

Techniques for Small Groups

By Anne Ortlund

Thank you for being kind.

I recall Jesus said he chose his disciples to be with him to go to Hawaii. That's pretty good. It didn't last very long, though. I'm getting wired for sound.

We have an 18 year old, Nels, who graduates from Corner Del Mar High this June. I was going out the door just now, leaving the house, and he says, "Shred them up, mom." When you're 59, you figure your hearing is going and you're too senile to know it. So I said, what? He said, "Shred them up, mom." And he said, "Go for it." He said, "Be totally outrageous."

Let me tell you what is really sweet. Quarter of a century from now, when you've got a kid who's 18 and you're walking with Jesus and your husband or wife is walking with Jesus and you're living for him and loving him, and you have a kid that's on the team that loves him too, wants to go for it and roots for you to go for it. I tell you that is so sweet. That is so sweet. I just say every day to the Lord, he's a baby of number four and they're all living for Jesus. I just say, Lord, how could I have it so good? Lord, it is awesome.

Well, so that's what set me off tonight. I'm going to try shred you up tonight. We were talking last night about the very next priority to God himself, the most precious priority of your life after Christ. And that is the body of Christ. And I want to start out tonight by saying the two are very

close together, Christ and the body of Christ, closer than you think. And renewal will come to you as you give your heart again to Christ himself. And as you give your heart again to the body of Christ, it is so important that you fall more and more in love with him.

And listen, it is so important that you fall more and more in love with your fellow believers. And the two are related often. We don't know how closely connected they are. I like to think of it as, this is silly, I made this up myself, a giant with its head in the clouds. We can see the body, can't we? The body of Christ. We can see that's visible. We can't see the head, so we forget how connected they are.

I think the head is in heaven, but it's just a little out of sight. When the clouds dissipate below, there's the body. Listen, if you pinch the body, the head says "Ouch," right? Okay. In the Book of Acts, when Paul was persecuting the Christians and then Jesus Christ met him on the Damascus road, did Jesus say, "Paul, why are you persecuting Christians?" What did he say? "Paul, why are you persecuting--?" Right. Paul didn't know he'd been persecuting Christ.

He thought he'd been persecuting Christians. You pinch the body and the head says "Ouch." That's why in Ephesians 4, when it says, "Be kind to one another," don't back-bite, don't gossip, don't chew one another out. And the same verse is prefaced with grieve not the Holy Spirit. Or you could say about that, "Don't make God cry."

And you know what? When you downplay somebody in the body of Christ, you're downplaying Christ, you're offending him. It hurts him. When you pinch the body, the head says "Ouch." You

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know, a lot of Christians say, "I love the Lord, but those Presbyterians or those charismatics or Lutherans, Episcopalians, National Council of Churches." Oh, let's be so careful.

Fall in love with the body of Christ. Fall in love with the head. If you learn to worship and oh, we're hungry for that these days, praise God, may it be. If you learn to admire Jesus and worship him publicly and privately, both. If you want to really strengthen that muscle, get good at it, admire and love and lift up your fellow believers, tell them they're wonderful, too. That's great practice for telling God he's wonderful. The two go together. On the other hand, you see, if you don't know how to worship, you probably will gripe against your fellow Christians, too.

So first, John 4 talks all about that. How can you say you love God and hate your brother? How can you say you love your brother and hate God? The two just don't mix. Either you love them both, hate them both. So let me call you to worship and let me call you to the body of Christ. I prefaced it with this because I don't want to seem horizontal to you. I don't want to just talk about relationships in the body and leave it at that. Like we've got some little exclusive club going to the little poem.

We are God's chosen few. All the rest are damned. There is no room in heaven for you. We don't want heaven crammed.

So what we're talking about, even in small groups and all this is not some little hand holding club and we keep everybody else away and we just spend our time stroking each other. Interesting,

though, I had my small group today, these seven gals I told you that are praying for me right now. And that means so much to me. In my notes today, we talked about crowns.

There are five crowns listed in the New Testament, five rewards, what we get for the good stuff here in this life, what we get later on for that. And two of them, the crown of rejoicing, is for soul-winning, bringing people to know the Lord Jesus. And the crown of glory is for feeding the flock, for disciplining them after they get there and nourishing them and caring for them and all that.

God loves his people. He loves the redeemed. He loves the unbelievers. He weeps over them. He wants us to, we're to give ourselves to the dear lost ones, to bring them to Christ, and then we must give ourselves to nurturing the body. Nurturing the body. Let me say one more thing about that. We'll get into the how-to's. I read 1 Corinthians 3 for years, and I didn't get the picture. I didn't see that. It was talking about discipline and ministering to each other. I didn't see that. It says how Christ is the foundation, and you can build all kinds of stuff on top of that foundation.

You can build wood, hay and stubble, or you can build gold, silver and precious stones. Right? And then comes the judgment. You touch a match to it. And what burns up? Well, the wood, hay and stubble burns up the gold, silver, precious stones are left. And that proves that you got to live a great life so that you live a life of gold, silver and precious stones, right?

No, the whole chapter is on ministry, and he's been talking, first of all, about one plant and other waters and about the whole nurturing thing as a field and a crop. Then he changes the figure of

speech. You are the building, God's the foundation. All of you are the building. The body of Christ is the building. All the believers in it are stones in the building. And he says, what kind of stones are you putting into that building? Are you so nurturing and building up the body of Christ that your products, your disciples, the people that you could influence in the body of Christ, are they going to turn out to be gold, silver, precious stones?

Or are you going to have so little effect on your fellow believers that they'll just get into heaven as wood-hand stubble is the chapter on ministry. Isn't it interesting? How are you affecting your fellow believers that determines how your life adds up in the end, whether you're building others around you to be permanent, beautiful parts of the building of God?

Well, last night we were looking at the biblical basis for discipling and ministering to each other in the body of Christ. We talked a little about small groups tonight. I want to talk about the how-to's of small groups for a little bit now. And I have to say this is like Paul, when he was talking to the Corinthians, when he was writing to them, and he said, "Now I've been telling you things that were by the word of the Lord." And he says, "Now I want to add a few of my own opinions."

Do you remember when he says that? I'm dying to ask Paul, when I see him in heaven, how he figures that because it all went into the word of God. It's part of the inspired pages. So how does he figure that? Now this before has been the word of God.

Now I'm going to give you a few of my own ideas. Okay. What we said before is out of the word of God and the biblical basis for discipling small groups, ministering to each other at close range.

Now I'm going to give you a few things that are just not biblical, but out of ten or 11, 12, about 13 years now of falling on our faces, Ray and I and seeing what works and what doesn't work, trial and error in small groups and so on, try them on for size.

These are not biblical. They're just practical. And you might think of ten other better ways to do it. So that's okay. We have taught these things and observed small groups around the world, and we've seen what works in churches and what doesn't work. And these are some of our ideas, okay? How do you get into one? If you've not been in a small group before, that might be your number one question. How do you get into one?

Well, we talked last night about how Jesus formed his small group. He had a long prayer session with the Father first, and the father gave him the names of those he wanted for his group. That's the way you've got to do it. That's absolutely important. Prayer is the prelude. The reason is if you're an aggressive, outgoing kind of person, you might rush out and say, boy, this is terrific. I'm going to do it and choose six people, and they'd all be dead wrong because you're apt to act on impulse.

On the other hand, if you're a shy person and you pray, well, the point of what I was saying was pray first and God will give you the names of those that he wants you to have. On the other hand, if you're a shy person and you think, oh, I never had the courage to say, would you be in a group with me? Pray first, and God will let somebody else who's more aggressive ask you. It'll always work if you pray first, because God loves to give good things to his children, and he will do that for you.

Don't administrate it too heavily from above. Wait. If you think, oh, I love you, dear kids, for always having the word revival on your tongue. The last couple of years, when Ray and I speak at Biola or Talbot, they say, pray for revival. We're longing for revival. We think God's going to give us revival soon. I think he is, too, when you're asking him for it and when you're excited about it.

And revival comes when you well, among many other things, when you get your relationships straightened out with each other, when you confess your faults to one another and you apologize, when you're out of sorts with anyone and you get all your relationships clean and clear with each other. So if you're thinking, oh, this is what would bring revival, let's post all the names on the bulletin board and all the A through B's will be in one group in groups and over here and all the CS through F will be in another group or all the dorms. No artificial grouping, no false chemistry.

Just let the Holy Spirit put together the people that he wants to put together and it'll be right. What kinds of groupings? As far as I know, there are two basic kinds of groups. Maybe I'm wrong. I mean, we've got all kinds of terms for them these days. Growth groups. Well, anyway, I see two basic groups in Scripture. Discipline groups and support groups or supportive fellowships, whatever you want to call these.

Here's the difference between them as far as I can tell. A discipling group is when either at the instigation of the disciples or the discipler, a bunch of people who want to know more about the Lord gather around one person who's walked with them longer and they get together so that

everything the discipler knows can rub off on them. And everything he is can rub off on them.

They can watch his lifestyle, see him operate, learn doctrine from him, etc. Is that okay? That is what Jesus formed. He trained his twelve out of them, particularly three.

That's a typical discipling group. Paul had discipling groups. In fact, not even his apparently his discipline of Timothy was not just a one on one thing. Do you remember he says in 2 Timothy, 2 Timothy, the things that you have learned from me among many others? See, this was a group situation.

Apparently those things pass on to faithful men who will be able to teach others. Also, discipline goes from spiritual generation to spiritual generation. Okay, that's a discipling group. Now, you will not go out and say, "Since I know so much and you know so little, how would you like me to disciple you?"

But some of you kids are brand new Christians. Probably came to the campus shortly after you were saved. Some of you were born into Christian homes and you know, rich doctrine forever and ever. You have a responsibility to these kids that just come along and eager to grow. There is absolutely no reason why you shouldn't say, hey, let's get in a group together.

Would that be okay? I've been just burning to teach first chapter of Ephesians to somebody. Will you be my guinea pig for six weeks or something? God will give you tact and it'll work out. Or some of your kids say to some others, hey, or to one other, maybe six of you would say six freshmen to one senior. I don't know. "Would you disciple us?" When our Sherry, our older oldest daughter, was 28, she came to me and she said, "Mother, I am so mad."

And I said, "What's the matter, Sherry?" And she said, "Five of the college gals came to me and said, Sherry, you're a godly older woman. Would you disciple us?" She said, "Mother, I am not a godly older woman." And I said, "Well, now, wait a minute here. You think about that. You were four years old when you accepted Jesus as your savior. You have taken notes on your Daddy's sermons ever since you were junior high school and you're 28 years old." I said, "You know so much, you're responsible to pass on. And some of these college gals are brand new Christians."

I said, "Besides, when you're 18 or 19, 28 is old." So I said, go for it. She did. Let me tell you what's fabulous. That was a few years ago. And now she is not only discipling small groups, she is teaching Bible conferences. She's speaker for three day things. She is just fabulous. She really is holding forth the word of life, breaking the bread really well.

On the other hand, you've got support groups. You've got people who say, and this is a fabulous thing to do, what you know about the Lord. You teach me what I know about him, I'll teach you. Where you're strong and I'm weak, you help me. Where I'm strong and you're weak, I'll help you. And let's just grow together in Jesus.

Fabulous. However, if you only have time for one group in your life, let's think about which it ought to be a discipline group or a support group. Which group do you think you see more often in Scripture? Do you see discipline or do you see support groups? Discipling? You're right. In fact, it doesn't even start in the New Testament. It's from Old Testament straight through. Which

do you think is more prevalent today? Discipline groups or support groups? So we got a way to go, don't we?

We're not really biblical and balanced yet, although we're sure on the road. And it's exciting and wonderful. If you only have time for one group in your life, I would suggest, I don't know, get close to a faculty member, a more mature student, somebody and say, "Disciple me." Or if you feel that the Lord is just helping you be rich in things, you need to pass them along, get somebody at your elbow. I don't know. Just ask the Holy Spirit to make you humble and obedient.

And how is he going to do it in your life? Always have a flow go in your life. Always be learning and growing and watching and being taught by somebody who's farther along than you. Don't be the end of the road. Always be passing along to those who aren't quite as far along as you. Okay, next question. Can you mix the sexes? Let's break it down again into discipline groups and support groups in the scriptures. Do you see jumping across the sexes for discipline?

You're right. Except you're saying no. Maybe one instance. I can think this is fudging a little. It's not really over the line. I can think of a couple who disciplined a guy. Who? Priscilla and Aquila discipling Apollos. So that might be in fact, that's got to be legitimate. That was a wonderful thing in the Scriptures. All right. But you can see really how this guy who's walked with the Lord a long time says, I'm going to disciple this little freshman girl. Doesn't know very much. Yeah.

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In fact, that's got to be legitimate. That was a wonderful thing in the scriptures. All right. But you can see really how this guy who's walked with the Lord a long time says, I'm going to disciple this little freshman girl that doesn't know very much. Yeah. He is telling her about 1 Thessalonians for the second coming. And she's saying, oh, he's got the most gorgeous brown eyes I ever saw.

How about support groups, guys and gals in support groups? Can you think of any support groups in scripture? I've asked a lot of groups this you start scratching your head, don't you? I can only think of one. Tell me afterwards if you think of another or if I've missed anything.

Maybe Paul and Priscilla and Aquila were a support group together. The three of them were tentmakers, and they bound together not only because profession, but for ministry's sake and encouraged each other over a period of time, certainly the year and a half that they lived in. Where do they live? Corinth? I think it was Corinth where they lived together. Or was it Ephesus? Corinth, Acts 18.

All right, so that might have been a support group. You kind of have to scratch around to find any Ray and I have often been in support groups. That's a neat kind of thing for guys and gals to be in together. We try never to say this probably doesn't apply to most of you yet. We try never to say couples groups, not just married couples.

That's when you mix the singles and the marrieds that is so much fun. We try always to have both in our mixed groups because the singles learn so much about married people and the married people learn so much about single people and we all need each other. Well, that's a fun way to share Jesus in the kind of relationships that are just so pure and so neat, like Timothy says about loving guys, loving your sisters in the Lord with all purity. You know, that can happen when you pray for one another's exams and struggles and joys and golly. That's a neat way to interact in the body of Christ.

Doesn't have to have any romance in it at all. Just a neat way to interrelate. How many in a group? Well, we have discovered through years of trial and error, four to eight. Six is really wonderful. If you get past eight, not only does the commitment level go down, they'll think, oh, I could miss this one time. They're enough. They won't notice I'm not there. But also you don't have time for everybody really to share and to interact. Somebody's going to get crushed in the rush.

They'll start getting anonymous if this were a Bible class, I'm talking about if this were an informational time, good night. You can have Bill Gothard seminars with what, 20,000? And one speaker up front? You can have any number for that. We are not talking about one speaker up front and everybody sitting in pews or seats listening. We're talking about lives, ripping off on lives and lifestyle, showing, interacting at all kinds of levels, sharing joys and sorrows and being accountable, sharing goals, saying, Help me get from here to there in six months, whatever.

We're talking about all that nitty gritty, good stuff. The greatest revival that the English-speaking world has ever known, as far as I know, we called the Great Awakening in the middle of the 18th century. It was so powerful just around the middle 1700s, that on the Great Britain's side of the Atlantic Ocean, you had Wesley and the beginning of Methodism. And that deep revival transformed the social life of Great Britain. And child labor laws were established and orphanages were established and a lot of social abuses were done away with.

And it was revolutionary time for the cause of righteousness in our country. The Great Awakening on this side of the Atlantic produced our Constitution. A short couple of decades later. Our forefathers influenced by the spiritual atmosphere of this Great Awakening, which was so long lasting, they were still really in it in 1776. They really built it into their Constitution.

George Whitfield was preaching then and so many other greats now, what was the one characteristic of that revival on both sides of the Atlantic. Small groups. Do you know that? Wesley had been converted listening when he had been at a Church of England Rector for quite a while, a missionary in Georgia came over to America to convert the Indians. Went back with his tail between his legs 18 months later and considered himself a failure.

And he had talked to some Arabians in Georgia and was curious about whether they were heretics or had something he didn't have went back and listened to a Moravian preacher, Peter Bowler. And he says, my heart was strangely warmed and I did trust in Christ as my savior. And he learned he was discipled by Peter Bowler, who taught small groups to Wesley. And Wesley preached to these enormous crowds and popularized this. And do you know, in the year, what,

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1737 or 38, Peter Bowler laid out 33 rules that Wesley's followers all had to follow the things that they were to do in their class meetings, as they call them.

There could only be five to ten in a meeting. I told you four to eight. I think we talk longer or something today. I've had ten in a group and we couldn't get through soon enough or else it got to be a midnight thing. But they had five to ten. They said they are to meet twice a week, once on Monday nights, and the other time at their own choosing. They were to come each week. First they were to sing a hymn. Then they were to go around the circle and each one was to tell his several temptations since the time of their last meeting. And his deliverance is there from Whoa.

You see, if you get together and just read little book and fill in blanks and assign homework. If it turns into a cerebral thing, that's not what produced the Great Awakening or what conserved it and continued it. But they got right down eyeball to eyeball to their true spiritual condition and solicited prayer from each other to get out of it. And this transformed society on both sides of the Atlantic, and it'll do it for you. I don't want to give you any quick and easy answers.

The Holy Spirit, of course, is the one who does it all, but this has been his great tool. We saw for Max Two last night that as soon as the 30 converts were brought into the body of Christ in the day of Pentecost, they were folded into small groups in homes as well as encouraged to Church, to the big public meetings. How many in a group then? Four to eight. How often should you meet?

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You see each other every day? I don't know. Usually it's once a week. But I know businessmen that call each other every day and pray over the phone. They have that commitment. I know high school kids that do the same. The Lord will lead.

How long should a group last? How long? Be absolutely sure. You have cut off times. Perfect when you're in school, they're built in. You can say, hey, Lace, let's be a group from now to June, or from September to June or whatever. Six months, nine months, a year. It's ideal when you're in your kind of situation, but through the rest of your life, when you start into a group, you ought to agree from the beginning what your cutoff time is going to be. A year, nine months, whatever.

Three, whatever you decide on one of two things will probably happen. If you don't, you will peter out in failure. A couple of years later, you'll be saying, Gosh, this thing has gotten stale. How do I get out of it? I don't want to hurt their feelings or it will Harden into a click.

That can easily happen. And there'll be a lot of others with tears in their eyes on the outside looking in, wishing that you'd be in a group and you've got these cement blocks that you can't bust apart with a sledgehammer.

What do you do when you're together? Let me give you five ingredients so important. One, worship, two, the word. Three, sharing, four, prayer. Five, accountability. Worship the word, sharing, prayer, accountability.

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A lot of groups just have two, three, four, and they miss one and five absolutely essential that when you come together, even as Christians, it not be all horizontal. You need to look up together into the face of God and say you are wonderful. Sing to him, pray to him, whatever part of it ought to be really vertical before you get onto the horizontal. Even good stuff. Okay, now you don't need heavy assignments.

This is not a Moody Bible Institute course or something. For going to sake, don't be a Marine Sergeant if you're leading a group. Busy days for you kids. You get Bible anyway. Praise God. You're in such a wonderful situation now. And in fact, your danger can be that you handle precious things so much it can get to be humdrum unless you constantly draw on the Holy Spirit to make it fresh and precious to you.

So when you get together, let it be what's blessed you in the last week in your quiet time, or a verse that was really fabulous to you that you want to share with your brothers and sisters. I don't know. Just play it cool, hang loose a little bit. If it's a discipling group, then it'll have a little more structure and it'll be more what you want to really get across.

However, but leadership in a typical support group probably pass it around or as many as want to lead, take turns leading accountability. What if you would say, let's have a group from now till June in that time, hold me accountable to learn a verse of scripture every other week to pray for my grandmother who doesn't know the Lord four times a week. Put it on the calendar so you'll know if you did it or not, and to gain £3 because you're too skinny. Okay, okay. Now then, your brothers and sisters will go to work and they'll root for you.

And if you tell them that when they come to me, this is accountability. This is how it works. Did you pray for your grandmother four times this last week? I forgot. So they call you or they see you in class and they say, hey, grandmother, and you don't flatten them with your purse. You know they don't mean you or they say, One more milkshake. Come on, you got to put on that half pound this week.

You know your goals. I don't. Do I have to tell them everything about myself? No. These are not confession sessions. When the Lord Jesus forgives and forgets and covers everything by the blood of his cross, why should we dig him out and remember them? No way. No way. However, small groups are a wonderful time for James 5:16 to work out in your life.

If we confess our faults to one another, I can't think of it. That's not right. James 5:16. Hang on with me here. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." I don't know when Protestants confess their sins. Catholics have a good plan. What do we do about it? So as a general rule, we stay bottled up until we're absolutely ready to explode and have a lot of unhealth inside.

And then we rush off in desperation to some professionals that we've never seen before and pay them a bunch of money so we can bear our souls. Not that God doesn't give us psychologists and psychiatrists who are needed by some I don't mean to downplay them, but there can be such health in the body when we are just in a small group of caring people whom we trust and who

love us. My big mouth. If you don't pray for my big mouth, I will never get any victory over it. I do that with every small group I have. I do believe because I've got a big mouth.

I can come across [inaudible] like some Mother's Superior, the source of all wisdom. I hear myself doing it and I hate it. So I say to my small roof, Please pray for me, that I'll be this little family and wife and look up with my green eyes into his and say, Whatever you say, Darling. I picture myself one way and then this big mouth takes over and I say to my group, Please love me enough to pray for my mouth. And I tell you they do.

They really do. In fact, I'll give you one quick little story. I got so desperate. This was early in the days of small groups when I had no victory over this at all. And my big thing then was exaggeration.

I lived with it all my entire life. I've exaggerated since I was a tiny little girl, just a dramatic person. And I love flair. I love to tell good stories. I can always make a good story better.

There was one, January 1st. I guess it was December 31st. We were having a watch night service, about 1200 people in the sanctuary sharing time. Pastor's wife stands up and says, "I am so desperate because I am finally calling exaggeration lying. And will you pray for me that I will not lie anymore? I want God to break me of this." Do you know in the next week or two I felt almost immediate relief. I could feel myself checking myself. When I was ready to say 3000, it was only 2500. No.

The next October, 10 months later, a dear young housewife came up to me. I met her in the street. She said, Anne, how's your tongue? I said, you know, Cathy, I'm doing better. The Lord has really broken the back of a lifetime habit for me. She said, I've prayed for you every day since January 1st. I just hugged her and cried. I was so touched. That is love in the body. She cared for me enough to do that. I didn't even know her real well.

I will thank the Lord for Kathy to my dying day for doing that for me. That took energy and time and care on her part well so we do each other good in the body of Christ love each other to the Lord I had this smashing closing story and we're out of time so we'll just pray and you can stand and stretch I'll see you again tomorrow night.

Dear Father in heaven, you know what you want us to learn from this. Whatever I've said that is not biblical or that is not in correct scriptural balance, Lord adjust it in the ears of these dear people. I pray, Father, that anything I've said that isn't right in error that you'll drop it out of their memories and will you teach them by your own spirit that's what you want them to know and obey? Oh Lord, we love you. We thank you that you're up to doing this. We praise you. We say Hallelujah to you. In Jesus name, Amen.