

CHAPTER ONE
**WHY SMALL
GROUPS?**

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“You see, but you do not observe,” said Sherlock Holmes to his loyal friend, Dr. Watson. “The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room.”

“Frequently.”

“How often?”

“Well, some hundreds of times.”

“Then how many are there?”

“How many? I don’t know.”

“Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. This is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed.”¹

If you have read any of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic detective stories, you know that Sherlock Holmes often rebukes Dr. Watson for his oversight. But Watson was no fool. Like me, and probably you, he simply lacked Holmes’ unusually strong gifts of observation and deduction. He could see the very same situations as Holmes without noticing important details. As Holmes stated, Watson saw...but he did not observe.

By the way—if I had been in Watson’s place, I might have answered the famous detective a bit differently. I would at least have been tempted to say, “How many steps? Who cares! Just solve the case, pal.”

Sherlock Holmes cared. Observation was a critical tool of his trade. It’s critical for us as well as we examine the subject of small groups. You see, too many of us view small groups the way Watson viewed the staircase. We see but we don’t observe. We attend a group without understanding its real purpose. We fail to understand why our small group exists.

And if we don’t know God’s purpose for small groups, we’re never going to achieve it.

From *Why Small Groups?*, part of the Pursuit of Godliness series from Sovereign Grace Ministries, 7505 Muncaster Mill Road, Gaithersburg, MD 20877. www.sovereigngraceministries.org

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Small Groups Are Elementary, My Dear Watson

Meditate on Matthew 7:24-27. What does Jesus promise to those who build on the foundation of his Word?

Since at least the mid-1970s, the church in America has been fascinated with small groups. The majority of churches have at least experimented with small groups, and many still maintain active small-group ministries of various kinds.

However, from my limited perspective, a number of these churches never hammered out a clear purpose and set of biblical goals when beginning their small groups. Some did, and I commend them. It is these churches that no doubt have had the greatest success with their small groups. But others started groups simply because they were popular—the latest church trend. Obviously, that isn't a sufficient motive. Current trends rarely provide a church with strong foundations. A small-group ministry won't ultimately be effective unless it exists to achieve biblical purposes.

For lack of a biblical purpose and mandate, many small groups have floundered. Other groups have been seriously

MEMORABLE MOMENTS IN SMALL-GROUP HISTORY

With a sincere desire to have our small group reach out and evangelize, last year I came up with the infamous "Fourth of July Caroling Parade." I admit that most of the people were somewhat reluctant (including my wife, which should have alerted me), though the kids thought it was a great idea. On the Fourth of July we dressed up in red, white and blue party hats and vests. Carrying colored balloons, we marched through our neighborhood handing out tracts and stopping at houses to sing patriotic songs such as "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Yankee Doodle Dandy."

Because I was so pleased with my creative idea, I didn't see the looks my wife and other group members noticed as we walked down the street. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if, when my neighbors see me, they still say, "There's that strange man!"

— John Masanotti (Mesa, AZ)

handicapped by the lack of good resources available. It is no exaggeration to say that most popular books and guides dealing with the topic of small groups are shockingly deficient in sound doctrine. I don't say this lightly. I have reviewed them for years, and have found a greater emphasis on modern psychology and sociology than on thorough, biblical theology.

Most of these materials are well-produced. They feature numerous thought-provoking questions and illustrations. Undoubtedly the publishers want to help Christians grow. But without solid biblical content, these materials can actually hinder God's intentions for us as individuals and groups.

Despite these concerns, I

see small groups as a priority for every Christian and every church. Why? Because the Scripture constantly underscores the centrality of relationships. J.I. Packer agrees:

We should not think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotions. Fellowship is one of the great words of the New Testament: it denotes something that is vital to a Christian's spiritual health, and central to the Church's true life...The church will flourish and Christians will be strong only when there is fellowship.²

For Further Study:

Read 1 John 1:7.
How ought Christians to relate to one another in order to experience fellowship?

Genuine fellowship isn't practical in a crowd of 200 or 2,000. That's why I feel so strongly that churches must create small groups where Christians can develop intimate relationships, where they can "know and be known." A church following a biblical model will not just "have" small groups. It will not merely "offer" small groups. Rather, it will *be built with* small groups.

As I stated before, though, small groups will only serve the church if they are founded on sound doctrine and sustained by a clear biblical purpose. That brings us to the title of this chapter and this book: *Why Small Groups?*

To answer the question posed by that title, let me present what I consider to be four clear goals from Scripture: progressive sanctification, mutual care, fellowship, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

What Sanctification Is—and Is Not

Theologian Wayne Grudem provides a fine, concise definition of this critical doctrine: "Sanctification is a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives."³ That's the goal of the Christian life, isn't it? Increasing freedom from sin and increasing resemblance to Jesus. Small groups provide an ideal context for this to occur.

Not every small group is intent on this purpose, however. Some put a higher priority on socializing than on sanctification. Others excel in open sharing and sympathetic listening, yet they never confront sin or challenge members to change.

This is unacceptable. A group with an unbiblical purpose can do more harm than good. Groups that meet without the biblical purpose of pursuing character development have the tendency to reinforce, rather than con-

1 If someone in your group pointed out what she thought was a sin in your life (without first getting written permission), how would you respond?

- Become offended but internalize it
- Become offended and express it
- Dissolve into tears
- Point out the obvious sins in her life
- Thank her for her care and concern

Meditate on Romans 5:1-2. In three words, summarize the benefit of justification that you find described in this passage.

front, the sin and selfishness already present in us. None of us needs such reinforcement. Instead, we need to be provoked and challenged by others so we can change for the glory of God.

Let me make one critical insertion here before going any further. I've spoken with many Christians who, whether they realize it or not, don't understand the difference between the doctrine of sanctification and the doctrine of justification. Because this con-

fusion can lead to serious spiritual consequences, let me take a minute to distinguish these critical truths. Please follow closely—the rest of this book (and the rest of your Christian life!) depends on a clear understanding of these two doctrines.

I have given Dr. Grudem's definition of sanctification above. He defines the doctrine of justification this way:

Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he 1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and 2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.⁴

Justification refers to a Christian's *position* before God. The moment you were born again, God justified you. On the basis of Christ's finished work, God thought of your sins as forgiven and declared that you were righteous.

Sanctification, on the other hand, refers to our *practice* before God. It is the ongoing process of battling sin and becoming more like Jesus. Though sanctification is the evidence and goal of our justification, we must never see it as the basis of our justification. Here's where so many Christians get confused. They try to earn what has already been given to them as a free gift. As Martin Luther stated, "The only contribution we make to our justification is our sin which God so graciously forgives."

There are other vital distinctions. Justification is about being declared righteous; sanctification is about becoming more righteous. Justification is immediate; sanctification is gradual. Justification is complete the moment God declares us righteous. It does not take place by degrees. Sanctification, however, is a process that lasts as long as we live. Finally, while every Christian enjoys the same degree of justification, we vary in terms of sanctification. You will never be more justified than you are at this moment, because justification is an act of God. But by

God's grace, you will become ever more sanctified as you cooperate with God's Spirit in the process of change.

“ The glory of the gospel is that God has declared Christians to be rightly related to him in spite of their sin. But our greatest temptation and mistake is to try to smuggle character into his work of grace. How easily we fall into the trap of assuming that we only remain justified so long as there are grounds in our character for that justification. But Paul's teaching is that nothing we do ever contributes to our justification.⁵ ”

— Sinclair Ferguson

Though it's important to distinguish between justification and sanctification, these two doctrines are inseparable. God does not justify someone without sanctifying him as well. Sanctification is not optional. If one has truly been justified, that will be evident by a progressive work of sanctification in his life. Small groups contribute to this magnificent and gradual work of grace in our lives.

Meditate on Hebrews 10:24-25. How have you benefitted from having others “spur you on” in the faith?

Don't Try This Alone

Although one's personal responsibility for sanctification remains paramount, sanctification cannot be accomplished in isolation from the local church. Scripture clearly teaches that sanctification is intended to take place in the local church—and small groups contribute invaluable to this process. Consider these insights by theologian Bruce Milne:

The Christian life is inescapably corporate. Teaching on Christian holiness has frequently concentrated almost exclusively on the “holy man” or the “holy woman,” to the neglect of the biblical concern for “the holy people” or the “holy church.” The ideal of the “omnipotent Christian individual,” able to meet every spiritual challenge and live a life of unbroken victory over sin and the devil, has undoubtedly produced remarkable examples of Christian character; but, as every Christian counsellor knows, this emphasis has driven many to a lonely struggle ending in despair and disillusionment, or, worse, in the hypocrisy of a double-standard life.

This whole approach needs re-examination. The bulk of New Testament teaching on the Christian life, including the major sections on holiness, occur in letters addressed to corporate groups, to churches. All the major exhortations to holy living are plural—“we,” “you” (Ro 6:1-23; Gal 5:13-6:10; Eph 4:17-

6:18)...Similarly all the New Testament promises of victory are corporate (1Co 15:57; 1Jn 5:4; Rev 15:2). In other words the apostles envisaged the Christian life and Christian sanctification in the context of a loving, caring fellowship.⁶

For Further Study:

According to Ephesians 4:15, what two ingredients must be present in our communication with other Christians?

By the grace of God, I've experienced what Milne is describing. Many of the most significant changes in my Christian life have taken place in the fellowship of the local church—specifically, in small groups. On many occasions, members of my small group have lovingly (but firmly) confronted my sin and held me accountable as I pursued change. Of course the Holy Spirit is directly responsible for convicting me of these things, but I can only guess where I would be without such faithful friends. God has used them time after time to address sins in my life that I would never have perceived if I were on my own.

It's been sobering to observe others who have chosen *not* to participate in a local church or in small groups. They have demonstrated a distinct lack of growth. What's worse, they haven't even been aware of their spiritual condition and stagnation.

“ It is both foolish and wicked to suppose that we will make much progress in sanctification if we isolate ourselves from the visible church. Indeed, it is commonplace to hear people declare that they don't need to unite with a church to be a Christian. They claim that their devotion is personal and private, not institutional or corporate. This is not the testimony of the great saints of history; it is the confession of fools.⁷

— R.C. Sproul

Small groups provide the encouragement, correction, and accountability that keep us from drifting. As important as it is to cultivate a personal relationship with God by practicing the spiritual disciplines, we need others to help us in our pursuit of sanctification.

If you have a passion for personal change—and every Christian should—then you will be glad when others challenge you to grow. This

should not be seen as abnormal, or as the domain of those with an unusual level of maturity. It should be viewed as the normal process that follows new birth, expressed in a desire to conform to the image of Jesus Christ. We should be seriously and unapologetically committed to change.

Who Is Your Nathan?

Cain, when questioned by God about the murder of Abel, tried to deny he was his brother's keeper (Ge 4:9).

THESE GUYS MEANT BUSINESS!

Early in the 18th century, Samuel Wesley (brother of John Wesley) formed a religious society with regular small-group meetings. Called "Band Societies," these single-sex groups were designed to facilitate mutual accountability. All who wished to join were required to answer the following questions as evidence of justification and an accompanying desire to grow in God:

Have you peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?

Do you desire to be told of your faults?

Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?

Consider! Do you desire that we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?

Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?

Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?

After joining, group members could be asked the preceding questions "as often as occasion offers," while the following questions were asked at every meeting:

What known sin have you committed since our last meeting?

What temptations have you met with?

How were you delivered?

What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?⁸

But he was. We all are. We have a responsibility to help our brothers and sisters keep the will of God. The common term for this is accountability. It is a specific way in which relationships help us achieve sanctification.

Charles Swindoll has said "Accountability includes opening one's life to a few carefully selected, trusted, individual confidants who speak the truth—who have the right to examine, to question, to approve, and to give counsel." Don Cousins has called it "Allowing someone to ask penetrating, sometimes uncomfortable questions in order to challenge you to grow."

The lives of King David and his son Solomon illustrate the importance of being accountable. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed her husband Uriah, he was confronted—held accountable—by the prophet Nathan (see 2 Samuel 11-12). As a result, he repented of his sin and received God's forgiveness. What would David have become without Nathan in his life?

Solomon, on the other hand, apparently had no one like Nathan to hold him accountable as he began to disobey God's commands. Eventually he was severely disciplined by God for his

sin. What might Solomon have become with someone like Nathan in his life? A more relevant question is, what will you become without a Nathan in your life?

For Further Study:
The tragic account of Solomon's spiritual decline is found in 1 Kings 11:1-13.

Take it from Solomon: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up" (Ecc 4:9-10). The man speaks from experience. If Solomon—the wisest man (besides our Lord) who ever lived— needed accountability, then each of us does as well.

Is there someone who can (and does) question your motives and ask for an explanation of your actions when appropriate? This is what we want to work toward in our small groups. Like Wesley's Band Societies (see "These Guys Meant *Business!*" on page 7), we want our small-group meetings to fulfill Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron so one man sharpens another."

Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall

Relationships are one vital means of sanctification; God's Word is another. Nothing changes us more effectively than the application of Scripture. I'm aware of this every time I preach. What a sobering responsibility! And yet I'm also aware that my words—no matter how passionately I deliver them or how persuasive they may seem—will often fail to bear fruit. That's because merely hearing God's Word is insufficient. It bears fruit only when we apply it. And as we'll see in a minute, small groups are an ideal context for applying God's Word.

The Book of James uses a humorous illustration to show the importance of application:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. (Jas 1:22-24)

I don't know anybody who wakes up in the morning, looks in the mirror, and then leaves the house without making some strategic changes. In fact, most of us spend considerable time in front of the mirror each morning—assessing the damages from the night before and making the necessary repairs. According to an article I once saw in *Newsweek*, a typical man's lifetime will include a total of seven years in the bathroom.⁹ Much of that time will be spent looking in the mirror as we make increasingly futile attempts at damage control.

Meditate on Hebrews

4:12. Once you apply God's Word to your life, you'll find that it has a unique power to change you!

Ladies, you should probably add about three years to that amount, rounding it up to an even decade—and even that may be on the low side. Trust me. With all possible respect for my wife and three daughters, I have irrefutable evidence. There was a time in my life, when my daughters were young, that I could initiate spontaneous family activities at any time. Now, we can hardly go out for ice cream without everyone first getting a perm!

(I'm glad my girls appreciate my sense of humor. No father could be prouder of their passion for God.)

Wouldn't you be just a little concerned if you knew someone who got up each day, looked in the mirror, and walked away without making any adjustments? How long

2 Can you identify one verse or passage from the Bible that has provoked you to change? Briefly summarize what it says in the space below.

would that person be presentable to others? How long would you wait before you offered him a comb? It's an absurd scenario...or is it? According to James, this is exactly what happens every time we encounter Scripture (the mirror) and then walk away without making any changes.

The person who routinely looks in the mirror without making alterations does not understand the purpose of the mirror. Likewise, the person who reads or listens to God's Word without applying what he has heard obviously doesn't understand the purpose of Scripture.

Simply reading your Bible and listening to good preaching won't make you like Jesus. Though each of these disciplines is essential for the Christian life and each is a vital means of grace, neither is sufficient in itself. In fact, biblical knowledge is potentially deceptive if obedience doesn't take place. The purpose of the mirror is to provoke adjustment. The purpose of Scripture is to provoke obedience and produce definitive change in our lives.

Those who merely listen to the word, Sunday after Sunday, but fail to apply the word to their lives, will experience an increasing degree of self-deception rather than progressive sanctification. And yet isn't it interesting that they deceive only themselves? Everyone else knows full well that they are merely listening and not obeying, not maturing. It's as obvious to them as it would be if we woke up tomorrow morning, glanced in the mirror, and then walked away without ever touching the comb, the washcloth, or the toothbrush.

“ No matter how extensive one’s scriptural knowledge, how amazing one’s memory, it is self-deception if that is all there is...It is not what one knows, but what one does that counts. True knowledge is the prelude to action, and it is the obedience to the word that counts in the end.¹⁰ ”

— Peter Davids

Meditate on

2 Timothy 2:15. Have you ever been tempted to bend the meaning of Scripture to suit your own purposes?

So what does this have to do with this book? Small groups are not primarily intended for teaching and preaching; those functions are the responsibility of your pastor. Rather, small groups are designed for application. They create a context where Christians can apply God’s truth in a

personal, practical way. In order to apply God’s Word effectively, though, we must first interpret it accurately.

Some groups think “Bible study” means swapping their personal opinions and preferences. That’s bogus. We don’t gather to exchange our opinions; we gather to learn God’s truth. The first step is to understand what the author’s original intent was when he wrote to his original audience. Only then can we begin to apply that truth to our lives, allowing God’s Word to rule over us and change us for the glory of God. (For information on a great book that details how to study Scripture, see the Recommended Reading list on page 16.)

As your small group looks into the mirror of God’s Word, you should be making adjustments. Each year you should be able to look back and identify distinct areas in which you have changed during the previous twelve months. This is the difference small-group participation is to make in our lives. This and no less.

Called to Mutual Care

In the church where I serve, we call our small groups “care groups.” It’s not a unique title, but it expresses a second primary purpose of small groups. Just as the first is to create a context where every member can pursue sanctification, the second is to create a context where every member can give and receive care. This principle comes straight out of Scripture:

God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1Co 12:24-26)

Christians have always been characterized by their sacrificial love for each other. We are commanded to care for each other unselfishly, without favoritism. “Carry each other’s burdens,” Paul writes, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

In a Sunday-morning meeting, there are obvious limitations on our ability to express this kind of care. If I’m in the middle of a message and notice someone start to cry in the seventh row back, I can’t stop preaching and go minister to that individual. I’d like to, but it wouldn’t serve the entire church. In a small-group context, though, we are not so limited. Here we can both give and receive specific, personal care. No one need be overlooked or neglected.

For Further Study:

1 John 3:16 defines love as a willingness to lay down our lives for each other. What is one specific way that you could “lay down your life” for someone in your small group?

It is important to point out that mutual care and close relationships are not dependent on the size of a church. Many assume it’s impossible to form close relationships in a large church. They also assume that in a small church, close relationships will develop automatically. Both assumptions are false. Relationships can flourish in a large church...and be absent in a small one.

The ability to forge strong, personal relationships does not depend on a church’s size. Rather, it depends on the doctrinal understanding and practice of the people who make up that church. Relationships will flourish in any church, no matter what size, where they are stressed as a biblical necessity.

First-time visitors at my church are often intimidated by its size. I can understand how they might feel that way. But as I tell them, “The longer you are involved here, the smaller this church becomes.” It’s a fact. A large church does not need to sacrifice quality relationships—but it *does* need to provide the small groups and service opportunities that make mutual care a reality.

Fellowship Redefined

Why small groups? A third reason is fellowship. Many small groups use this word without understanding what it really means. As a result, they aren’t experiencing one of the most vital things a group has to offer. You’ll look at fellowship in depth in the next chapter, so I’ll try to limit myself to just a few comments on this critical topic.

Fellowship means to participate together, or to communicate things we hold in common. The greatest common denominator between us as Christians is our

relationship with God the Father, through God the Son, by God the Holy Spirit. This forms the content of true fellowship. Our relationship with God should be the main topic of communication within our small groups as we participate together to fulfill his purpose in the local church.

There's a catch, however. The depth of our personal relationship with God determines the degree of fellowship possible with each other. Thus, in order to know true fellowship, one must maintain a passionate relationship with and experience of God. Perhaps that is why biblical fellowship is so rare.

Fellowship is not just another word for social activities. I really enjoy watching the Washington Redskins or Baltimore Orioles with my friends. This can be a healthy part of small-group life...but it isn't fellowship. And you don't have fellowship talking about the latest opinion from Rush Limbaugh or Jesse Jackson, either. Social activities can't be equated or confused with fellowship. They are distinctly different. Nothing compares to the fellowship we enjoy when we worship together, study and apply Scripture together, encourage and correct each other, and communicate to one another our current experience of God. Nothing. Social activities can create a context for fellowship, but they are a place to begin—not a place to remain.

When I spend an extended time with another Christian, my main desire is that we know fellowship. I want to hear of his relationship with God, and how God is revealing

himself to him. I want to communicate my current experience of God as well, and impart a fresh passion for God.

Is that your desire? If someone spent an afternoon with you, would he or she leave with a fresh understanding of and passion for God? If not, you need to change.

With this definition of fellowship in mind, consider your small group. Are you experiencing fellowship? How much time do you spend in the meetings talking about your current relationship with God? When you meet together outside the meetings, how often do your conversations revolve around God's work in your life? If you are relaxing together more than you're

For Further Study:

What "litmus test" for Christian conversation do you find in Ephesians 4:29?

3 Based on the author's definition, which of these topics of conversation do you think would promote true fellowship:

- The "one that got away" on your last fishing trip
- The details about how you became a Christian
- The passage of Scripture you read this morning
- The latest site you visited on the Internet
- Terrorism
- The difficulties of raising a strong-willed child
- The most recent movie you watched

relating together spiritually, you're not enjoying true biblical fellowship—and you have something to look forward to.

Experiencing and Expressing the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

God has given spiritual gifts to every Christian (1Co 12:1-7). He fully expects us to use them. But in a church of any size at all, it's simply not feasible for every member to use these gifts on a Sunday morning. They can in a small group, though. In this smaller and more personal context, each one can serve according to the gifting of the Holy Spirit. This is the fourth and final reason why small groups exist.

Some Christians define the Spirit's work in very narrow terms, causing a good bit of needless controversy. Seminary professor Gordon Fee, who recently completed a major study of Paul's writings on the Holy Spirit, calls for a different approach. Pay close attention to this quote from his book, *God's Empowering Presence*:

“ We should make a deliberate effort at the outset of every day to recognize the person of the Holy Spirit...We should continue to walk throughout the day in a relationship of communication and communion with the Spirit mediated through our knowledge of the Word, relying upon every office of the Holy Spirit's role as counselor mentioned in the Scripture. We should acknowledge him as the illuminator of truth and of the glory of Christ. We should look to him as teacher, guide, sanctifier, giver of assurance concerning our sonship and standing before God, helper in prayer, and as the one who directs and empowers witness.¹² ”

— **Richard Lovelace**

In Paul, power is not to be thought of merely in terms of the miraculous, the extraordinary...Paul understood the Spirit's power in the broadest possible way.¹¹

I'm all for the miraculous and the extraordinary, but it is easy to get preoccupied with this. Our small groups need to become familiar with the varied and distinct works of the Holy Spirit. Through a combination of doctrinal study, experience, and practice, we should seek to understand the Spirit's

power in “the broadest possible way.”

I recommend beginning with a thorough study of Scripture concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit. This will include seeking to define, identify, and cultivate the various gifts of the Spirit listed in 1

For Further Study:

Read 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6. What two commands does Paul give Timothy regarding his spiritual gift?

Meditate on

1 Thessalonians 5:19.

Isn't it sobering to know that your attitudes and actions can extinguish the Spirit's activity within the group?

Corinthians 12:8-10,28; Ephesians 4:11; Romans 12 : 6 - 8 ; and 1 Peter 4:11. I would also recommend that you set the same goal for your group that Scripture sets: reaching the point where each member is able to serve others and glorify God with the unique gifting which has been imparted by the Spirit. Everybody should be bringing something to the party!

Let me give a few suggestions from my own experience and study of Scripture. First, in order to experience and express the gifts of the Spirit, we must develop the habit of *communing* with the Holy Spirit. Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthian church by saying, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, *and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* be with you all" (2Co 13:14). Is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit as much a reality for you as the love of the Father and the grace of Christ?

Second, we need to avoid *grieving* the Holy Spirit. I like what Jerry Bridges says on this topic:

It is very instructive that it is in the context of interpersonal relationships that Paul wrote his warning, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph 4:30). Now, all sin grieves God, and Paul could have inserted that warning in the context of sexual immorality (Eph 5:3-5) or lying and stealing (Eph 4:25,28). But he places it in the context of sins we commit with hardly any sense of shame or guilt. The message should be clear. God is grieved over our "refined" sins just as He is grieved over sexual immorality or dishonesty. I am not suggesting that being irritable at one's spouse is as serious as something like adultery. I am saying that being irritable at one's spouse is sin, and that *all* sin grieves God and should grieve us.¹³

When we sin, we must respond quickly to the convicting presence of the Spirit; otherwise we will grieve him and break fellowship with him.

Third, we need to avoid *quenching* the Holy Spirit. In this case, the best defense is a good offense. Are you stirring up the gifts God has placed in you? When he prompts you to use them to serve others, are you obeying right away? If not, you're quenching the Spirit.

Last week's meeting is history. Tonight's meeting demands a fresh visitation by the Spirit of God. Apart from his presence, there's no point in meeting. Each of us has a responsibility to seek the Holy Spirit and be sensi-

tive to what he wants to accomplish in the group as we gather together. Wayne Grudem writes,

We must recognize that these activities of the Holy Spirit are not to be taken for granted, and they do not just happen automatically among God's people. Rather, the Holy Spirit reflects the pleasure or displeasure of God with the faith and obedience—or unbelief and disobedience—of God's people...The

Holy Spirit *gives stronger or weaker evidence* of the presence and blessing of God, according to our response to him.¹⁴

What is *your* response to him on a daily basis? During the small-group meeting? To a degree, that response will determine the forcefulness of his presence in your midst. Let us purpose to avoid grieving or quenching the Spirit so that we can experience the full strength of his presence and pleasure.

“ Expectancy is a context for the gift of the Holy Spirit...People who look for something to happen are particularly candidates for the reception of the Holy Spirit...When people have expected little and expressed satisfaction with their present spiritual situation, they have received little, if anything. But those who wait to receive everything God has to give, those who desire great things from God, those who stand on tip-toes of expectation—it is they whom God delights to bless. Expect a miracle, and miracles begin to happen!¹⁵ ”

— J. Rodman Williams

Meditate on Psalm 42:1. Here's a great verse to read on the way to your next small-group meeting.

Fourth, we should arrive at our small-group meetings *expecting* the Spirit to be powerfully present. This is essential. What a difference expectation can make as we begin our small-group meetings! It can be the difference between a life-changing encounter with God and a superficial time together with no immediate *or* eternal benefit. When each member comes expecting the Holy Spirit to reveal and refresh, together we taste the power of the age to come.

This is why we are committed to small groups. By his grace, together we are being changed into the image of Jesus Christ through progressive sanctification. Together we are experiencing mutual care, genuine fellowship, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We no longer just see—we observe. We no longer simply attend—we participate. We no longer selfishly consume—instead we are carrying out God's purpose for our lives as we contribute to the building of the local church.

And you thought it was for the refreshments! ■

- GROUP DISCUSSION**
1. How observant are you? Without looking, try to answer the following questions:
 - Does this room have an overhead fan?
 - What is the main image on the front of this book?
 - How much money is in your wallet or purse?
 - What is the brand name of the shoes you have on?
 - What color are the socks/nylons of the person sitting to your left?
 2. According to the author, what four goals should each small group share?
 3. In simple terms, how would you describe the difference between justification and sanctification?
 4. Why is the Christian life “inescapably corporate”?
 5. What role do other Christians play in our progressive sanctification?
 6. Do you have a Nathan—someone to whom you are accountable?
 7. Share your answer to Question 2 on page 9.
 8. Why might some people hesitate to share personal needs with their group?
 9. Is your group experiencing consistent fellowship?
 10. Is there anything you can do personally to increase the Holy Spirit’s power and presence in your small-group meetings?

- RECOMMENDED READING**
- The Discipline of Grace* by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994)
- Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* by Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994)
- How Can I Change?* by C.J. Mahaney and Robin Boisvert (Gaithersburg, MD: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1993)

NOTES

1. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia" in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Doubleday, 1927).
2. J.I. Packer, *God's Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 193.
3. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p. 746.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 723.
5. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), pp. 82-83.
6. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 194.
7. R.C. Sproul, *The Soul's Quest for God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), p. 151.
8. Quoted by Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., in *Where Do We Go from Here? A Guidebook for Cell Group Churches* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 1990), pp. 166-67.
9. *Newsweek*, March 26, 1990.
10. Peter H. Davids, *New International Bible Commentary: James* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), p. 41.
11. Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), p. 8.
12. Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 131.
13. Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), p. 35.
14. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 635.
15. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Salvation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 305.