

Growth Group Handbook

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The Growth Group Handbook

This is a *How-to* guide for Growth Groups. For biblical background and more on the vision behind Growth Groups see “*Growth Groups - Introduction for Leaders*”.

Love One another – go and make disciples

Jesus gave many commandments but there is one He gave special emphasis to. He called it a *New Commandment*. It was short and simple:

“Love one another” (John 13:34).

The last command Matthew records, known as the *Great Commission* is:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. **Go therefore and make disciples** of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20)

Growth Groups are one of the simplest and most effective ways of fulfilling the *New Commandment* and the *Great Commission*.

Growth Group Principles

Growth Groups are built upon five essential elements which Jesus says discipleship depends upon:

1. Living in Jesus' Light
2. Believing and Obeying Jesus
3. Personal Relationship with Jesus
4. Feeding on Jesus
5. Hearing Jesus Speak

Living in Jesus' Light

A disciple of Jesus is shaped and moulded by the radiant and penetrating purity and righteousness of God.

“He who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (Jn 3:21)

Those who have not discovered God's truth in Jesus are afraid of the light. They fear God's “interference” in their life; they fear the exposure of their ungodly deeds; they fear condemnation of their attitudes and motivations. On the other hand, those who know Jesus love the light. They love His truth; they are confident in His love; they rest in His forgiveness; they relish His affirmation as beloved children of God.

Loving and living in God's light is the starting point of discipleship. Growth Groups depend upon openness with one another and openness to God.

Believing and Obeying Jesus

One of the clearest statements Jesus makes about discipleship is that to be a disciple we must both believe what He says and do what He commands; there is no discipleship without obedience.

“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.” (Jn 14:23)

We must grow in our obedience to His *moral* teaching, but He also wants us to grow in confidence in His promises, especially to do the works that He did:

“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” (Jn 14:12)

Jesus says that faith and obedience are the true measure of our love for Him. Growth Groups therefore place faith and obedience to Jesus at their heart.

Personal Relationship

Just as there is no discipleship without obedience, there can be no true obedience without a personal loving relationship with Jesus. Obedience flows from relationship, not knowledge:

“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.” (Jn 14:23)

Many people admire Jesus from afar. We can admire and seek to imitate His example of love, we can be impressed by His insight into man’s nature, we can enjoy reading the Gospels. We might even be a faithful member of a church and devote our energies to loving others through acts of kindness. But discipleship is a call to a relationship with Jesus which bears the fruit of *intimacy*:

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit ... showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (Jn 15:5,8)

Focusing on intimacy and fruitfulness will be especially challenging as we all fall so short of the relationship that Jesus models for us. Nevertheless growth in our personal relationship with Jesus must be placed at the heart of our Growth Group.

Feeding on Jesus

Bible study and bible knowledge is commonly mistaken for discipleship, but Jesus was clear that they are not the same:

“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (Jn 5:39-40)

This brings us back to personal relationship. Without personal relationship with Jesus all the study and knowledge in the world counts for nothing. But neither can there be discipleship without bible study:

“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.” (Jn 8:31)

Jesus calls us beyond bible study. He says we are to *abide* in His word. The NIV has “remain” instead of *abide* (NKJV). I think *abide* conveys the sense better; it is where our home is, where we live, where we draw life from. The way Jesus

explains what He means by *abiding* in His word is with the imagery of food. He says we are to feed on Him:

”Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you ... For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood *abides* in me, and I in them. (Jn 6:53-56)

When we read and study the scriptures, we should do so to feast on Jesus. We should think of it as eating a meal, not as gaining knowledge.

Imagine inviting some friends for a meal, but instead of eating the food, you simply discuss it. Perhaps you analyse its nutritional value and discuss where and how it was grown. You might sample the various foods and compare their tastes. You might come away much more knowledgeable about the food and even recommend it to others. But you have entirely missed the point.

On the other hand, what if you *eat* the meal? You might not be conscious of the need your body has for Iron and Magnesium and Vitamin B12. You might have no idea what happens to the food and how it helps your body to grow and stay healthy. But eating it will still do you good!

This is how we should approach the Word of God, both in our personal reading and in our Growth Group. Discussion of origins and meanings and possible applications may well enhance our enjoyment of the meal, but even where we have little understanding of the meaning and no knowledge of how it can help us, it still does us good. God’s word, and especially the Gospels, is food for the Holy Spirit to use in shaping our thinking and nourishing our faith. If you do not yet know this to be true, you will soon prove it for yourself as you share in your Growth Group.

Learning to feed on Jesus is central to discipleship.

Hearing Jesus Speak

You might be surprised that prayer has not been included as one of the essential ingredients of discipleship. Well, it has been, except that the aspect of prayer Jesus tied to discipleship is not us speaking to God (which even unbelievers do), but God speaking to us. Jesus said:

“My sheep hear My voice” (John 10:27).

Nearly every chapter of John’s Gospel shows us that Jesus heard the Father’s voice and received His direction for life and ministry from Him. Jesus teaches that hearing God is a mark of discipleship:

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” (John 6:63)

“He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.” (John 8:47)

One of the primary characteristics of the New Covenant is the giving of the Holy Spirit so that we may be taught directly by Him:

“It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Holy Spirit will not come to you; ... He will guide you into all the truth ... He will glorify me because he will receive from me and make it known to you.” (Jn 16:7-14)

Listening to God is one of the most important aspects of prayer for a disciple. Yet some people find even the *idea* of hearing Jesus difficult. This is an area where we must exercise our faith and believe what Jesus says, “My sheep hear My voice.” If you are a disciple and have been baptised in His Holy Spirit then you hear His voice – but you might not have learnt to recognise it yet. God sometimes speaks to us very strongly and clearly, but often He speaks to us in a still, small voice and sometimes we only discern His voice gradually over a period of weeks or months. He often uses a combination of methods including scripture, our own thoughts and conversations with others.

Growth Groups are designed to help you grow in confidence in discerning what Jesus is saying to you.

Growth Group Practice

Jesus made two great promises which are the foundation of the Growth Group method.

- Where two or three gather in my name, I am there with them (Matthew 18:20)
- The Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth. (John 16:13)

Two or three friends, meeting together in confident faith that Jesus is with them and the Holy Spirit will guide them, can join the growing family of countless other such groups who experience the joy and excitement of being discipled by Jesus.

A Growth Group is a group of two or three people who meet regularly to be discipled by Jesus. Only one of the members needs to be a Christian, the others may be Christians or not-yet-Christians who are curious about Jesus.

The group meets once a week to learn from Jesus, love each other and share in an adventure of faith. Through prayer, discussing and applying scripture and through outreach the group will grow both in discipleship and in numbers. To function well the members must be open and real with one another, let the Holy Spirit teach them and be prepared to take risks and learn from their mistakes.

Growth Group Distinctives

A Growth Group is NOT just another name for a cell group, home group, bible study group or prayer partner / triplet. The essential distinctives of a Growth

Group are these:

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Growth Groups are limited to two or three members. Four is recommended only for a short period before dividing into two groups. The reason is that where there are four or more people, some can easily become spectators.

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Each group is unique and should be free to choose what scripture they read and at what pace they proceed through a book.

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Growth Groups depend upon the Holy Spirit to be the leader and teacher. Growth Groups work well even with brand new Christians who have no one to teach them.

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Growth Groups pray, but prayer is not the focus; discipleship is. A prayer group's purpose has been fulfilled when you have prayed together. A Growth Group's purpose is fulfilled only by growing obedience to Jesus.

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Growth Groups study the bible, but bible knowledge and understanding is not the focus; discipleship is.

A bible study asks “What does this passage mean” and usually requires someone to lead and do some teaching, or books or study guides to help.

A Growth Group asks “What is Jesus saying to me today.” Growth Groups can benefit from bible study helps, but they are not dependent upon them. The Holy Spirit will give understanding sufficient for the obedience He is asking for.

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Although the Growth Group will usually meet just once a week, it is dependent upon each member having daily time with Jesus asking Him to speak to them through that week’s bible passage. It is also dependent upon daily prayer and obedience to the Holy Spirit.

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Most other groups’ value stability and the members often stay together for years. This is not the case with Growth Groups. The membership of a healthy Growth Group will change as it reaches out to include new people and then divides to observe the “no more than three” rule.

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It is important that all members of a Growth Group know that it is perfectly alright to stop. Indeed if you do not feel it is helping you grow in obedience to Jesus then you should stop. It is better to seek new partners for a group than to continue with a group that is not growing. But you should not give up too soon. If you have not been in a Growth Group before it may take up to 6 months before you really begin to recognise how Jesus is teaching you and causing you to grow.

Jesus warned us that some people are poor soil; some will not want to continue as a disciple of Jesus. Sadly we have to let them go rather than have them hold others back. Growth groups are not suitable for half-hearted Christians.

Learning to Listening

Members of a Growth Group must practice listening to one another and listening to Jesus. Sharing about our most intimate relationship is often difficult and can make us feel vulnerable. It is vital that we listen carefully to each other. These guidelines will help:

- Each member should be allowed to share without being interrupted.
- We should not try to provide answers to one another's problems; when a person shares their heart, they want you to listen to them, not fix them.
- Questions may be asked to help a person explore and express their meaning.
- Offer help only if invited to do so.
- After this, ordinary interactive discussion can follow.

A Growth Group is not a competition for the deepest insights; it is sitting together at Jesus' feet. It is perfectly alright to say, "I don't understand this passage", or "I don't know what Jesus might be saying to me". As we feed on Jesus and share the delights we are enjoying with each other, we need to practice listening for Jesus' voice. The most important thing is that we encourage each other to keep listening to Jesus in the confident assurance that His sheep hear His voice.

Learning to Obey Jesus

Jesus told us to make disciples who obey all He commanded. This is the focus of Growth Groups from day one, even if some members are not yet saved.

Each day of the week you read an agreed portion of scripture on your own (or with a friend if your reading is poor). Remember to approach this like eating a meal. Whether or not you feel you are learning anything, trust the Holy Spirit to make it spiritual food and drink to you.

Then once a week you meet to discuss the passage and ask Jesus to show you what He is saying to you and what He wants you to do about it. You may find it helpful for each of you to answer four simple questions:

1. What does this passage tell us about people's character or nature?
2. What does this passage tell us about Jesus or God?

3. What does Jesus want to say to me personally?
4. Who does Jesus want me to share this message with?

What to read

- If you have not-yet-Christians or new Christians in the group we recommend you start your daily readings with the Seven Signs of Jesus (see later).
- When you have completed this we recommend you work through Luke's gospel.

From here there are a variety of options depending on the needs and abilities of the group.

- You could stay in the gospels, working through each in turn. I have found this extremely profitable.
- You could venture into Acts which is more like a fifth gospel than any other part of scripture.
- Venturing further into the New Testament the shorter letters are easier to understand than the longer ones.
- The New Testament often refers to the Old Testament. At some point you will probably want to follow the story of salvation through the Old Testament. You can stick to the main stories and skip over the rest or perhaps intersperse OT books with NT books.

How much to read

My advice is to go at your own pace. The members must agree week by week the minimum portion of scripture they will read the following week, but then each member is free to concentrate on just one verse or to read several chapters around the agreed passage. Each must follow what they feel the Holy Spirit is leading them to.

Accountability to One another

Friends who love another will speak up if they think their friend is doing something wrong or is disregarding what Jesus is saying. But friends who love each other will do this with love and gentleness, seeking to win their friend, not to condemn them:

“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” (Gal 6:1-2)

If a friend feels that God is disciplining them, you will be careful and prayerful in offering comfort, protecting your friend from the deceitful and destructive lies of Satan but letting the Holy Spirit do his heart surgery.

God holds each of us accountable for how we live our lives and one day we will have to give an account to Him. But if you recognise that you are being tempted in an area of weakness and vulnerability you would be very wise to share this with your Growth Group, or perhaps another friend who really cares about you.

Some groups are excessive or even obsessive about accountability, in the misguided belief that confessing every known sin each week to one another will help stop us sinning. I believe this practice is harmful rather than helpful. It leads to self-righteousness and pride and actually encourages people to hide their sin rather than share their struggles.

So take care:

- Let there be humility, love and mercy.
- Focus on the heart rather than outward behaviour.
- Aim to please Christ, not just have a clean track record.
- No pretence of holiness or wallowing in failure.
- Move towards genuine repentance, not just confession.
- Find peace and acceptance not in our behaviour, but in His grace and that Christ is our righteousness.

The following questions are designed to help you think if there is anything you wish to share for prayer and encouragement.

Accountability Questions

1. Are you enjoying a consistent prayer life and listening to God?
2. Have you sought first God’s Kingdom this week?
3. Have you struggled with any disappointments this week?
4. Have you been self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?

5. Have you given sufficient time to communicating with your spouse / close friends? Is there harmony?
6. Have you been consistent in talking to, training and disciplining your children / dependents / people you are disciplining?
7. Are you reconciled to everyone as far as it depends on you?
8. Are there any people or situations you are trying to avoid or control? Have you been prideful, boastful or gossiped?
9. Have you handled your work and money in a godly, honest, faithful and generous manor?
10. Are you preoccupied with unhelpful thoughts or struggling with addictive or compulsive behaviour?
11. Have you cared for your body in your diet, exercise, recreation and sleep? Have you been excessive in TV or games?
12. Has media or peer pressure influenced you wrongly?
13. Have you demonstrated a servant's heart? Not lording it over another? Have you been angry or lacked mercy or compassion?
14. Are you resting in Christ and not obsessing in your failures, dwelling on disappointments or trusting in your own performance?
15. What would you like help with this week?

Prayer

Having discussed your scripture reading and shared what you think Jesus is saying to you, it is time to pray. Start with a time of thanksgiving and then pray for one another and for any other issues that concern members of the group and finally for those you are seeking to reach in mission. Each member should try to name at least one not-yet-believer they are specifically praying for.

Pray with confident faith, fully expecting God to answer your prayers. Remember Luke 12:32 – “it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.”

Mission

Try to arrange to share in mission together each week. Jesus gave very clear instructions for outreach:

“But whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking such things as they give, for the labourer is worthy of his wages. Do not go from house to house ... Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God is near you.’ But when you enter a town

and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.’” (Lk 10:5-11)

You could start by simply visiting and praying blessing and healing for your immediate neighbours. If you can’t visit people in their houses, look for a place where people know one another, such as a club or popular café or local bar. Expect the Holy Spirit to lead you to good soil, a “son of peace”, where He has been preparing the ground to receive the word.

Some important points arise from this scripture:

- Go out to people’s houses and families with the gospel. Don’t expect them to come to your church.
- Bring gospel peace and healing to a whole family, not just the individual you meet first.
- Get the family to invite their friends to share in their discovery; don’t you go house to house.
- If a person turns out to be poor soil we should encourage and challenge them with the Gospel but if they do not chose to follow Jesus faithfully, then don’t waste time on them. Look for better soil.

When you find someone who wants to hear more about Jesus, offer to come to their house each week and share with their whole family and any friends or neighbours they would like to invite. Give them the *Seven Signs of Jesus (signs 1-3)* asking them to read the first sign every day during the week. When you visit the following week let each person answer the first question. Then let each person answer the second question. Then the third and finally the fourth. Urge them to respond in obedience to the third question, “What does this scripture say about you?” and also to act on their answer to the last question:

“Who needs to hear this?”

Remember that from day one you are seeking to teach them to be obedient to Jesus and to engage in mission.

Experience shows that anyone who completes the seven weeks will almost certainly want to follow Jesus. At this point you will need to rearrange your Growth Group because each new person who wishes to follow Jesus will need to be in a Growth Group. Your group may need to disband so each of you can lead a new group allowing you to add up to six new people to the church!

Starting a Growth Group - The First Meeting

The *Seven Signs of Jesus* is a key tool for mission so each member needs to be familiar with this study. If the members of a Growth Group have not already done this study you should start with the *Seven Signs of Jesus* as your weekly scripture reading.

1. Make sure you each have a modern translation of the bible or a copy of the *Seven Signs of Jesus (signs 1-3)*
2. Go through this leaflet and make sure each one understands the purpose of the Growth Group.
3. Take turns for each member to say how they feel they can show love and care for one another.
4. In the same way, share in turn about each of the following:
 - a. Finding a time when you can meet for 1½ hours each week.
 - b. Being open and honest with each other.
 - c. Being obedient to scripture.
 - d. Reaching out to your neighbours, friends and community.
5. Pray for one another.
6. Agree on your next meeting time and the scripture you will read during the week.

Multiplying Growth Groups

Through mission a group will soon add another member to the group. The group is allowed to meet for two weeks with four members so that the newest members can see how the group works, and then the group should multiply into two Growth Groups. Each group can then continue to add two new members before multiplying again. Growth Groups of more than three members are nowhere near as effective as groups of two or three and should be strongly discouraged. Larger groups can function as Discovery Groups, or several Growth Groups can meet together as a church (see separate handbooks).

Demonstrating the Gospel - Seven Signs of Jesus

For decades the church has used tracts with a summary of the “gospel” for evangelism. These typically talk about the problem of our sin, the solution in the cross and a “sinner’s prayer”. However, the Gospel is never presented like this in the Holy-Spirit inspired scriptures.

When we start reaching out to people held in the grip of Satan’s lies we soon see the wisdom of Jesus’ approach. He never *explained* how He had come to take the penalty for our sin; rather He *broke* the power of Satan. He demonstrated the Gospel’s *power* rather than explaining its *theory*. He set people free from sickness and demonic oppression.

Consider how the Holy Spirit inspired John’s Gospel:

“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31)

These verses describe precisely what we are trying to achieve with our little tracts. The reality is that unsaved people are not interested in the *theory* of salvation; they need to see and hear *stories* of salvation. That is why a newly transformed believer telling his story makes a good evangelist - we should listen and learn from them. The signs which John records are a powerful way of sharing that good news.

John selected seven *miraculous signs*:

1. Turning water into wine (Jn 2:1-12)
2. Healing the official's son (Jn 4:46-54)
3. Healing the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:1-17)
4. Feeding the 5000 (Jn 6:1-14)
5. Walking on the water (Jn 6:15-25)
6. Healing a man born blind (Jn 9:1-41)
7. Raising Lazarus (Jn 11:1-46)

The *Seven Signs of Jesus* are available as a series of leaflets. Please ask your pastor for copies.