

Three Principal Goals of Covenant Discipleship Groups

James Reuteler



Without clearly defined goals, covenant discipleship groups will not last very long. True, they are organized to watch over one another in love through mutual accountability and support for Christian discipleship. There are also three principal goals that inspire and motivate group members.

Religious Experience

One of the goals of covenant discipleship groups is *religious experience*. In early Methodism, more people had their religious experiences in class meetings than in preaching services.¹ The first order of business in a CD group meeting is to talk about the variety of religious experiences. They are not all the same, nor should they be. They do, however, form the inspiration and motivation for witnessing to Jesus Christ in the world through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion; and they are essential for discerning the promptings and warnings of the Holy Spirit. Without them there is no spiritual guidance.

A time to reflect on religious experience is in the opening devotion of the weekly meeting. Consider reading an account of the religious experience of Christian saints and disciples from history. The group may then reflect upon and discuss it for a few moments.² What does the experience of a saint from the past say to us today? How is your experience similar? different?

After sharing insights on other people's religious experiences, it might be time for each group member to write down his/her own. Remember, your religious experience does not have to be similar to that of the Apostle Paul in Acts.³ It is simply an account of what led you to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. For some people this experience is deeply emotional; for others, it takes place over time without much awareness of what has been happening. I find that most people can give an account of their religious experience in one or two pages. One should not overlook religious experiences that continue to inspire and motivate our discipleship.

All kinds of religious experiences are important to inspire and motivate us to witness to Jesus Christ in the world. This exercise of putting it down on paper may be very helpful to CD groups and may result in the writing of a devotional guide to be used within the entire congregation—an excellent way to witness to others.

Spiritual Gifts

The second principal goal of CD groups is to help one another identify *spiritual gifts*. This can be as simple as being truthful with one another in a group meeting or as complicated as taking a Spiritual Gifts Inventory.⁴ The latter can get very complicated indeed, for there are many different kinds of inventories. Taking a spiritual gifts inventory is only a starting place. Much more needs to be done, but the CD group is an excellent place to explore spiritual gifts with like-minded people who also want to relate their spiritual gifts to witnessing through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The areas in which this will be most helpful are worship and justice, the public arenas of the General Rule of Discipleship. Not every disciple has the spiritual gifts to lead worship or preach, but there are many other things that need to be done 'in the background' — and we need to identify these to help one another find a ministry. The same holds for acts of justice. We do not always have to find acts of justice we can do together. In fact, we may not all agree on acts of justice. What we must do is support one another, even when we disagree.

Action is the path to creating justice. We must recognize that Christians frequently take different positions on an issue. A CD group is an excellent place to share those opinions and to listen to differing opinions in a safe place. What is important is that we discover our spiritual gifts and put them to the best possible use. We want to do more than just talk!

Social Outreach Ministries

Being able to articulate religious experience and to discover spiritual gifts may lead to involvement in at least two social outreach ministries: involvement within and outside the congregation. The church does not exist for its members alone. It exists for the world. Thus, every disciple should participate in outreach ministry both within and outside the congregation. We need to make contact with the people for whom the church exists. We are not a social club, but a community of people called by God to be in mission. Christianity is a social religion

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and our ministry should be reaching out into the world with the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The church, however, must be more than committees and programs. Its primary task is not entertainment, but ministry and mission. Our ministry is to both the physical and spiritual sides of life. When we minister only to the needs of hunger, housing, and medical care, we fall short. This is why Heifer Project and Habitat for Humanity are such good programs. They not only deal with hunger and the need for housing; they place strong emphasis on spirituality and are not ashamed to put the spiritual at the center of all that they do. They touch both the church and the unchurched. They also teach their recipients how to give at the same time that they receive. Social outreach ministries that focus only on physical needs miss the mark, falling short of ministering to the whole person.

The above three underlying goals are not meant to change the format of CD groups. They support their efforts to witness to Jesus Christ in the world and follow

his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

1 See the work of Thomas Albin, "An Empirical Study of Early Methodist Spirituality," in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), p. 278.

2 Recommended sources: *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* by Robert Ellsberg (Crossroads/Herder & Herder, 1997); *Servants, Misfits, and Martyrs: Saints and Their Stories* by James C. Howell (Upper Room Books, 1999); *Neglected Voices: Biblical Spirituality in the Margins* by John Indemark (Upper Room Books, 1999); *Famous Conversions: The Christian Experience* by Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder (Eerdmans, 1983).

3 See Acts 9:1-18; 22:1-16; and 26:4-18 for brief descriptions of Paul's Religious Experience. Contrast that with Billy Graham, who says, "I didn't have any tears, I didn't have any emotion, I didn't hear any thunder, there was no lightning. But right there, I made my decision for Christ. It was as simple as that, and as conclusive." Graham's testimony was quoted in *Time*, November 15, 1993, p. 74.

4 There are many Spiritual Gifts Inventories, but there is one on the Internet that makes it easy: www.cforc.com/sgifts.html.

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Small Groups Online

Here is a sampling of online resources for your small group ministry:

- www.gbod.org/smallgroup •
- www.sproutsnet.org •
- www.upperroom.org/fivecircles/walking.asp •
- www.smallgroups.com •
- www.renovare.org •

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- Create a covenant discipleship network of congregations;
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