

# The Power of a Small Group

My\* first small group experience was in my freshman year of college. I was plunged into a web of complex relationships. I developed a crush on the leader—who was secretly dating the coleader—and I had a personality conflict with one of the group members. But in the midst of all that emotion, I remained committed to the weekly meetings. As the weeks passed, the crush faded and, better yet, the personality conflict turned into a lasting friendship. Best of all, I discovered that I loved talking about the Bible and praying with others. Ever since, small groups have been an essential part of my spiritual growth.

I've been in lots of kinds of groups: book discussion, writing and arts, recovery, even church committees. But I find I get the most out of the groups that focus on the Bible. It's the process of opening the Scripture as equals and drawing out the meaning together that stimulates me. I find that listening to others talk about how they live out these passages helps me enormously in applying the Bible to my own life.

## **What Does a Bible Discussion Look Like?**

In a good group Bible study there's lots of interaction. The leader is not a teacher or "answer person." Everyone contributes ideas.

---

\* "My" and "I" refer to Cindy Bunch throughout this book (see preface).

Here's how Jack Kuhatschek, the first editor of the LifeBuilders, describes what happens in a typical Bible study session.

The study had already begun when we arrived. People were seated in a circle with Bibles in their laps. At first it was difficult to tell who was leading. Conversation crisscrossed from person to person. Everyone seemed to be involved.

The study that day was on the book of Jonah. We took our seats and were quickly caught up in the discussion. It was Darcy's turn to be leading, so she spoke up and said, "God told Jonah to go preach to the pagan city of Nineveh, but Jonah headed off in the opposite direction. How did God respond to his disobedience?"

We all looked down at our Bibles for a moment, then Steve said, "God judged Jonah for disobeying him." He explained that poor Jonah had nearly been shipwrecked, was thrown overboard, was swallowed by a large fish, spent three days and nights in its stomach and then was vomited on dry land.

Sandy agreed with Steve but felt that God was also merciful to Jonah. "After all," she said, "he could have let Jonah drown. Or he might have let him stay in the belly of the fish until he had been digested!"

After the laughter, there was a brief pause. "Anything else?" Darcy asked.

Curtis, who had been quiet up to that point, decided to join in. "God knew what it would take to bring Jonah to repentance. By the time he was back safely on dry land, and the word of the Lord came to him a second time, Jonah was more than willing to consider going to Nineveh!"

We went on like this for about forty-five minutes. Periodically Darcy would ask another question from our study guide. ("What was Jonah's reaction to the destruction of the plant?" "How does God's attitude toward the people of Nineveh compare with Jonah's?") Then several of us would respond, being careful to base our answers on the text before us.

Our Wednesday night group consists of a computer programmer, a homemaker, a marketing specialist, a publicist, an InterVarsity staff member, an editor and an artist. Darcy is a part-time secretary. None of us is ordained; only one person is involved in “full-time Christian work.” Yet it was amazing how much we learned from each other. Each person provided a unique perspective on this brief but challenging book of the Bible. Together we relived Jonah’s experiences. We felt sorry for him. We were amused at him. Most importantly, we identified with him!

We also got a fresh look at God, especially his care for people—even those we disapprove of. He lovingly disciplined Jonah. He had compassion on the people of Nineveh, even though they were part of a ruthless, idolatrous nation. His justice and judgment were unmistakable. But they were overshadowed by his mercy, love and forgiveness.

By the end of the discussion we were exhausted, but we had been stimulated, instructed and encouraged.

### **What Makes It Work?**

If you are the leader, then I have some great news for you: What makes a LifeBuilder Bible Study so exciting for the group members is that the leader stays in the background. You don’t have to be a gifted communicator or a biblical studies major to lead one of these discussions. All you need are some well-written questions and some basic communication skills to help people open up. The questions will encourage group members to dig into the text for their responses and the application will flow naturally out of their own lives.

This type of study also has a number of benefits.

1. *People learn how to feed themselves from the Scriptures.* Each member of the group is involved in discovering the meaning of the passage. For some, this kind of involvement is a new experience. They are used to being told what the Scriptures say. They may know a lot about the Bible, but what they know is the result of someone else’s

study, not their own. A Bible discussion encourages them to search the Scriptures for themselves. For many, the Bible comes alive in a way they have never experienced before.

2. *It encourages regular patterns of Bible study.* A Bible discussion provides an opportunity for regular personal Bible study in a small group, which may help people carve out study disciplines on their own as well.
3. *Everyone has an opportunity to participate.* Because the group is small (eight to ten people is best), the very nature of the group encourages members to be involved. They begin to realize that their contributions are crucial to the learning experience. Even people who might never have spoken up in a large group begin to open up.
4. *We benefit from other people's insights.* As each person shares, all of us gain a fuller understanding of a passage and how it applies to our lives.
5. *Participants become part of a caring community.* A group study provides a natural setting in which to get to know one another and to cultivate honest, open relationships. The members of the group pray for each other and care for each other in practical ways.
6. *The leader learns from the group members.* It isn't necessary for you to know more about the passage than anyone else. In fact, there may be times when you will ask the group a question that you cannot answer. But you will look into the passage and uncover the meaning together.

### **How Do I Go About Leading?**

If you've been in a small group before, you may have had some negative experiences. For example, have you ever been in a Bible study where the leader sat down and just started reading through the questions—and you could tell that was the first time the leader had opened the guide? Have you ever been in a group where people spent the whole time talking about television or sports—and never got to the Bible? Have you ever been in a group where one group member did all the talking? We want to help you navigate these dangerous small group waters.

Leading a Bible discussion is not difficult, but it does require some skills. This book is designed to provide you with those skills by walking you through each component of a LifeBuilder Bible Study and describing how to use it. So we begin at the beginning—what to study.