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Jesus as a Small-Group Leader (pt. 1)

An exploration of Christ's use of community as a means to change the world.

by Mike Shepherd

It's kind strange to think of him this way, but I believe that Jesus was the ultimate small-group Bible study leader. This article will examine that claim in light of Jesus' fitness to teach spiritual truth, his audience, his goals, his values, his methods, and his results as a group leader.

The six explorations in this article are a combination of my own study and the influence of a book written by J. M. Price in 1946 called *Jesus the Teacher*.

1. Jesus' Fitness to Teach Spiritual Truth

- **Jesus lived authentically.** The most important element in the qualification of any group leader is himself or herself. Our most effective lesson must be the authenticity with which we live our life. In Jesus' case, the authenticity of his life gave meaning to his teaching: "The people there were amazed at his teaching. He did not teach like their teachers of the law. He taught like a person who had authority" (Mark 1:22, ICB).

What about you? Do you live authentically with your group? Do they see your humanity along with your spirituality?

- **Jesus desired to serve others.** A small-group leader must have a desire to serve and help people understand spiritual truth. Jesus was not too proud to help anyone. He was not as much concerned about creeds, ceremonies, or proper procedure as he was about people. As Scripture says in Mark 6:34, Jesus saw people as "sheep without a shepherd."

What about you? Do you genuinely care for the people entrusted to your spiritual care? Are you willing to serve them with a "whatever it takes" attitude?

- **Jesus believed in teaching.** At least 45 times in the Gospels, Jesus was called "teacher." He was never called preacher. He even called himself "teacher" in John 13:13. In addition, he called his followers "disciples," which is a word that means "learner." That term is used 243 times in the Gospels. Jesus taught everywhere and anywhere, and at all times. He was constantly connecting real life experiences with eternal truth.

What about you? Do you work hard at making the truth of God simple enough to understand? Do you believe that the truths you share can really change the lives of those in your group?

- **Jesus knew the Scriptures.** A group leader should know and study the Bible, and Jesus consistently used the Scriptures to validate his teaching. Matthew 4:1-11 is a good example; so is Luke 24:27. During his ministry, Jesus quoted from at least 16 Old

Testament books.

What about you? What kind of time do you put in at personally knowing the Scriptures? Do you practice Scripture memorization?

- **Jesus understood people.** A small-group leader must understand people in order to lead them. One cannot apply the Scriptures to the life of an individual until they understand that individual's needs. Indeed, John 2:25 says that Jesus knew what was in man, and Matthew 9:4 says that he knew what was in their hearts.

What about you? What kind of time do you invest in hanging out with the people in your group? Do you balance your time equally between Bible Study and hanging with people?

- **Jesus used a variety of teaching methods.** We will forever be learning from the skills of Jesus. He used methods with perfection. He used questions, lectures, stories, conversations, discussion, dramatics, objects, and demonstration—all to teach different people the truths of God.

What about you? Do you do the same thing every time you lead your group? What can you do to become more creative in teaching spiritual truth?

2. Jesus' Small-Group Audience

History and the Scriptures reveal to us that Jesus' small group of disciples were slow to understand his truth. Over and over again, Jesus had to explain and repeat what he had already taught them. At times, we may be discouraged when we sense a lack of life change in those we lead. But we can be encouraged when we compare our audience to the audience Jesus had in his groups. They were:

- **Immature.** John had an uncontrolled temper. Peter was not the rock that Jesus eventually developed him to be. Thomas doubted, and Judas was deceitful. But Jesus did not view himself as a failure because of his disciples' character flaws, and neither should we. After all, God's truth did eventually transform them.

What about you? Does the level of maturity your group members are at discourage you? Do you help them assess their spiritual journey and offer them next steps in spiritual development?

- **Impulsive.** Peter exemplified this trait perhaps more than the others. James and John were not called Sons of Thunder for any reason. And what about Simon the Zealot? These were hot-tempered, impulsive men.

What about you? Do you encourage individuals to create soul-care relationships where they can learn about their blind spots and work to overcome them?

- **Sinful and confused.** James wanted social recognition and power. Peter cursed Christ. Zacchaeus was a money lover, and Mary Magdalene had seven demons. In other words, Jesus' followers had many problems in life. But Jesus knew of their sinful struggles, and he still created an open environment where they felt safe to bring him those problems.

What about you? Is your group a safe place where members can openly struggle with whatever is going on in their lives and truly engage in authentic community?

- **Ignorant and prejudiced.** Many of Jesus' disciples came from a common walk of life. They were not educated, and were often ignorant about spiritual things. Not only that,

they divided others outside their small circle by whether they were rich or poor, Sadducee or Pharisee, Samaritan or Jew, and so on.

What about you? Do you work at keeping a level playing field where all of your group members can connect, no matter what their particular life experiences, Bible knowledge, or "status" may be?

- **Wishy-washy.** The disciples did not carry out faithfully that which they understood and received with open minds. They vacillated a great deal in their faith journey. But in spite of these weaknesses, Jesus did not give up on his followers. Instead, the disciples were made to be a mighty army that eventually altered the history of the world.

What about you? Do you struggle with giving up on some of your group members? Do you have a regular group-leader meeting where you not only receive effective training, but also encouragement in your role as a spiritual guide for those you lead?

3. Jesus' Goals in Teaching

Sometimes when we lead a small-group study, we do not have a purpose to our lesson. Jesus never did that. He always had a purpose when he was teaching spiritual truth. Those purposes included:

- **Establishing what actually is Truth.** We are all guided by a set of values. People make choices, good or bad, based on those values. But Jesus taught to declare and emphasize what we know to be truth. He boldly declared, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), and "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Yes, as group leaders we want to facilitate people to share their feelings, experiences, and beliefs. But there must come a time in the study when we say, "This is what God's Word says is the truth about this matter."

What about you? Do you boldly declare, "Thus says the Lord," when teaching about Scripture?

- **Bringing about personal beliefs.** Jesus knew that truth alone was not enough. His group members had to come to believe that truth for themselves. Jesus knew—and used—the process of forming beliefs: I show, I do, I feel, I know, I am. That's why he asked questions like, "What do you think?" (Matt. 18:12) and "What do you think of Christ?" (Matt. 22:42).

What about you? Do you ask open-ended questions in order to encourage people to move through the process of forming personal beliefs?

- **Meeting life's problems.** Jesus' teaching was life-centered rather than curriculum-centered. He dealt with life's problems straight on. We must do the same; we must learn to teach people more than just lessons. The group leader who refuses to deal with life issues and encourage discussion about them is missing the point.

What about you? Do you encourage people to share the "realness" of their lives in your group discussions? Do you teach in such a way that you weave the truth with real life issues? Do you encourage people to wrestle with God's truth in light of real life problems? Is it safe to be real about life's problems in your group?

- **Growing mature followers and training them for service.** Jesus taught in such a way

as to lead his group members to live out their beliefs daily. The goal was to keep growing, not just in knowledge, but in transformation. Once transformation took place, the learner was to take that truth wherever he or she went and share it with other people. Jesus prepared his group members ultimately to serve one another and the unbelieving world.

What about you? Does your teaching challenge people to grow? Does it challenge them to serve?

This article is Part 1 of a two-part series. In [Part 2](#), Mike Shepherd explores Jesus' focus as a group leader, his methods, and his results.

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