

PARADOX

EMBRACING THE TENSIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

Matt LeRoy
Jeremy Summers

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

HOW TO LEAD A SMALL GROUP

If you are new to leading a small group or want to be challenged further in your experience, use this guide for ideas and encouragement.

THE METHOD

We encourage small groups to integrate these five elements:

- Gather Together
- Share Together
- Grow Together
- Worship Together
- Serve Together

WHAT THAT MEANS

Gather Together. Choose a consistent time to meet and make that time a protected priority in your week. Choose a time and place that best fits the members and mission of your group.

Share Together. Small groups play a vital role in fostering community within the church. Each week, take intentional time to share and pray together. Share your joys and deep struggles. Be authentic. As the leader, pave the way and set the tone. Lead with vulnerable courage and let your group share in your burdens. Create a safe place for them to do the same. After you offer an opportunity to share honestly, spend time praying for the specific needs mentioned. Bind your group together through prayer.

Grow Together. This small group experience is designed to spur you on toward growth in Christ within the context of community. Being together is important and meaningful. But be sure to orient your time together around the purpose of discipleship. Dig into the discussion opportunities and encourage and challenge spiritual growth.

Worship Together. Encourage your group members to stay connected to the larger church family. Engage with your church and worship together. You are on a journey with each other, walking in step with the Spirit. He is shaping you as the body of Jesus, a collective expression of the kingdom in your community. Lead your group in joining that journey.

Serve Together. We hope you grow in knowledge through this small group experience, but we pray that you will be challenged toward action. Mission is a crucial part of active discipleship, and any expression of the church that does not integrate both is not whole. We envision these small groups as micro-movements—the dream tanks and creative incubators for furthering the mission of God in your communities. In these fertile settings, ideas and ingenuity will give birth to beautiful expressions of the transforming love of Jesus. The potential here is unlimited. We want to mobilize your group to serve the community for the sake of the kingdom. Don't just discuss the topic at hand. Find a way to put it into action.

HOW TO CREATE A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

Ambiance and baked goods are great. But an environment that is welcoming is created by people who are welcoming. Here are a few tips for starters.

Set the Tone. As the group leader, people will follow what you do. Model what a welcoming group looks like. If it's uncomfortable or not natural for you, that's OK. Identify someone in your group with that gift and set them loose. They will love serving in that way.

Create Connections. You don't have to be the social shepherd for everyone. Look for ways to connect people to each other, not just you. "Oh, you're a new dad? You should meet Chris over here. He is too." "You're a journalism major? Meet Sarah. She just finished her second year in the program."

Learn Stories. Ask people to tell their stories or share about themselves. It builds a meaningful bridge into the group.

Be Aware. If you already have deep connections with some members of your group, be aware of the rest of the group. No inside jokes, no lengthy sidebar stories that cut out the other members.

HOW TO FACILITATE DISCUSSION

Lead and Listen. Set the direction but don't dominate the conversation. Create intentional space for others to offer ideas, observations, or questions.

Ask Good Questions. Don't kill your chances of discussion by asking yes/no questions. Keep them open ended. Ask why/how/what questions that require thoughtful answers and spark more questions.

Embrace the Awkward. Resist the temptation to fill the awkward silence. If you really want engagement and discussion, be willing to wait for the input of others. It might help to even break the ice by joking, "I'm OK with awkward silence. I'm not afraid to wait." Chances are they will laugh, and then they will speak up.

Embrace Diversity. Don't be afraid of differing opinions. Allow for the minority voice to be heard. This isn't always easy, but it's important for the culture of openness in your group. Listen to the opposing side of the argument. If you shut down that voice and show disrespect for opinions, you undercut the opportunity for honest expression. Create a safe place for people to express their disagreement and doubt.

Speak Boldly. Embracing diversity is not the same as endorsing every opinion as equal truth. As group leader, you will need to speak boldly at times, correcting misguided interpretations, representing the views of Scripture, even speaking on behalf of your church.

Practice Discernment. The Holy Spirit will give you discernment and wisdom and show you how to speak the truth in love. He will show you when to correct and when to just listen. He will help you. Trust where he leads you.

HOW TO FOSTER COMMUNITY

Be Real. Nothing kills community like isolation and insulation. As the leader you are not elevated above the group. You follow Jesus the Pioneer who entered our story and shared his life with us. Lead like that.

Pray for Each Other. Intercessory prayer is the art of friendship in the trenches. Carry each other. Celebrate with each other. Fight for each other.

Share a Meal. You might not do this every time, but make space to share a table. It's what you do when you want to get to know someone.

Ask Tough Questions. Use the questions in this guide to foster discussion. They have been designed to challenge and encourage your group.

Serve Together. Serving is a vital part of discipleship and an expectation of every group. But even more, it's a powerful way to bond a group.

HOW TO SHEPHERD SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Grow Spiritually. It's important to allow the Holy Spirit to lead you before you lead others. Allow him to cultivate an authentic relationship with Jesus. Lead out of that.

Pray for Your Group. Lift them up often. And remember that their growth will come from God's grace. Pray for the Holy Spirit to do his work in their lives. To guide them, guard them, push them, comfort them.

Pray Together. Notice a trend? Good.

Read Scripture Together. Let Scripture guide, correct, build, and inspire your group.

Ask Tough Questions. Notice another trend? Also, good.

1

GRACE & TRUTH

1. Read John 8:2–11. What does John 8 teach us about living a life of grace and truth in the world?
2. When do you find yourself living in the tension of grace and truth?
3. Jesus does more than forgive our pasts; he redeems our presents and reclaims our future. In what ways have you experienced this redeeming love of grace and truth?
4. Many of us hold onto “rocks,” and we refuse to let go of the shame we have been dragging around for years. What have you been holding on to? Are you ready to receive and be set free?
5. Speaking to the religious leaders, Jesus told them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (v. 7). Process this for a moment. What does this look like for you personally? For us as the church? How does this action resonate within today’s context? Who are today’s “prostitutes,” who today’s “religious” leaders?

2

CHURCH & CULTURE

1. By remembering our story, we rediscover our DNA. What is your story? Have you ever paused and thought about your story? Your history, family tree, and decisions that were made in your past have impacted the trajectory of your life. Take time to reflect on your story, your DNA.

2. The DNA of the church is discipleship (called), mission (out), and community (ones). Read Matthew 5:14–16 and Matthew 28. Engage the text. Wrestle with the reality of it. How does this passage speak to you today?

3. We learned that *ecclesia* is the assembly, gathering, or congregation, and refers to a body of people not a building. And the root meaning is “called out ones.” *Kirche* is the German for word referring to a church building. Do you see the difference between the meaning of these two words? Which definition do people tend to identify with when talking about the church—*ecclesia* or *kirche*—and why?

4. How have you been called out? How did you respond?

5. As “called out ones,” we are to follow Jesus into the broken places of our world. Identify those places in your life. How can you be the church in those places? In what ways can you shine like stars where the darkness is the deepest?

3

WORK & WORSHIP

1. Where do you spend most of your time during the week? In a twenty-four hour day, how much time do you spend working, eating, sleeping, etc.? Take a moment and calculate.
2. Why do we tend to associate ourselves by what we do with who we are?
3. Do you see your work as worship? Read Genesis 2:15 and Genesis 3. If the aim of work is to glorify God by making his creation flourish, how can you glorify God in your work?
4. Work is designed to be an expression of worship, not the object of worship. What does this look like for you? Can you give an example of how you've seen this lived out?
5. "Our lives are our liturgies" (*Paradox*, p. 38). Do you believe this statement? In what ways can one's life be liturgy?

4

HOPE & SUFFERING

1. Read Job 38–40 and Romans 5:3–5. How do you see God present in both the suffering and in the saving from the suffering (the hope)?

2. When God addressed Job, he appeared out of the storm. What is the storm in your life? How has God appeared to you? What is he saying?

3. When we are faced with suffering, we learned from Job's life gives us four core truths. Based on the Scriptures and readings, how can you apply these four truths to your life?

- Suffering is universal.
- Karma is a lie.
- We don't always have answers.
- God redeems suffering.

4. Remember, you don't find hope in suffering; hope finds you. So why would God enter into the suffering of his servants?

5

REPENTANCE & REVIVAL

1. When we dig into the story of Jonah, we realize that it is a gospel story, pointing us forward to the coming of Jesus. It is our story. In what ways does your story identify with Jonah's?
2. Jonah ran not because he feared Nineveh's strength or his own failure, but because of he was afraid of God's grace toward sinners. Toward whom are you afraid God will show grace?
3. Are you concerned more with others discovering God's love or his judgment? Toward whom does God want you to show grace?
4. For what might God be asking you to repent? What might he want to bring revival to in your life, church, or community?
5. Do you believe in the statement that the church must lead they way in repentance if we are to see revival?

6

OLD & NEW

1. Do you find that the Old Testament is irrelevant or not applicable to today's world? Why or why not?
2. Why does God seem so different in the Old Testament from the New Testament?
3. How do the Old and New Testaments relate to each other?
4. Why do the Old and New Testaments appear to contradict each other?
5. Read Genesis 3 and John 2. Share the similarities found between the two passages.
6. In what ways can you consume more of the scope of the Old and New Testaments, engaging the living Word?

7

INDIVIDUALITY & COMMUNITY

1. The saving love of Jesus is deeply personal. How did you come to following Jesus? What is your salvation story?
2. How does our belief in the nature and character of God shape our actions toward others? How should it shape our characters and actions toward others? Read the “Created for Relationship” section of this chapter in *Paradox* (p. 68).
3. Read Proverbs 27 and then reflect on verse 17. How would your relationships look different if you really lived out a life sharpening? What does this mean to you?
4. Do you find yourself rejecting or embracing truth when it hurts? What truth or truths are you currently rejecting and need to embrace?
5. Do you long for community? Have you ever experienced true community, friendships that are truly authentic, vulnerable, and life giving? Do you have the will, time, and passion to fight for true community, and to bring others along in this transformational journey?
6. We often fall into one of three roles when it comes to building authentic Christian community: the critic (What is wrong?), the consumer (What’s here for me?), or the creator (What can I do?). Which role do you lean toward? Why?
7. Jesus taught his disciples that the world will know you are his by how we love. Jesus invites us to follow him into an intimate relationship and personal faith, but he also calls us to love one another. How will you love those in your world—your neighborhood, your workplace, your school, or your family and friends?

8

HOLINESS & LOVE

1. Complete the following statement: God is _____. Why did you choose this description of God?
2. Many of us have experienced being hurt or disappointed, but have you ever really experienced brokenness? How did you feel? Did you carry the weight of this brokenness alone or did others support and encourage you?
3. How did your faith in God grow stronger through your brokenness? Did you share your experience with anyone? Why or why not?
4. God expresses his holiness and love to the world through us, and he plants himself in each of us so we become an extension of his mission in the world. Does your life currently reflect this truth in words and actions? Why or why not?
5. Ask yourself if you are tired (physically, emotionally, spiritually), hurting, discouraged, afraid, uncertain, trapped, or at a dead end. Remember that because God is love and because he loves you he fills your heart with holy love and mends the broken places in the world.

9

FAITH & WORKS

1. There is no such thing as salvation by works. So are works unimportant? Does your behavior matter? Have you dealt with this tension between faith and works?
2. Read Ephesians 2:4–9. On the topic of faith and works, what sticks out to you in this passage? What is opposed to our efforts?
3. Read James 2:14–24. What sticks out to you in this passage? Do you feel the tension between Ephesians 2 and James 2? Do you really have faith if it never produces good works?
4. Read John 15. Branches don't produce fruit, but they do display it. How is your faith displayed in the character of your life? Is there fruit?

10

BELIEF & REASON

1. Read Psalm 19:1–10. How did David demonstrate that both belief and reason inform our understanding, worship, and experience of God?
2. Do you tend to separate faith from science? How do you embrace both?
3. Christianity isn't about following the heart alone; it's about engaging both the heart and mind in pursuit of God. Is there a time when you engaged both your mind and heart, rather than just one or the other? How did you see God at work in that decision?
4. As disciples, we are all students of the Word. We might not become scholars, but we should become students. Do you see yourself as a student of the Word, a folk theologian (*Paradox*, pp. 101–102)? Why or why not?
5. What questions are you wrestling with today? What rocks or boulders consume your mind and heart? Pause, consider them, and name them, but don't let them hold you back. Don't be afraid to voice your questions and offer your thoughts on the answers. Share and pray for one another.