

SMALL GROUP ESSENTIALS

| THREATS TO COMMUNITY

 **GROUPS**

THREATS TO COMMUNITY

| Conflict

by Clayton Aker

Leader: This lesson has the potential to be eye opening for group members. Hopefully, in a good way. Discussing conflict and how it will be addressed in the group would be a beneficial outcome for this lesson. Be attentive to group members' non-verbal cues and use those as a guide for how far to let the discussion progress.

Group Member: As you read this week's lesson jot down any thoughts and/or reactions you may have. Share these with your group at your next group meeting. Go ahead and answer the questions in the deepen section and be ready to share at your next group meeting.

DISCOVER

If we are to pursue community that is like family then we will soon reach a point of conflict. If conflict doesn't seem to arise, we may want to ask "am I being transparent with my group?" Lack of conflict may be from a lack of intimacy. We may think that's okay, but if we trace it back to its root, we will discover that shallow relationships never have conflict; growing relationships do.

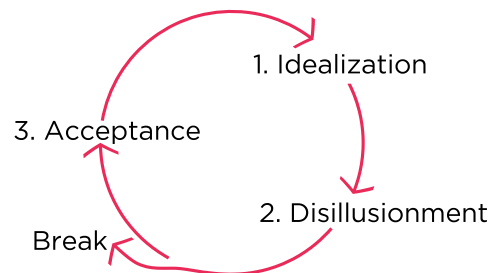
When conflict does arrive through, we should not pack up and run away. People may change, but problems will follow us. Conflict is an amazing opportunity to become fluent in the Gospel and its implications for our life. How do we handle conflict as followers of Jesus? It's not picking up and going home but wading into the relational mess and pursuing love and forgiveness with the one in whom we have conflict. Conflict doesn't have to stand in the way of progress. Jesus gave us the ideal template to transform conflict into confrontation and ultimately, confrontation into reconciliation.

DEVELOP

Conflict is unavoidable in any relationship. Jesus taught us to deal with conflict to become a stronger,

better community. In community we can experience some of the greatest pains because of the depth with which we love. Yet, at the same time that depth can bring some of the greatest healings. The Apostle Paul knew that confrontation was going to happen. As we have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13), Paul reminds us that our old self will continue to creep back in (Romans 7). He gives the Galatians a warning saying "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted." (Galatians 6:1)

Has there ever been a time where you were approached about not living a life that honors God? How did that make you feel?



Being a part of a small group will have a cycle. When you first join you are in stage 1, Idealization, the honeymoon. Everyone is getting along, you are getting to know each other but over time you will move to stage 2, Disillusionment.

Disillusionment starts to happen as you spend more time together. It may start as an annoyance, which should not account for confrontation. Before you move to stage 3 disillusionment provides an escape or break from community. The only way we can move from disillusionment into stage 3, acceptance, is if we learn to do confrontation well. If we don't learn to do conflict well, we may never taste the goodness God has for us in community.

Paul reminds us in Philippians 2:1-5 of what it would look like if we had the same mind about us as Jesus did. We are a new community, a new family in

Christ, and it is a work of the enemy to divide us, so we must stay diligent. We do not confront for the sake of confronting. Conflict that comes up from an annoyance or venting, may reveal more about us than the person it is aimed after. We desire fruitful confrontation, that help both people become who God wants them to be.

Fruitful confrontation is always showing people what is actually true about them. It can only happen in the security of knowing who you are and grace for another.

Two thoughts about conflict:

1. We must take a look at our identity. How we see ourself is going to be how we treat other people around us. Are you finding your identity in Jesus or external sources? It's important to always remind ourselves that we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession..."(1 Peter 2:9) Did you catch the language Peter uses? It's not singular but plural. While we are a son/daughter of God, we are apart of a family of God. It's an individual and communal identity. We must take an introspective look at our past and how we were raised and where we find our identity because it will give us insight into how we handle conflict.

How was conflict handled in your family growing up?

2. What are the common root issues that you deal with that cause many of your conflicts?

In our small groups, we should strive to produce culture of grace. Read Paul's words to the church in Ephesus in Ephesians 4:2-5. "Live

worthy", "with all humility and gentleness", "with patience", "bearing with one another" and "make every effort", these are strong terms for people in community. It takes work to be a family. The easy way is to abandon when conflict arises, it takes remembering the call of Jesus that we can produce a culture of grace. In a culture of grace we want to see who the person who God is creating them to become.

Now for the confrontation, we turn to Matthew 18:15-19 to look how Jesus encourages us to pursue unity. First, if you feel wronged by someone, go to them directly, not to your leader or another member, but go to them and let them know how you felt hurt. After some time passes, if you still feel that it is not resolved, bring it to the leader to have accountability. If that still doesn't seem to work, presenting the issue to your small group is the last step. Every step of the way, people will look for the break option. But in a culture of grace and forgiveness, we give people the freedom to find life in Jesus alone and let the Spirit convict and bring about repentance.

Questions to ask before confrontation:

Do you have the right to talk to this person about this issue? People need to know you care before how much you know. Have they invited you to critique? Are they speaking into your life? Are they a follower of Jesus?

Are you winning them over in love? All confrontation is showing people who they really are in love. Is God already working on this in them? OR do I need to bring it up?

Are you being clear? Don't sugar coat it or exaggerate it. Say what you think, give your reasons for it and then wait or listen. This is how you know they love you, they stay and listen, and walk with you.

Fruitful confrontation is always pointing to Jesus so we can learn how he leads us.

DEEPEN

Read Matthew 18:15-19, describe the method Jesus uses to deal with conflict. What is difficult about it? What can get in the way of pursuing fruitful confrontation?

THREATS TO COMMUNITY

| Crisis

by Barry Parker

Leader: The tendency in this lesson will be for group members to not want to engage because they are not sure that they themselves would be able to help in a crisis. Reassure them this is okay and it's important to talk about why. Also, be cautious for group members that have been wounded by groups that failed to act. It's important to allow them to share their story so that it's not repeated in your group.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you. Be ready to share your responses to the questions posed in this lesson at your group meeting this week.

DISCOVER

In any organization it is vitally important to have an emergency plan in place that provides protection and safety for all who are involved when a crisis occurs. Not having a plan could be seen as negligent and the same is true for a small group. Crisis is inevitable, someone gets cancer, a marriage is on the rocks, a job loss, a flooded house and panic ensues. How a small group handle these situations can either help those in need or create more pain.

DEVELOP

Since Adam and Eve's rebellion against God in the garden, people have and will continually be plagued by crisis. We were never meant to deal with this constant barrage of crisis on our own. We were created and designed to lean on the help of others to carry these burdens.

One of the greatest Biblical illustrations we have of someone dealing with a massive crisis is in the book of Job. The story of Job begins by describing Job's faithfulness to God and his unsurpassed wealth and success, Job 1:3 describes Job in this way "...this man was the greatest of all the people of the east." However, very quickly the story turns to tragedy and everything Job enjoyed, his health, wealth and family

were stripped from him in one day and Job responds to the onslaught of crisis by saying "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Hearing of Job's incredible loss, his friends go to him and join him in hopes to help ease his burdens .

READ JOB 3:13

In this little segment of the story, Job's small group of friends demonstrate what could be the greatest help we can offer in a time of great despair. There are no words, no deeds of service, no gifts that can offer comfort like being present. In the article "The Power of Silence and Healing" written for Psychology Today, Arthur Dobrin writes "In a world filled with bugles and noise, we sometimes forget the power of silence. The simplicity of merely being with another is in itself a source of comfort. As May Sarton writes, "Sometimes silence is the greatest sign of understanding and respect. It is far more consoling than words of false comfort."

Unfortunately, after seven days of Job's friends displaying their quiet gift of love for Job the silence is broken. What come's next is a prime example of what a small group should not do in times of crisis.

The four friends mistakenly get caught up in a conversation of judgment, defensiveness, pointing fingers and blame and for the next 35 chapters. This back a forth dialogue is worthless in bringing help to a friend that desperately needs encouraging support. Ultimately, at the conclusion of the story, God corrects the circle of friends and rewards Job for his faithfulness by restoring his health, doubling his wealth and doubling his family.

In the story of Job, we see two approaches from his friends to offer help in the time of crisis. The 1st was to offer a silent, warm and understanding of "we are here with you" the other was a sad attempt of trying through words to figure out why these catastrophes were inflicted. Obviously, according to God, this 2nd approach was not helpful.

There are many ways to help our friends recover from a crisis. During a crisis things such as praying, reading

THREATS TO COMMUNITY

| *Mismatched expectations*

by Clayton Carver

Leader: A common frustration for group members is mismatched expectations. This week be gentle in gathering feedback during the group discussion. The questions in the deepen section should create a dialogue that could be helpful for the group to establish clear expectations. The activity in the dream session will be helpful too.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you. Be ready to share your responses to the questions posed in this lesson at your group meeting this week.

DISCOVER

Have you ever been on an “acci-date?” That’s where one person, for example, thinks that meeting up for coffee was a date, but someone else just saw it as two people getting to know each other. Maybe that day, but certainly later, this can create awkwardness, confusion, and even frustration because the two people were never on the same page as to what the nature of their situation was.

In every relationship we have, frustration and hurt can arise very commonly from mismatched expectations. The same is true for a group. If group members are not on the same page as to what to expect in the group, somebody is going to get hurt or frustrated. A group may be more focused on building community and being an encouragement to one another, while some members expect much more in-depth study of the Bible. Likewise, a group may be doing great at studying Scripture on a regular basis, but the members aren’t feeling like they are growing closer to each other.

So, what should be expected from a group at Rush Creek? There are a few things we want to keep in mind, as we will see in the passages below.

DEVELOP

READ COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Groups should have a sense of unity. (v. 14)

This may seem obvious, but we must start here. As believers, we have all been united by our faith in Jesus Christ. Even though none of us are perfect, we must always understand that for the good of ourselves and our group, we must always strive for unity. That doesn’t mean we will always agree, but it does mean that even in the midst of our disagreement, we do not let it divide us and cause conflict with one another.

We must strive to treat each other as Christ treats us. (v. 12)

In a group of people, there is going to be disagreement. There is going to be conflict. When these situations arise, we must always remember that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and therefore much treat each other as such. We must never be afraid to speak our minds there an expectation is not being met, but we must always do so with love, kindness, and patience, and not out of a selfish desire for attention or control.

The Bible teaches us what our community should look like. (v. 16)

At Rush Creek, we want all of our groups to reflect the type of community that is called for in the Bible. Therefore, when expectations are not being met, we must always revisit Scripture to see how we are to handle our expectation. Is this something that should be addressed by the whole group? Or, is this something that I need to deal with in my own heart?

Ultimately, our groups are to encourage us to become more like Jesus. (v. 17)

Everything we do as a church must be to push each other closer to Christ. We must be striving to become more like Jesus and encouraging our group members to do the same. Everything we do as a group should run through the filter of, “Will this help us become more like Jesus?” If the answer to the question is yes, then it is something to be encouraged. If not, then it is something to be lovingly and graciously addressed.

DEEPEN

What are some positive ways that our group has met your expectations?

What are some ways that you have had to readjust your expectations of our group?

What could we do as a group to better understand what to expect of one another?

How can we become more selfless in my expectations of our group?

DREAM

On a notecard or sheet of paper, have each person right down their main expectations for your group. After everyone is finished, have each person present their list and look for commonalities between what each person wrote down. Discuss how well your group addresses these unified expectations, as well if you can improve in the other areas that expectations are exactly matching.

THREATS TO COMMUNITY

| *Priority drift*

by Cole Guidroz

Leader: This lesson contains a lot of Scripture reading and reflection. During group time be prepared to be attentive to body language. In any season of life discussing priority can be a sensitive topic. Provide clarity where you feel necessary and ease up when you feel the group needs a break from the possible tension a discussion on priority can bring.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you. Read through the Scripture passages slowly. Be ready to share your responses to the questions posed in this lesson at your group meeting this week.

DISCOVER

Think about a ship at sea. The goal of a ship, like all transportation, is to get something, or someone, from point A to B. When you get on a cruise ship headed for Cozumel you would be shocked to find your ship ported in the Dominican Republic. Some might think this was an upgrade! However, in the end somewhere along the trip the ship, and all of its passengers, failed to arrive at their desired destination. These ships use satellites and radar systems to keep a display of their ship's heading and make them aware of any obstacles that are along their way, so they can quickly and effectively get to their destination. If a ship turns off its navigation technology, or fails to constantly check it, drift occurs. When drift occurs, obstacles are unavoidable, and the destination fails to be achieved.

One type of drift is a common danger in community. It is called priority drift. This happens when one or more individuals in the community are drifting off course from the groups desired destination. At Rush Creek our destination is to become more like Jesus. When other priorities in life overtake the interests and focus of group members Christ-like maturity through community is missed. This could be family, children, work, stress, or school, many of which are

great things and gifts from God, but when the priority of each group shifts even the slightest towards other things, we arrive at a destination unintended and ultimately less satisfying.

DEVELOP

Drift towards other obligations

READ LUKE 10:38-42

In this passage, two sisters respond to Jesus' invitation in two different ways. The first, Martha, when hearing the invitation to join Jesus and His people decides to do many small things to get prepared for the evening. She probably wanted to clean the house, wash the dishes, cook a great meal, and many other "good" things. While the other sister, Mary, was simply sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to all He had to say so that she could learn from Him. If you are like me, you may be thinking, "I get it Martha! Things need to be neat and tidy for company, I have all these other tasks that need to get done in the day, I wish people would help out so that I can enjoy the time too." The issue was not that the things she had chosen were wrong, but that the things she had chosen choked out the most important thing. This is a perfect illustration of Jesus' parable of the soils in Mark 4:7. In it, one of the piles of seed, which is the Word of God, fell among a certain soil, represented by people's hearts. However, in certain people's hearts, it was eventually choked out because of the "cares of this world". Mary decided being with Jesus and His people was a more pressing issue at hand. Martha, however, ultimately missed out on the opportunity to grow in her relationship with the Lord because of prioritizing so many different things. Isn't this so often us with small groups? Certain things like sports, work, cleaning, relaxing, or rehearsals fill our schedules while small group is placed as the last thing to try to fit on the calendar. Due to this, our relationships all around suffer because our time with God's people was put off.

What tends to have priority on your calendar around group time?

Drift towards different goals

READ 1 KINGS 10:23-24

This is a testimony of King Solomon whom the Bible calls the wisest King of all. Who wouldn't want that to be their testimony by God? We want our groups to be a place where those far from God can come and hear wisdom and see the love from God through His people! This requires time with the Lord and a refusal to drift towards other goals. However, if you keep reading on look at how the Bible describes Solomon's final days and what he spent his time on.

READ 1 KINGS 10:26-27, 11:1-5

Solomon's priorities started to drift to different things the world had to offer. Instead of focusing on glorifying the Lord with the kingdom of Israel, Solomon started doing the very things that God had specifically said no king should be engaged in. Solomon started building what he thought a kingdom should look like to be successful instead of what God had declared His kingdom would be. If we're not careful this can true for our small groups. We start off like Solomon declaring our group time will be about entering into the presence of the Lord to be transformed into His image. What a goal! However, our groups can easily turn into a time of simple social dinners and unengaged prayer requests if we don't maintain our focus.

Groups that start drifting from the main priority of gathering to become more like Jesus fail to break through the barriers and hurts in members' lives. They also fail to address and transform real needs of group members and inevitably fail to reach out to their lost friends to share the gospel. Often times this is outcome occurs because we have made group time more about "my" time, instead of group meetings being focused on "our time with God." Solomon started on his destructive path by making small yet compromising choices. It was these choices that led to God's anger against him. We stop priority drift by constantly re-iterating the purpose and passion of our small groups whenever we meet. In doing so our groups are less likely to make small yet compromising choices that take the focus off of why our group is gathering.

Describe the circumstances around times you have seen people in your life have different principles in their walk with the Lord?

In your view, has your group drifted towards more of a social hour or a transformational hour?

DEEPEN

What areas in life tend to contend for small group time?

Where does group time rank on your priority list?

What is the purpose of your small group? How often is the purpose of your group re-explained?

What are identifiable things that reveal possible drift in your groups purpose?

How would you know if your group was focused on the “right” things?

DREAM

In Malachi 1:6-14, God is correcting His people from bringing their “second best” offerings into His presence. They thought that they could please God by bringing Him their leftover time and treasure. This revealed to the people where their hearts really dwelled. The same is true for us individually and as a group. What we bring to the table in group, how often we prioritize group, and what we discuss in group reveals where our hearts lie.

As a leader, you need to know people will invest in things that they feel are valuable to them. Places people feel valued and people who value them determine what they value back. Everyone has a limited amount of time in a week, but the more we invest with our members outside of group in the different things they value the more valued their time in group will become because they know you care and value them. Therefore, meet outside of group time to invest in the things they value to show you care for them.

As a group, before the study, re-iterate why you are all meeting together every time. Repetition causes retention. Also, worry, struggle, anxiety, stress, sadness, and fear are all things that can break a group from connecting. If the group is willing, have everyone express what they are bringing into the group and pray for one another before you even begin the study. We often leave prayer request for the end because it is a nice transition out of the study but fail to remember prayer for one another brings healing and focus. Having their minds lifted from the burden they brought in will allow easier access for God to move and address that burden Himself.

THREATS TO COMMUNITY

| *Christian freedom*

by Stan Rogers

Leader: The exercise in the dream section will be the primary focus for your group meeting this week. Make sure to provide adequate time for group members to share their responses. Also consider setting some ground rules to insure productive, respectful discussion.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you in the lesson this week. Posture your heart for full participation as you read through the assigned Scriptures. Be ready to share your responses to the questions posed in this lesson at your group meeting this week.

DISCOVER

“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). The shed blood of Jesus Christ paves the way to freedom for all who turn from their sin and call upon His name. So, how does this freedom, once grasped through salvation, work its way into our sanctification and Christian community?

The Triune God fashioned the world with diversity, showcasing His creative genius. When we embrace the grace of allowing our fellow man to be what they were made to be, we are well on our way to understanding Christian freedom. “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?” (1 Corinthians 12:17) God made each one of us different, desiring that our unique traits and gifting make up a whole Body of Christ that functions magnificently and for His glory. Naturally, with such variation, we can expect Christians to see things quite differently from one another, especially in the grey areas of the Bible and Christian walk.

Joni Eareckson Tada, Christian author, radio personality, and advocate for the disabled, rightly reminds: “Believers are never told to become one; we already are one and are expected to act like

it.” Upon surrendering “our life” for Christ’s life, we became part of the Body of Christ, and “when Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). Part of that death is the abandoning of our opinions, preferences, and persuasions for what best serves Christ and His Bride.

“‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). The Apostle Paul speaks to the church at Corinth about two important issues when determining if something is helpful for the Christian and Christ’s Church. First, is the freedom you wish to participate in “beneficial” to you and others? Secondly, is the activity enslaving you or allowing you to grasp more fully the abundant life Christ came to give (John 10:10)?

Within the life of a small group, there will be many occasions when we come into contact with other lifestyles and convictions that greatly differ from our own. What should our response be? Do we try to persuade others that our way is right and their way is wrong? Oswald Chambers, author of *My Utmost for His Highest*, states, “When we discern that people are not going on spiritually and allow the discernment to turn to criticism, we block our way to God. God never gives us discernment in order that we may criticize, but that we may intercede” If we discern, in our interaction with another, that they seem to be missing the mark spiritually, the greatest thing we can do is pray for them—for God to grant them understanding and submission to His will.

Read Romans 2:1-4 and then take 2-3 deep breaths and jot down your reflections in light of what you have learned in this lesson so far.

DEVELOP

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 10:23-33

When I was in 7th grade, I joined the school football team. I remember going to school early in August to

get fitted for football pads, helmet, jersey, etc. Upon walking into the gym, there was football equipment everywhere. Piles of various football padding, helmets, practice pants & jerseys, all put in order by size. The first set of shoulder pads and helmet put on me were so big, I felt like David trying on Saul's armor. It was determined that my pre-adolescent frame was not medium or even small; I needed pee-wee equipment.

As we gathered around for the first day of practice a few weeks before a new school year, I noticed some of the guys had grown quite a bit taller than they were back in May. Some were proudly displaying their new facial hair and their voice had a funny crackling sound when they talked. This team of boys, who were close in age, looked physically different. These differences determined their spot on the team. In most cases, size, strength, agility and speed determined what roster position they would have and whether they would be 1st, 2nd, or 3rd in line for that position. But no matter what position or place on the depth chart a player was, we were one team with one goal—to win!

Differences within the body of Christ should be celebrated as they produce a diversity of abilities on “Team Jesus.” However, different opinions within a community of believers can wreck a group's unity and function if the opinions are not submitted to the Spirit of God. Sometimes the line between personal conviction and biblical theology are blurry. This can lead to some pretty heated exchanges between group members in areas of political views, sports teams, social justice issues, current events in the news, or various beliefs concerning Christian behavior, such as drinking alcohol, tobacco, gambling, or what is acceptable in the area of media consumption.

It is not that these topics should never be discussed, but when they do come up, the principle Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 10:23-33, should apply. Look at what he says in verses 23-24, “All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.” He diverts the focus from whether or not a person has a right to do a certain action to how his actions benefit others in the community of faith.

Paul addresses a topic being dealt with in the church

in Corinth. There was debate over the consumption of meat offered as part of a ritual sacrifice to idols.

READ VERSES 24-30

It was common practice in Paul's day for the meat being sold in the market place to contain portions of meat from temple worship. The debate was whether a Christian should eat meat that had been part of a temple sacrifice. Paul states here that it is okay to eat this meat, but only under certain circumstances. The meat may have been used in some type of demonic sacrifice to an idol; however, it is the action of worshipping the idol that is wrong not the consumption of the meat. So, give thanks to God and eat.

I don't know who coined this phrase, but I have heard it said, “The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.” 1 Samuel 16 records God commanding Samuel to anoint a new king of Israel from the house of Jesse. When Jesse's oldest son was presented, he looked like a king and Samuel was ready to anoint him. Scripture records in verse seven, “But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’”

In the case of eating meat offered to idols, “the heart of the matter” is that physical food is for the body, not pertaining to worship from the heart. Paul presents his case that the consumption of meat is permissible, asking the question: “Why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?” He answers his own question in verses 31-33: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.”

Within the community of a small group, there are a range of opinions on any number of topics. The passionate convictions of some can produce an insurmountable wall creating division. Group members should avoid imposing one's personal conviction with a spirit of condemning another.

