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How to be in a small group

Another year, another Bible study group. Time to sign up, turn up and get things rolling for another year. Time also perhaps to ask some questions about your small group. Do you feel as if you just go along because that's what you're expected to do? Does the group have a clear purpose, or does it just exist because it has always existed?

More to the point, what part are you going to play in this year's group? What can you be doing to make the group a success? There are many books and guides and training materials for small group leaders (like *Growth Groups* from Matthias Media), but what about the humble group member? What can each of us be doing to make the most of our small groups?

Why go in the first place?

People go to small groups for all sorts of reasons to fulfil expectations, to make friends, to pursue romantic possibilities, to receive encouragement and counsel, to learn, and so on.

While most of these might be perfectly acceptable reasons to join a small group, the first and indispensable reason must be clear in our minds. Our primary reason for belonging to a small group is to give us opportunity to love and encourage other people in Christ. It's not about Me; it's about Them. And it's about Them because of Christ.

This after all is what the Christian life is about. Our most basic principle is to love other people as Christ has loved us, to lay down our lives for them as Christ did for us. This applies as much to small groups as it does to marriages, families, workplaces, and larger Christian meetings. We go to small groups not primarily to have our needs met, but to meet the needs of others. Of course, we have needs too, and no doubt they will be met along the way—but we can let others worry about that. In fact, paradoxically, the more we focus on loving others, and doing whatever we can for them, the more encouragement and strength we find ourselves.

There are many ways we can love and encourage the other people in our groups. Here are five powerful ones (complete with alliterative titles).

1. The power of presence

This is the simplest and most obvious, but is no less powerful for being so. Just being there each week without fail is a powerful encouragement to the other members of the group. In making the group time a solid commitment, to be missed only in times of emergency, you send a very clear message to the other members: "Being with you matters very much to me. Unless something very important comes up, you can expect me. Encouraging you is a top priority."

Conversely, inconsistent attendance sends a somewhat less encouraging message: "I don't mind coming, but it's not that important. If I feel a bit tired or something else crops up, don't expect me. Being with you and encouraging you isn't really a very high priority for me."

Turning up regularly requires no extraordinary gifts or talent, but it is a powerful way of loving other people.

2. The power of preparation

Most small groups complete their evening's Bible study with a plaintive plea from the leader for people to read the passage and prepare for next week's study. The leader knows full well that most people won't, but there's no harm in trying!

However, preparing for the group time is another powerful way to love the members of the group. Of course, having read the

passage, or done the homework, greatly increases the benefit you yourself receive from the discussion. More importantly, however, it equips you to encourage others by what you say. Rather than throwing in whatever occurs to you at the time, you have actually thought about the Bible passage and the issues that it raises. You are much better prepared to say things that stimulate and encourage and teach others if you have bothered to give it some thought beforehand.

3. The power of prayer

Paul's friend and fellow worker, Epaphras, would have made an ideal small group member. According to Paul, he was always "wrestling in prayer" for the Colossians, that they might "stand firm in all the will of God". Paul was able to vouch that in doing so, Epaphras was "working hard for you" (Col 4:12-13).

Praying for others is hard work, but real work. It is one of the most loving things we can do for our fellow group members, not only because it is through our prayers that God does his work in people's lives, but because it is such a quiet, inconspicuous form of ministry. Making a casserole for someone, by comparison, is much more satisfying—you see something very tangible for your efforts, and you have the pleasure of delivering it to the person and receiving their warm expressions of thanks. Prayer has none of those rewards. You do it for one reason only: that you care for that person and want what is best for them in Christ. And so you pray for them.

4. The power of personality

The alliteration may be starting to stretch a little thin here, but the point is solid enough—that a powerful way of loving others in your small group is to be willing to share your own life and personality with them.

This is by no means an easy thing to do. Many of us would much rather keep quiet and not give too much away. However, by opening up and sharing our lives and thoughts and struggles and joys, we do others a great service. We not only show them that we have the very same struggles that they have (but thought they were alone in suffering); we also encourage them to open up as well.

Of course, it is anything but loving to indiscriminately dump everything we are thinking or feeling onto the group. We need to heed the advice of Proverbs and think carefully before we speak; as well as the words of Ephesians 4: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph 4:29).

5. The power of love

Whatever you do in the group—every word you say, every action—do it for the sake of others. Look for how you can support and help the leader. Look for ways to care for the members of the group—those who could really do with a phone call or visit; those who would benefit from having someone to pray or read the Bible with; those who need financial or other material help; those who just need a friend to have pizza and a video with.

Belonging to a small group can be a very demanding exercise. It can cost us our lives, because that is what it means to be a follower of Christ—to lay down our lives for the sake of others. If we grasp the possibilities, small groups represent an enormously fruitful opportunity for doing just that.



Introduction to Genesis 1-11

The first 11 chapters of Genesis contain many of the Bible's well-known stories. The creation of the world, Adam and Eve, the fall, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, the Tower of Babel... At first glance they appear to be a very strange and disconnected history of the very first years of humanity's existence. But God has kept them for us, right at the start of our Bibles. What is it all trying to tell us?

These days the early part of Genesis is controversial. Did God really create the world in seven days? Were Adam and Eve real people? Where did Cain's wife come from? Did people really live for hundreds of years? Did God really flood our entire planet?

These questions are interesting, that's for sure! But they can distract us from what Genesis is really about. As fascinating as it would be to know, Genesis doesn't tell us *how* the world came to be. It tells us *why*.

Genesis chapters 1-11 are sometimes called *The Primeval History*. These chapters set the scene for God's dealings with his people throughout the Bible. It shows us why the world is the way it is, and tells us why our relationship with God is the way it is. Ultimately it tells us both how and *why* God began his rescue plan that culminates with Jesus.¹

¹ For some longer studies (that don't follow the same passages we're doing at NightChurch, but do cover the same 11 chapters) check out *Beyond Eden* by Matthias Media.

Study 1; Genesis 1.1-2.3

In the beginning...

You are created for God.

How do you feel about the debates surrounding creation?

Read Genesis 1.1-25

What does Genesis 1 tell us before creation starts (verses 1-2)? What does it not tell us?

List all the patterns and repetitions you notice. What do you learn from them?

What question is Genesis 1 concerned with? Is it describing **how** the world was made, or **why** the world was made?

Read Genesis 1.26-2.3

What patterns are broken after verse 26? Why do you think this is?

What instructions does God give humanity? How do you think we are going at carrying out these instructions?

How would you describe God's relationship with his creation?

Read Genesis 1.27

Why are humans different to the rest of creation? What does this mean for us?

What is the result when people created in God's image live in his world but ignore their creator?

Check out John 1.1-13. How can we be re-created in God's image?

How would you explain Genesis 1 to someone who thought that science makes the Bible irrelevant?

Pray

What would God want you to pray about after reading this part of Genesis?

What can you pray for each other at Small Group?

What can you pray for our church?

What can you pray for all those outside our church?

Study 2; Genesis 2.4-25

Relation Creation

We are created for real relationship with God and with each other.

Who is your 'best friend'? What is your closest relationship? How would you describe that relationship?

Read Genesis 2.4-17

How is this account of creation different to the account we read last week in chapter 1?

Look closely at these verses. A lot of strange things are written about. But what is it all focussing on?

List all the things God does for humanity.

Read Genesis 2.18-25

Until now, everything God has created has been good. What is the first thing that is *not good*?

What does God do to fix this?

What is the result of woman's creation (verses 23-25)?

Read Genesis 1.27-28

How does chapter 2 elaborate on what was going on back in chapter 1?

How is this relationship similar to the relationship between God and humanity (check back to chapter 2 verse 7)?

Genesis 2 shows us how humanity is supposed to relate to God, creation, and each other. What happens when these relationships are not lived out the way God intended them to be lived out?

Read Colossians 3.9-19. Are your relationships being renewed in the image of your creator? If not, what can you do to change that?

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Study 3; Genesis 3

The Fall

God's explanation of what's wrong with the world.

“What's wrong with the world?!” “What's wrong with people?!” “Why isn't this as good as I expected?” What situations leave you asking these sorts of questions?

Read Genesis 2.9 and 2.16-17

What are the two trees called, and where are they located? What did God say to Adam and Eve about the first tree? What did he say to them about the second tree?

The Tree of Life reminds Adam and Eve that God created all life and God is their life-source. Why is this important for them to remember?

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil reminds Adam and Eve that there is a good way for the world to work (God's way), and an evil way (any other way). Why is this important for them to remember?

Read Genesis 3.1-6

Who is the snake (cf. Revelation 12.9)? What does he stand for?

Compare what God says about the two trees in chapter 2 verses 16-17 with what Eve claims God said in chapter 3 verses 2-3. What does Eve add, and what does she take away from God's words? How has Eve's perception of God already changed?

What's the danger of getting God half-right? What can you do to make sure you know God fully?

Read Genesis 3.7-24

What effects does disobeying God have on humanity (verses 6-13)? Do we have more in common with the chapter 2 version of Adam and Eve, or the chapter 3 version?

How is God's judgement (verses 16-19) appropriate for the sin committed?

What hints are there that God has a rescue plan (verses 15, 20-24)? What will this rescue plan ultimately look like (cf. 1st John 3.8)?

Check out Revelation 21.1-5 and Revelation 22.1-5. How is the new creation different to the first one? How is it better?

Satan still wants to undermine God's good work. What lies is Satan telling you to make you doubt God's love?

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Study 4; Genesis 4

Cain and Abel

Your heart's a mess.

Describe a situation where you were dealt with unfairly.

Read Genesis 4.1-12

What do we learn about Cain and Abel in verses 1-4? How do they worship God?

We're not told straight away why Cain's sacrifice wasn't acceptable. But then it all comes out...

What do we learn about Cain from verses 5-8? What words would you use to describe him?

How often do you think you're like Abel (living a life pleasing to God), but really have a heart like Cain's (wishing you had what someone else has, wanting to wrong those who've wronged you, etc)? Would it be fair to say that sin is often crouching at the door of your heart?

Read Genesis 4.13-16

Discuss Cain's reaction (verses 13-14).

How does God show this jealous, envious, bitter, resentful, murderous, and now **humble** man

mercy?

Describe the mercy God has shown us. How is it similar to the mercy God showed Cain?

Read Genesis 4.17-26

What kind of man is Lamech?

What pattern is being set, from Adam, to Cain, to Lamech, and beyond?

Where does Jesus fit in to this story?

Like Cain, if we come before Jesus and cry out, “My punishment is more than I can bear!”, he will bear it for us, and have mercy on us. What can you do this week to worship God with a humble heart?

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Study 5; Genesis 5-9

The Flood

God renews his world through both judgement and destruction.

Is God a God of judgement or salvation?

Read Genesis 6.5-17

What are we told about God's view of humanity? Would this view still be accurate today?

From verses 6-13, what is God's response to the state of the world? Do you think it's fair or unfair?

Verse 8 could be literally translated, "But Noah found *grace* in the eyes of Yahweh." What is the glimmer of hope here?

Read Genesis 6.18-7.24

What is a covenant (verse 18)? What are some modern-day covenants? How is this covenant unique?

How is Noah like Adam (also check out 8.16-17 and 9.6-7)?

Read Genesis 8-9

What's going on in chapter 8 verses 20-21?

How would you describe the situation after the flood? Is it all fixed (9.20-28, 8.21)?

Read Matthew 26.28. What is Jesus talking about? How is the covenant Jesus talks about similar to God's covenant with Noah? How is it different?

How is it possible for God to forgive and to judge?

How would you explain God's judgement to a non-Christian? How would you explain his salvation?

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Study 6; Genesis 10-11

The City and Tower of Babel

We are saved as God's children, but lost if we try to be his rivals.

Would you ever compete on Australian Idol (or MasterChef, or any other show that makes one lucky winner famous)? Why do you think people go on these shows?

Read Genesis 11.1-4

Compare verse 2 with Genesis 3.24 and 4.16. What happened in those previous verses? Where are the people headed in chapter 11?

Compare verse 1 with Genesis 1.28 and 9.1. What was happening in those previous verses? How are the people progressing?

What did the people want instead, and why (verse 4)? What does this show us about their relationship with God? Are we like this too?

Read Genesis 11.5

The people planned to build “a city, with a tower that reached to the heavens”. What did God have to do in order to see their lofty tower?

The city of Babel and its tower are a monument to humanity's pride. They wanted to bring God down to their level. They decided they didn't need God, and that their own glory was enough. Do people today have the same attitude? What do people do to show this attitude?

Are they right? Are we better off without God? Think over the previous 9 chapters...

Read Genesis 11.6-9

What does God do? And why (remember 1.28 and 9.1)?

Is this an act of insecurity on God's part, or an act of grace? Why?

Read 1st Corinthians 1:25-31. Where do we have real reason to boast?

Which of your achievements are you tempted to look for glory in? What sort of legacy will they give you? How do they stack up against what Christ has done?

Think back over Genesis chapters 1-11. What does it mean to be a human, created by God in his image, and in relationship with him?

Pray

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