

What pitfalls should we avoid when participating in a small group Bible study?

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I firmly believe that small groups can be a positive force for discipleship, spiritual growth, and advancing the kingdom of God through acts of service and love. But, like any human endeavor, that potential for good is balanced by the potential to cause damage.

To help you avoid that damage, here are several pitfalls to be aware of as you participate in small-group Bible studies:

- **Focusing on education rather than transformation.** Too many small-group members believe that "doing Bible study" is primarily an intellectual experience. That's not the case—or it shouldn't be the case. Acquiring new information is good, especially when that information has to do with God and his Word, but the experience of learning something new in a small group should be the first step on a long journey toward transformation. And the second step on that journey should be application. Remember James 1:22: "Do not merely listen to the Word and so deceive yourselves; do what it says."
- **Confusing opinion with fact.** We all have opinions about what the Bible says and what it means to live as a Christian. Most of us have strong opinions, at that. And it's natural for us to bring those opinions into a small group—that's a good thing. But trouble can arise when we start treating our opinions as established, "no one should disagree with this" fact. So if you feel yourself beginning to clash with what another person believes or how another person behaves, take a step back before escalating that clash. Ask yourself, "Am I reacting to an incontrovertible Truth from the Bible (of which there are surprisingly few), or am I reacting to a personal opinion?" It's vital that small-group members allow one another the freedom to learn and grow as individuals, rather than attempting to squeeze everyone into the same mold.
- **Giving in to fear.** Most people have an instinctual aversion to sharing the deeper parts of their stories—especially the parts that convey weakness, struggle, or shame. So it's no surprise that interaction and discussion between group members during the first several months of a group's journey usually remain on the surface. But if the goal of participating in a small group is spiritual growth and transformation, then people will eventually need to go deeper. It's a scary thing to talk openly about parts of yourself that you don't like. It's also scary to admit when you don't know or understand something, and to ask questions that reveal what you don't know. For many, the most frightening thing of all is the act of confessing sin. But all of these actions are important and necessary steps to growth.
- **Avoiding commitment.** People are busy. That's a fact of modern life and something that can't be ignored when it comes to establishing a community of believers. But that doesn't mean small-group members can treat the group as an optional experience from week to week—not if their goal in joining the group is spiritual growth and transformation.

Small groups work when group members establish a higher level of authenticity, trust, and accountability than they experience in other spheres of life (work, neighbors, and so on). And the first step in establishing that authenticity, trust, and accountability is regular, dependable attendance. If group members skip out on group meetings regularly (more than once or twice in a semester), they dramatically limit the amount of good that can be accomplished in that group. More than that, group members who do not participate fully during the group meetings, or who keep things at the surface (see above), risk turning the group into a collection of acquaintances rather than a living, breathing community.