself that solves problems, but the disciplined process of discussing group dysfunction before it even starts. Why don't most engaged couples get pre-marital counseling? Because they don't feel like they need it. After all, they're happy! Every time a young couple asks to me to perform their wedding ceremony, I inquire how they're handling conflict in their relationship. Sheepishly, but proudly, they often announce, "You know, we've never even had a fight!" My instinct is to say, "Run for the hills; you're clueless." It's the couples who can name their areas of potential disagreement that I feel good about.

Likewise, the initial energy and euphoria of a new small group gives the false impression that there will be no problems. Look how much we like each other! No one will ever be late, rude, unprepared, uncaring, loud, manipulative, insecure – you fill in the blank.

Therefore, what I've done is a kind of reverse-engineering for group life. I try to think through all the things that have damaged, derailed or destroyed groups in the past. Then I create a group covenant document that I hand out at or before the first

meeting, and we spend a significant amount of time going over it in every detail. A covenant is a description of how we want to conduct ourselves as a group, a picture of how we want to treat one another. I try to explain why each point is important, and give examples of past mistakes (especially ones I've made). I ask the guys to respond, so I know whether they "get it" or not. A sample of the issues:

- Showing up: What it does to the group if somebody is 15 minutes late every time
- What happens here, stays here: Why confidentiality is critical to people feeling safe telling their stories
- Why we try to balance knowledge and practical life-application, personal sharing and serious study
- Doing our homework: What happens if people don't prepare but just "wing-it," spouting popular conventional wisdom rather than truth they've discovered on their own
- Caring by paying attention: The importance and skill of listening to others in the group

A group covenant is like marriage vows. Do I perfectly love my wife? No, but that's the direction I want to move in. The covenant is something I can come back to and review time and again (which is actually a pretty good thing to do, maybe every couple months), to reaffirm what I initially agreed to pursue. And there's got to be an atmosphere of grace; we'll all screw up from time to time. A covenant is not a license to be a group Nazi, but it's a chance, like good pre-marital counseling, to talk about problems before they surface in real life. That way emotions, frustration and anger don't rule. How many times have you been in a group and, after several mediocre meetings, someone finally says, "Susy, you're kinda bugging me. By the time you're finished talking, there's no room left for anyone else." "Hmmm – so, how long has this been bothering you?" "For two years."

(You can see my version of a Group Covenant in the Appendix.)

Closure – ending well is important

Relationships don't have to end, but groups usually do. And just as it's important to start well, it's equally important to end well. Surprisingly, most groups just fade away with little or no fanfare. But

with just a little foresight and planning, a group can send itself off into the proverbial sunset with a great celebration. After all, you've invested a lot of time and effort in this, why not take a moment to remember the best? Closure is a way to say thanks to God and to each other for the gift of friendship and brotherhood.

Think about what Jesus did. He alone knew that the end was near. Most of the disciples probably didn't even realize that the Last Supper was the *last* supper, but he did, and he made sure it was a special evening. I'm sure the men reminisced about the three years they had spent together. Perhaps there was laughter. And Jesus seized the moment to give his great command – that they prove their commitment to him by choosing to love each other. He gave them an object lesson illustrating his own love for them, a parting gift that they would never forget. He washed their feet.

Be as creative as you want. What's most important is that, if possible, 100% of the group is present. Ask them to show up having thought through the time you had together. Last summer our group celebrated our study of the Psalms by each person bringing an expression of what they'd learned. People wrote psalms, poems, drew pictures, created collages, made slideshows. Some were hilariously funny, others were achingly poignant. It was a great evening, and it honored and elevated the weeks we had spent together, acknowledged that it had been worth it, that it meant something to us, that it was another strong brick in the building of our faith. Take a picture of the group, and give each person a copy. How knows, in this hectic world, that same set of people may never be together again this side of heaven.

On a larger scale, at one church we took the small group discipleship concept and created a program out of it. We spent months training leaders, then unleashed them upon men and women who had signed up for groups. We shepherded the leaders by meeting with them regularly, and at the end of the year we had a big banquet at a local hotel for the hundreds who had participated, and spent the evening sharing our experiences with laughter and tears. I recall that perhaps the greatest impact was felt by the spouses who attended but hadn't been in groups yet. Listening to the authentic stories that night, many of them sensed a spiritual awakening in their own hearts.

Core curriculum: what to study?

Good question! While there are no perfect answers, there are some bad, or at least mediocre ones. The curriculum for the group is the diet. Will it be nutritional or junk food?

My bias is that the Bible is critical to discipleship. Many groups will decide to read the latest popular Christian bestseller, but my experience is that groups based on these books usually last a few meetings, and then quickly start to lose steam. Christian books aren't inspired, the Bible is. The Holy Spirit only promises to inhabit one book; there's only one written Word. Someone once told me that the Bible is the track that the Spirit runs on. So if your goal is to produce disciples who own, understand, and can teach what they believe, what better curriculum than the Scriptures themselves?

Having said that, what do you do, read and explain the whole Bible? No group has time for that, and besides, that's the lifetime pursuit of every believer. In the mid-1980's, some friends and I sat down to try to answer this question. What do believers need to know? If we only have 6 months or a year with a person, how do we equip them? What do they need? We concluded that they didn't just need data, they needed essential concepts, or principles. They could spend the rest of their lives gathering Biblical facts. We realized that while there is an enormous amount of factual information in the Bible, there are relatively few, or at least a manageable number of principles. What principles do I really need to grasp to live the Christian life?

We forced ourselves to make a huge list, and then whittle it down to fifteen. Why fifteen, is that a magic number? Absolutely not. We just picked it out of thin air. But we realized that often groups may only meet for six months to a year, and it seemed to fit. Also, we decided to use John chapter fifteen as a template. In that passage, Jesus is speaking to his men on their last night together. He mentions three vital relationships that they needed to understand: their relationship with God, with each other, and with the world. And so we chose to organize our principles around those three relationships. We limited ourselves to five principles for each relationship, making fifteen in all. There could just as easily be 12, or 18. But if I spend a year with young believers, at

the end of that experience I want them to have a grasp on who God is, and who they are in relationship to Him. I want them to understand the importance of the body of Christ, since Christians are not designed to be lone rangers, but living out their faith in the midst of a believing community. And finally, I want them to know that there is a world system, and there is spiritual warfare, and that God wants us to operate in the world as His ambassadors, reaching out to those who are dying spiritually, offering the true bread of life to hungry people. And not arrogantly, but graciously, as beggars helping other beggars.

That's the core curriculum. There are plenty on the market, and you may have found or created something that really works for you. That's great. Revolving around that core, I want to also "impart" skills to the men in my group. Those skills are: how to study the Bible, how to teach a passage from the Bible, how to answer tough questions about their faith (apologetics), how to discover and develop your spiritual gifts, how to share your faith with other people. (As one friend of mine likes to say, when someone asks him what he does for a living, "I talk to people about Jesus when they're interested. Are you interested?")

If time permits, I also like to introduce guys to some great, short books on critical topics. I emphasize "short" because there's no quicker way to quench someone's interest in a topic than by giving them a 900 page tome that will serve as a great doorstop. (In seminary I was told to buy The Attributes of God by Stephen Charnock, a 17th-century Puritan who evidently had some time on his hands. It's enormous, almost 1200 pages. I never got past page 6, but I felt all holy while I was buying it!) Some of my favorites include:

- More Than a Carpenter, by Josh McDowell (apologetics)
- The Master Plan of Evangelism, by Robert Coleman (how Jesus trained his men)
- Too Busy Not to Pray, by Bill Hybels (prayer, duh)
- Messy Spirituality, by Mike Yaconelli (grace)
- The Jesus I Never Knew, by Philip Yancey (the life of Christ)

I'm also constantly on the lookout for great short articles on essential topics. Some of the best brief

treatments of difficult subjects come from CS Lewis, John Stott, JI Packer, Francis Schaeffer, Ray Stedman, Philip Yancey, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Henri Nouwen. I love to introduce men to great authors, who will become trustworthy wells of wisdom from which to draw for the rest of their lives.

Discipleship in Action: Real-Life Stories

Well, I've described all this in theory. But what does it look like in real life?

Can I share some snapshots with you? If I had a picture album from all my discipleship groups, the following moments would definitely be keepers.

Frank's story

Frank was rocking like a maniac, and it looked like he was starting to sweat. Glancing around, I locked eyes with Ken, and we both thought, "What the heck?" Everyone had put together a "life map," a graphic representation of the significant people and defining moments in their lives. It was Frank's turn to tell his story, to share with us whatever he wanted to from his whole life. It didn't seem like it ought to be this hard, and it wasn't like he was the first in our group to do it. The rocking chair he was in actually began to skip across the hard-wood floor as he recounted his early years growing up in Florida. Finally I couldn't take it any more, I had to ask, "Frank, do you realize that you and that chair are about to take off? Are you nervous, or what?" I'll never forget what he said next.

"No one's ever heard this before."

"What do you mean, this part of your story?"

"No – any part. I've never told my life story to anyone."

"But ... weren't you married for a several years?"

"Like I said, I've never told anyone."

In the book, The Friendless American Male, David Smith says, "Women seem to have a monopoly on meaningful, intimate relationships.... Men have friendships which relate to work or play, but seldom go beyond the surface...."

Ben's serious challenge

Before, and after Ben became a follower of Christ, he spent hours and hours each week in smoke-filled rooms, playing guitar and mandolin for one of the best Irish bands in Texas. Somehow he came into a relationship with God and appeared on the horizon of our little church, and then made his way into my guys' group. Ben's major contribution was that he taught us to take each other seriously. From the very first meeting, he let us know. "Look, if I'm going to show up, I want you to show up too, and I want you to be on time. Don't make me sit around waiting for you! And if I study and prepare the lesson, I don't want you to show up with a blank piece of paper." Well, that woke everyone up! I smiled to myself, thinking he'd said it better than I could have, and coming from a group member, it carried a lot of weight. After all, he was just a volunteer. He wasn't paid to be good, like me. He was just good for nothing. (OK, I couldn't resist.)

Ben let us know that this was a critical, unique time in his life, and our lives, and he didn't want to mess around. He really wanted to grow. He had only recently come to accept Jesus Christ, and he was eager to see real life change. Thankfully he hadn't lapsed into the kind of go-to-Bible-study mentality that was more an inoculation against change than an authentic adventure.

The opportunity came a few weeks into the group. "I want to quit smoking and I need your help," he announced. "I've tried five times before and it never works. We just found out that Susan is pregnant, and I always said I wanted to quit before we had our first child."

We nodded in agreement, but nobody really knew what to say next. There's no magic formula for things like this. But out of the blue Sam had an idea, "Look," he said, "there are eight of us. Why don't we each pick a day this coming week and fast and pray for Ben?"

"Fast – like, don't eat for a whole day?" someone verbalized what we were all thinking. "A whole day just for Ben? I mean, maybe he's worth skipping lunch for, but...!"

But we all did it, and when the next meeting rolled around, we desperately wanted to know what had happened. After all, we'd made pretty major investments, especially for guys! All eyes were on Ben. "Well...?"

"You're not gonna believe this. I quit! I just stopped and never turned back. It's the only time it's ever worked."

And it's still working for Ben. The point is not that smoking is the unforgivable sin, but that we did something together, and saw God work, saw an answer to prayer. It made us all want to pray more, and it bound us together as brothers.

The value of time spent together

Our kids spent 18 years each living in our home, but I can't remember many individual days or nights. The mundane blends together. The ones that stand out are the ones that were different somehow. The time my son and I spent the night in a friend's cabin, eating pizza and playing games, just the two of us. The Mondays when my second-grade daughter and I had breakfast together, because a special program allowed her to go to school an hour late. The afternoon my younger daughter and I drove our ailing golden retriever to the vet, and came back alone, never to see him again.

Likewise, I don't recall the normal meetings with the guys, but the unusual times. Like the time we packed up the cars and drove to a cabin in the mountains for a night, fishing in the nearby stream, riding bikes down a trail at breakneck speed, whitewater rafting and grinning like idiots as we careened through the class-4 rapids. It was over too quickly, but I still have that photograph.

Or the time we all pitched in to put a new roof on a church member's house; she had the materials, but no husband, and no money, and no friends to do it. So we found out and volunteered. I'd never nailed a single shingle before, and I prayed to God that the roof would last despite my incompetence. I can still see us, scattered across the top of that little house, like rats on a sinking ship. But somehow it worked, and again, we did it together. It was something tangible, a real person's real need met.

John's defining moment

John would always say what was on his mind, which was one of the reasons I liked him. "I swear, sometimes I don't even know if I'm a Christian or not," he blurted one morning. "I mean, I've been in this church forever, but some days I just wonder."

Hmm. How to respond to this honesty? "Well," I said, "do you feel like you believe these things we're studying?"

"Yeah, but then I screw up and doubt that I've ever really changed. It's like I'm in a spiritual revolving door."

I secretly wondered how many men and women feel the same way, not knowing that most basic truth – am I or not? Am I forgiven, or do I need to do something else?

John went on, "Would you guys do something?"

"Sure – what?"

"Would you sign a piece of paper saying you witnessed my confession?"

In all the years of meeting with guys, I'd never even thought of such a thing. According to his wish, I asked John, "Do you believe that you need a savior, and that Jesus offered himself for you and paid for your sin? Do you accept his free gift? Is that where your heart is?"

"Yes, absolutely," John replied, wholeheartedly.

So we passed around a piece of paper and signed it, saying we'd witnessed the declaration of John's heart, and that we stood together with him as brothers in Christ. I think he took it to Kinko's the next day and had it laminated, and now he keeps it in his wallet. "Whenever I have doubts, I pull out that card," he said a few weeks later, with a twinkle in his eye. "It's like a confirmation."

Bob's stunning revelation

I glanced at the clock. Dang, not much time left. Our practice was to study for an hour and leave the last 30 minutes for one guy to share whatever he wanted from his life map. (see the attachment on how to create Life Map.) He could share deep or shallow, where he was born or went to grade school, or the most painful trauma of his life. Certainly today, I thought, with ten minutes left, Bob won't want to open up. I wouldn't. I wouldn't risk baring my soul, only to have guys look at their watches and say, sorry, I'm late for work. It was the perfect excuse to be superficial.

Bob hesitated, and his lip began to quiver. What's going on inside him? I wondered.

He began slowly, but soon it became apparent that this was not going to be anything superficial. We were glued to his words, not really wanting to hear them, but unable to turn away as he recounted the horror of an escalating and destructive pattern of sin in his not-so-long-ago past. Tears began to flow, and not just from Bob. Inside, each of us thought, "That could so easily be me. God don't let me do that. Please don't let that happen." Thankfully, Bob's story took a hopeful, positive turn, but it wasn't completely over with yet, and there were no easy answers. Yet there was God's grace, and there was significant healing. He paused. In the wake of his story we all sat stunned. What do you do next, just disband for the morning and say, "Well, have a nice day?"

I wasn't sure what to say, but I thanked Bob for trusting us with this bombshell, and then I looked around at the group and quietly asked, "What did you hear from Bob? What does it mean to you?" There was silence for a few seconds, no one sure what was appropriate; like funeral mourners, not wanting to say something amazingly stupid. Finally Jerry summed it up so well. He smiled and said, "Transformation is a beautiful thing." We all silently agreed; it was the perfect thing to say. Bob was being transformed. God was taking ugliness and creating beauty, an ugliness we all knew we had inside, and a beauty we all desperately wanted. Bob was being transformed, and we got to watch. It reminded me of what I think might be Jesus' favorite Old Testament passage, because he quoted it when he was asked to speak in

his hometown. Isaiah 61:1-3 describes the kind of transformation God loves to create:

*The Lord has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
...to comfort all who mourn,
to bestow on them
a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.*

And once again, this time in the New Testament:

*And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah,
our lives gradually becoming
brighter and more beautiful
as God enters our lives and we become like him.*

- 2 Corinthians 3:18 (The Message)

Summing it all up

Well, I could go on and on, mainly because the Spirit of God is going on and on, as one church puts it, “transforming irreligious people into fully-devoted followers of Christ.” Thank God He does. And the weird thing is, He wants you and me to be involved. He wants your hands, your feet, your eyes, your words. Your unique, unusual, special wiring. And the amazing thing, the glory of the ministry, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say, is that “*you never know what’s going to happen.*”

DISCIPLESHIP GROUP COVENANT



Signed: _____

This covenant is an agreement among brothers in Christ as to how we want to treat one another and how we desire to function as a group. It is a commitment we make as to our intentions, and like all commitments in Christ, we fully realize that we must rely upon the Holy Spirit for any of this to happen!

For as long as I am in this group, I will make every attempt to...

- **Show up** on time unless I absolutely can't make it, in which case I'll call Steve or one of the guys in the group to let them know ahead of time.
"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'... (Matthew 5:37)
- **Be prepared** by studying the material for the week to the best of my ability and time my schedule and other commitments allow.
"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)
- **Contribute** to the group discussion, believing that healthy interaction requires everyone's input and that each member has something special to offer.
"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Cor 12:27)
- **Be honest** about how I am doing in my life and in my walk with God. Complete vulnerability cannot be forced and is not always wise, but I desire to honor these brothers by letting them know what's going on in my life.
"Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth." (Proverbs 16:13)
- **Keep my relationships** with others in the group in good repair. If I have a problem with someone, I will try to work it out with them rather than gossiping, putting them down or ignoring the issue.
"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." (Matthew 18:15)
- **Be emotionally available** to the guys in the group – that is, care about them as brothers, rejoicing when good things come into their lives and showing appropriate concern when times are tough.
"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." (Romans 12:15)
*"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."
(1 Cor 12:26)*
*"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."
(James 5:16)*
- **Be confidential** about things that others share within the group.
"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be." (James 3:9,10)
- **Discover and use my spiritual gifts** in whatever setting God has planned for me.
*"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."
(Ephesians 2:10)*
"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others..." (1 Peter 4:10)