

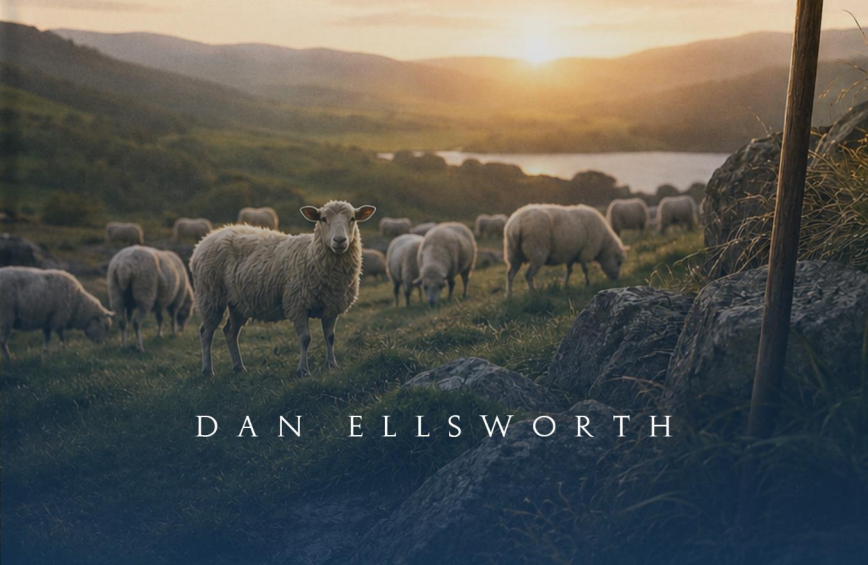
# THE ANCHOR



A FIELD GUIDE FOR  
SCRIPTURE CENTERED  
SMALL GROUP LEADERS

*Where Christ's Sheep  
Are Fed Through His Word*

DAN ELLSWORTH



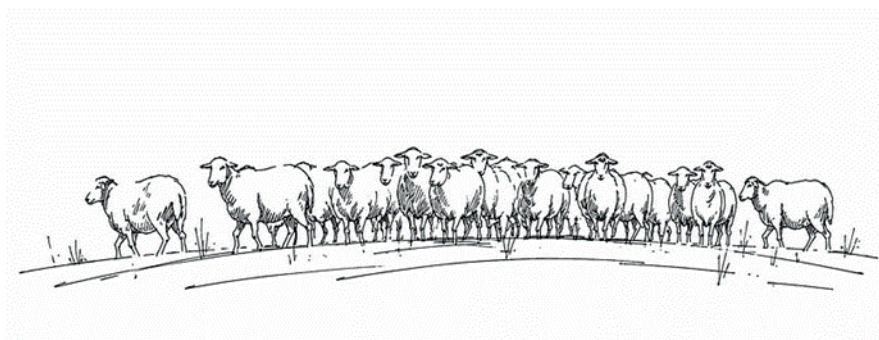
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# Dedication

This book is dedicated to Mark Williamson, my first small group leader. He introduced me to the power of what a small group, rooted in Scripture, can become. He did not simply lead discussions; he created space for growth, honesty, and genuine transformation. Through his leadership, I experienced what it means to invest in people with intention and to walk alongside others in faith.

Steady, thoughtful, and deeply committed to Christ, his family, and those around him, Mark had a way of slowing life down and drawing people into the present moment. He reminded others to be present, to care deeply, and to live with perspective and purpose.

We lost Mark in March 2024, and his absence is deeply felt. His wife Michelle, his children, his family, and so many others carry both the weight of that loss and the strength of the life they shared with him.

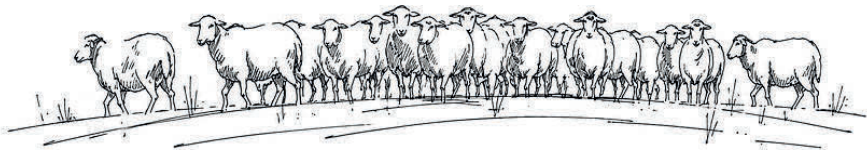
In honoring Mark, I'm reminded of a truth he lived out daily: life is short, people matter, and time spent investing in others carries eternal weight.

# INTRODUCTION

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## The Crisis of Biblical Literacy

*What is present is not always  
what is leading.*



A quiet erosion has been unfolding within many congregations, not through open rebellion or intentional neglect, but through gradual and almost unnoticed displacement. Churches have pursued accessibility, leaders have prioritized relevance, and small groups have focused on building connection. None of these aims are inherently misguided. Yet over time, the emphasis has subtly shifted. Scripture, once the foundation, has become more of a supplement. It remains present, but no longer directs the course.

You may have felt this shift without fully identifying it. Gatherings feel engaging, conversations flow naturally, and relationships continue to deepen. However, when the group turns to Scripture, a different dynamic often emerges. Confidence weakens. Participants hesitate to follow the flow of a passage or explain why a verse holds significance within its context. Discussion tends to move quickly toward personal reflection, application, or shared experiences, but spends far less time carefully examining what the text actually communicates and why it was written.

Biblical literacy rarely disappears all at once. Instead, it diminishes gradually. Exposure begins to replace intentional study, and familiarity takes the place of true understanding. In many group settings, conversations center on personal development, emotional processing, or practical advice. While these discussions can be valuable and often necessary, they cannot substitute for the shaping power of sustained engagement with God's Word. When Scripture becomes secondary, depth begins to erode, even if participation

remains consistent. People may feel connected, yet still lack the confidence to interpret a passage accurately or apply it with clarity.

The issue is not typically hostility toward Scripture, but displacement. Over time, conversation takes center stage, personalities begin to influence direction, and curriculum shapes the flow, while Scripture remains present but no longer authoritative. As its role diminishes, spiritual formation slows in ways that are subtle but cumulative. Over months and years, confidence declines, obedience becomes less defined, and faith settles into a state of comfort rather than growth.

As a small group leader, you may experience this tension firsthand. You desire genuine growth within your group, and you want Scripture to shape lives rather than simply inspire discussion. At the same time, you may feel an unspoken pressure to keep conversations engaging, avoid uncomfortable silence, answer difficult questions, and resolve every tension that arises. When a passage feels complex, you may question your ability to guide it effectively. When discussions drift, you may wonder whether you corrected course too strongly or not strongly enough. In those moments, the weight of responsibility can feel greater than the role itself suggests.

Yet small groups carry a unique and powerful potential precisely because they function within close relational settings. In these environments, people are known, and questions emerge naturally. Within a circle, struggles become visible, and obedience can be identified and pursued together. What is heard in larger settings is processed more deeply in smaller ones. This allows faith to move from

abstraction into lived practice. Growth becomes observable rather than assumed. At the same time, without intentional grounding in Scripture, this same environment can easily drift toward comfort without meaningful formation. When the text no longer anchors the group, the strongest voice often fills the gap.

This manual is built on a simple but essential conviction. God shapes His people through His Word in the context of community. You are not called to manufacture transformation or engineer spiritual outcomes. Your role is one of stewardship. It is both sacred and steady. You are responsible for creating and protecting a space where Scripture is handled with care, understood with integrity, and applied with faithfulness. You guide conversations so they remain anchored rather than reactive. You acknowledge tension without fearing it and preserve unity without avoiding truth.

When this perspective becomes clear, much of the quiet pressure leaders carry begins to ease. You are not the authority in the room, Scripture is. You are not the source of growth, the Spirit is. You are not accountable for outcomes. You are accountable for faithfulness. This clarity does not diminish your role, it strengthens it.

Throughout the following chapters, a consistent pattern will emerge. Scripture leads, leaders steward, and the Spirit forms. Every principle, example, and tool is designed to support this pattern. The goal is not to create impressive gatherings or emotionally charged experiences, but to cultivate lasting discipleship that can grow and multiply over time. The framework is intentionally simple so it can be practiced consistently, repeated faithfully, and shared easily without

losing its integrity. What is established in one group can extend naturally into another.

People will come distracted. Some will speak openly, while others remain hesitant. Difficult questions will arise, and emotions will surface. These realities are not signs of failure. They reflect the human condition through which God works. Leadership matters not because you must provide every answer, but because you maintain direction and preserve focus. When Scripture remains central, growth unfolds steadily and often quietly.

Small group leadership is rarely dramatic. It is patient, relational, and often unseen. Yet over time, Scripture reshapes instincts, realigns priorities, and deepens obedience in ways no single gathering can measure. Participation matures, confidence develops, and new leaders begin to emerge. What begins around a table gradually extends into homes, families, and future groups. In time, multiplication becomes a natural expression of faithful stewardship rather than a disruption.

Your willingness to step into this role carries more significance than you may realize. You do not need a different personality to lead effectively. What you need is clarity about your role and the courage to live it out. The decline in biblical literacy will not be reversed through programs alone. It will be restored in living rooms and around tables where God's Word remains central and authoritative.

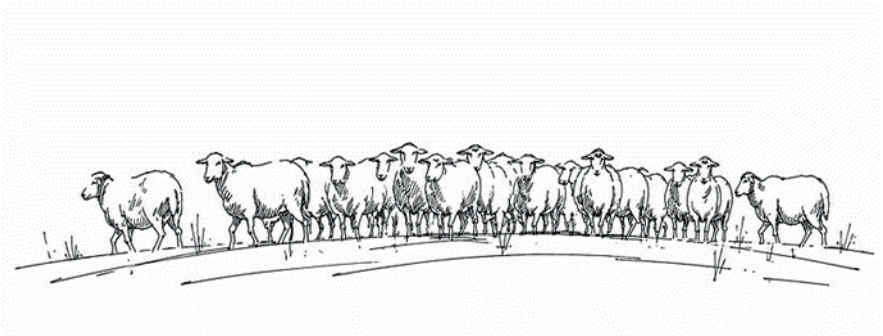
The work begins there, and you are already part of it.

## CHAPTER ONE

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# Disciples Are Formed in Circles, Not Rows

*Disciples are not formed by listening alone,  
but by engaging together around the Word.*



God forms His people in proximity. Throughout Scripture, spiritual growth unfolds within relational settings rather than in private isolation. Abraham becomes the father of a people. Israel learns covenant faithfulness as a community. Jesus gathers twelve before He addresses the crowds. The early church meets in homes, devoting themselves to teaching, fellowship, prayer, Communion and shared life. Faith may begin with personal conviction, but maturity is developed and refined within community.

Large gatherings serve an important purpose. They proclaim truth, unify believers in worship and doctrine, and cast vision that calls for response. However, proclamation alone does not complete spiritual formation. Truth that is heard in rows must be worked out in circles. In rows, listening is primary. In circles, participation begins. In rows, anonymity is possible. In circles, obedience becomes visible and accountable.

This distinction reveals both the strength and the vulnerability of small groups. Circles create relational weight. As questions emerge blind spots surface. Scripture moves from information into lived application. At the same time, circles can also amplify drift when Scripture no longer holds authority. When conversation replaces the text as the center, formation weakens, even if participation appears strong. The challenge facing many churches is not opposition to Scripture, but the quiet displacement of it. Discussions often focus on personal growth, emotional processing, or topical relevance. These conversations may feel helpful, but they rarely develop biblical literacy unless they remain firmly anchored in the text. Over time, believers grow more comfortable sharing personal insights, yet less

confident interpreting Scripture accurately. Community deepens, but depth of understanding declines.

Healthy circles restore proper order. Scripture governs the room. Leaders provide direction and guard focus. Participants engage actively with the text. The Spirit works through the group's shared attention to God's Word. For a circle to remain healthy, three realities must stay clear. Scripture carries authority. Leaders maintain direction. Members participate rather than observe. When any of these elements shifts, formation begins to slow. If authority moves toward personality, groups become dependent on dominant voices. If leaders withdraw from guiding the discussion, conversations lose direction. If members remain passive, insight never develops into obedience.

Formation requires sustained engagement, and engagement grows best in close relational settings. When believers remain close enough to recognize one another's questions, hesitations, and blind spots, real growth becomes possible. Discomfort often follows. Many leaders misinterpret that discomfort as failure. Silence can feel awkward. Disagreement can feel unsettling. Vulnerability can feel risky. In reality, these moments often indicate genuine spiritual work. When Scripture challenges assumptions or confronts familiar patterns, tension naturally increases. Circles create space where that tension can be processed with patience instead of avoided. Over time, obedience takes root through repeated exposure and faithful response.

Understanding the difference between inspiration and formation helps clarify why circles matter. Inspiration can happen in a single sermon. Formation requires consistent submission within accountable relationships. Inspiration stirs emotion while formation reshapes

behavior. A congregation may leave a service encouraged, but without relational reinforcement, conviction often fades. Circles, on the other hand, provide continuity. They turn weekly exposure into lasting transformation.

A group remaining centered on Scripture will change over time. Members learn to read passages in context. They begin to trace arguments instead of quoting isolated verses. They listen more carefully to one another because authority rests in the text, not in personal confidence or delivery. Growth may appear less dramatic, but it becomes far more durable.

Leaders must be aware of two common distortions. The first treats the circle primarily as a social space. Fellowship is essential, but when it is disconnected from Scripture, it becomes shallow. Shared interests may create connection, but shared submission produces endurance. The second distortion turns the circle into a classroom where the leader speaks and others passively receive. Teaching is valuable, but discipleship requires active participation. Circles are most effective when members wrestle with Scripture together.

The purpose of a circle extends beyond the gathering itself. Healthy groups do not exist simply to preserve community. They exist to form disciples who carry Scripture into everyday life. When members begin to ask how obedience shapes their decisions, relationships, and speech, the circle fulfills its purpose. Some church leaders question whether meaningful growth can happen in ordinary living rooms, outside their direct control. Yet God has consistently worked through ordinary spaces. Homes, kitchens, and upper rooms have all become places of profound transformation because Scripture remained central. What appears small in scale often produces lasting impact.

A church filled with healthy circles develops spiritual resilience. Leaders emerge naturally. New believers learn how to engage Scripture within community. Mature believers grow in humility as they listen to perspectives different from their own. The circle becomes both a place of growth and a place of sending. Disciples are not formed through exposure alone. They are formed through engaged obedience within community. Rows gather crowds, circles form people.

### **Application Scenario**

Matt leads a small group of eight adults who have attended church for years but have rarely studied Scripture in depth together. Early gatherings focus largely on personal stories with only light references to the Bible, based off a book selected by church leadership. Participation feels warm, but the discussions lack depth. Matt recognizes the drift, yet hesitates to make a change.

One evening, instead of starting with a general discussion question, Matt reads the passage aloud and asks, “Before we share our thoughts, what do we observe in this text?” The room becomes noticeably quieter. Members begin looking closely at their Bibles. One person points out a repeated phrase. Another notices who is speaking and who the audience is. The pace of the conversation slows, but the level of focus increases. Over the following weeks, Matt continues to begin with the text. Gradually, the group starts to come prepared to engage Scripture rather than simply share personal experiences. Stories are still shared, but they now flow from the passage instead of replacing it. The overall tone shifts from casual conversation to collective discovery. The change is not dramatic, but it is steady. Formation begins to take root.

## **What the Leader Did**

- Re-centered the discussion on Scripture before inviting personal reflection.
- Slowed the pace to encourage observation instead of immediate reaction.
- Remained consistent over time rather than making abrupt corrections.

## **What to Say Next Time**

- “Let’s begin by reading the passage together.”
- “What stands out in the text before we move to application?”
- “Where do we see that in the passage?”

## **If It Goes Off Track**

If the conversation shifts toward unrelated stories:

- Gently redirect by asking, “How does that connect to what we just read?”

If silence becomes uncomfortable:

- Allow the pause, then ask, “What words or phrases are repeated here?”

## **Leader Takeaway**

Circles form disciples when Scripture remains central and engagement is shared. Your role is not to generate energy or control outcomes. Your role is to maintain direction and keep the group anchored in the text. Continue returning to Scripture, and over time, formation will follow.