



THE CLASS MEETING



Reclaiming a Forgotten
(and Essential)

Small Group Experience

KEVIN M. WATSON

INCLUDES AN EIGHT-WEEK CLASS MEETING CURRICULUM

Advance Accolades for *The Class Meeting* . . .

“Dr Kevin Watson has given every church and pastor a gift! The gift is the reclaiming of the Wesley Class Meeting as the primary disciple growing tool. Any church willing to use this book as a guide will experience what I experienced at Christ Church United Methodist in Ft Lauderdale, Fl. I was there when Wesley Fellowship Groups began and I had the honor to watch an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. If this is a hunger in your heart, then this book by Dr. Watson will be a “must read” for you.”

Richard J. Wills, Jr.
Bishop UMC, retired

Kevin Watson has given a wonderful gift for our church. He has resurrected an historic Wesleyan practice—the class meeting—and has given it fresh meaning, showing its relevance for the church today. Kevin shows us how the class meeting may be a perfect means for church renewal, a gift of God, through the Wesleyan movement, for such a time as this.

Will Willimon
Bishop UMC, retired
Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry
Duke Divinity School

“Dr. Kevin Watson’s emphasis upon renewing the Methodist movement takes a pragmatic approach. The intent of this book is to be practiced, not merely read.”

Tom Harrison
Senior Pastor
Asbury United Methodist Church
Tulsa, Oklahoma

This powerful practice must be reclaimed, but not just for adults, for all ages. Do your youth pastor a favor and give him/her a copy of this deeply-rooted and thoroughly-practical book!

Jeremy W. Steele
Next Generation Minister
Christ United Methodist Church
Mobile, Alabama

Kevin Watson's new book is a clarion call to recover the Methodist class meeting as a vital means of grace with an eye on the renewal of the church in the twenty-first century. Rightly balancing the historical and the practical, Watson invites readers to embrace not only the generous value of the class meeting in the past but also to participate in what promise it holds for the present and beyond in raising up disciples of Jesus Christ.

Kenneth J. Collins
Professor of Historical Theology and Wesley Studies
Asbury Theological Seminary

Kevin Watson has written a fresh new guide to the theory and practice of the Wesley Class meeting, an essential element of truly Wesleyan spirituality. As an experienced participant and initiator of class meetings in academic and congregational settings, Watson is a faithful guide. I highly recommend this book to clergy and congregations who are looking for ways to develop deeper discipleship and reconnect with our own, rich Wesleyan heritage.

Elaine A. Heath, Ph.D.
Southern Methodist University
Co-Founder, the Missional Wisdom Foundation
Director, the Academy for Missional Wisdom

As the United Methodist Church struggles to redefine itself and its mission for the next generation of disciples, Kevin Watson has managed to reconnect us to a timeless practice that has the potential of “revitalizing” our denomination—the Class Meeting! With so much emphasis on declining membership and loss of relevancy, we are invited to rediscover what made Methodism and the Wesleyan movement so vibrant for over a century.

Could it be that we’ve been looking in all the wrong places for the right answers? Watson reminds us that the class meeting is not an end in itself, but it has the ability to bring together and transform core groups of people who “are willing to invest in each other’s lives and who are desperate to grow in their relationship with Jesus.”

What I treasure most about this book is the way Watson traces the history of the class meeting, shares the basics of what should/should not take place within the group, and defines for us the role and qualities of the class leader. In other words, this is *not* a history book that simply tells us what happened *then*. Instead, it is a modern day road map that points us in the direction of what *can* happen *now*!

If you are one of those Christians seeking to experience the height, depth, length, width and breath of God’s purpose and meaning for your life, you need to know you can discover it in a place we’ve yet to look—the class meeting!

Robert E. Hayes Jr.
Bishop UMC

Like other key aspects of Christian living, the Wesleyan class meeting is often talked about today but seldom really practiced. For Wesley the class meeting included, but was much more than, “small-group fellowship.”

Kevin Watson understands this, and he writes out of both research and personal experience. The strength of authentic Wesleyanism is that it denies the sharp distinction between head knowledge and heart experience. Rather, it unites them. We find that strength here in this practical book.

To be effective today, the class meeting must be recontextualized (that is, made workable) without losing its essential dynamic as gospel-based accountable community. I commend this book as a useful tool that, if put into practice, can achieve that goal.

Howard A. Snyder, Ph.D.

Author, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal*

“We want to know and be known. We need to hear each other’s stories. Watson’s compelling case for reinventing the Methodist class meeting recognizes that holy living must be rooted in confession, accountable community, testimony, and gentle shepherding.”

Stan Ingersol, Ph.D.

Denominational Archivist, Church of the Nazarene

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KEVIN M. WATSON



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To Bethany, James, and Eden

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Preface

This is a book that has been on my mind for a long time. For years I have felt that a recovery of the class meeting in the contemporary church would be used by the Holy Spirit as a renewing means of grace. When I began writing and speaking about the early Methodist class meeting, particularly in local church contexts, I was surprised at how quick many people were to accept my argument that the class meeting was a key piece of early Methodist vitality and that it has something to offer us today. I was even more surprised at how quickly people turned to very practical questions: How would you reinstitute class meetings today? How often should they meet? How long should each meeting be? What is the role of the leader?

I became convinced of two things that led me to write this book in its current form. First, there is strong interest and desire in many parts of the Wesleyan/Methodist family to reclaim the class meeting. Second, Wesleyan/Methodist communities have, for the most part, moved so far away from this practice that these groups will mostly need to be started from scratch. As a result, this book seeks to provide an introduction to the class meeting

that will enable local churches to reclaim this practice. No prior knowledge of the class meeting, or even general small group dynamics, is expected. This is intended to be a guide for beginners, though I certainly hope it will also be useful to people with more experience with small groups.

The primary way I envision this book being used is as a way to jump-start class meetings. The book is designed to be used as an eight-week study that gradually shifts from an informational study about the class meeting to a class meeting itself. The goal of this book is to enable people to continue meeting as a class. In other words, my deep hope is that after the eight weeks are over, the group will continue meeting, simply following the basic format of the class meeting. To this end, each chapter has a guide for small group discussion at the end. The guide provides both questions for discussion and a “Transformation Question,” which is intended to help people gain comfort with talking about the state of their souls, and build a vocabulary for doing so. The first few weeks, the discussion is primarily centered on the content of the chapter. However, over the course of the study, more time is given to discussing the Transformation Question, which also becomes more focused each week. Over the eight weeks of the study, the group is being prepared to become a class meeting. For me, it would be a failure if a small group used this book as a study about the class meeting and then simply moved on to another study.

The book can also be used as a resource for local church leaders, either pastors or laity, as a handbook for starting class meetings. The book can help leaders make the case for why class meetings are important, as well as think through the practical details of how to start a class meeting from nothing, how to

identify a class leader, and how to conduct the weekly meeting. In other words, one could read this book to learn about the history and dynamics of the class meeting and then use it to help a small group become a class meeting.

The first part of the book (chapters 1–4) provides a theoretical introduction to the class meeting. Chapter 1 argues that though there are many different types of small groups, they are not equally effective at helping people grow in their faith in Jesus. Chapter 2 provides a brief historical introduction to the Methodist Revival and the key role class meetings played in the revival. Chapter 3 provides a basic introduction to Wesleyan theology, describing the theological foundation of the early Methodist class meeting. And chapter 4 narrates the decline of the class meeting and discusses why this approach to small groups is essential for contemporary Christianity.

The second part of the book (chapters 5–8) provides a practical guide to starting and developing class meetings. Chapter 5 outlines the basics of the class meeting, including how to start a class meeting in a church where there are none at all. Chapter 6 describes the strategic role of the class leader. Chapter 7 discusses common obstacles to a successful class meeting, as well as ways to prevent these common pitfalls from harming your group. Finally, chapter 8 narrates the keys to a life-changing small group.

I wrote this book because I believe the Holy Spirit wants to use this particular approach to small groups to bring renewal to the lives of women and men created in the image of God. My prayer is that you will find participating in a class meeting to be a means of God's transforming grace in your life.

May it be so! Amen.

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Acknowledgments

This book is the result of sustained interest over several years in a practical guide to reclaiming the early Methodist class meeting. While it is up to the reader to determine whether this book successfully provides such a guide, I would like to express my gratitude to the various audiences who convinced me of the need for this book. During my first semester as a PhD student at Southern Methodist University, I met a small group of students at Perkins School of Theology who wanted more intentional Christian formation during their time in seminary. We formed a weekly class meeting, which was a blessing to me during my three years in Dallas. I am also particularly grateful to the following communities that helped me refine my thinking about the class meeting while I was in Dallas: Andy Roberts and the Southern Methodist University Wesley Foundation; McFarlin United Methodist Church in Norman, Oklahoma; and Nexus Community within Richardson Church of the Nazarene in Richardson, Texas.

I am thankful for the comments and questions that my writing on the class meeting and its ongoing value for contemporary Christianity have received on my blog, as well as on Twitter

and Facebook. Thank you to all who have not only read my writing, but have taken the time to thoughtfully and charitably respond. And thank you to all who have made time to talk with me about these ideas in person or by phone. I am particularly grateful to Jeremiah Hinton, who read an early draft of the manuscript and offered helpful feedback.

Two speaking invitations especially spurred me to start writing about the class meeting. I am grateful to have been invited to lead a breakout session at the Scripture as Formation conference at Seattle Pacific University and to have been invited to be the keynote speaker for the meeting of the Virginia Society for Wesleyan Studies in the fall of 2011. Both audiences were attentive and gracious, while asking piercing questions that have shaped this book.

I am also grateful for the Spiritual and Education Resources for Vocational Exploration (SERVE) grants I received from Seattle Pacific University to direct a pilot project that gave me the opportunity to implement class meetings in an undergraduate setting. I appreciate the expert guidance and encouragement Margaret Diddams provided, as well as the support Douglas M. Strong provided for this project as the dean in the School of Theology. The project would not have been possible without the faculty who agreed to participate: Jeffrey Keuss, Michael D. Langford, and J. J. Johnson Leese. And thanks, of course, are due to the students who participated in these class meetings.

The idea of “watching over one another in love” is not my own. I am deeply aware that I am standing on the shoulders of giants. I thank God for the legacies of Philipp Jakob Spener, Anthony Horneck, John and Charles Wesley, and the many others before and since who have given Christians well-worn paths to

follow. I am also thankful to all who have more recently invested their time and energy in lifting up the value of this practice, especially David Lowes Watson and Steven W. Manskar. I also thank John Meunier and Nick Weatherford, who kindly gave me permission to quote comments from my blog in this book. Bishop Dick Wills graciously spent a significant amount of time talking with me about the way “Wesley Fellowship Groups” worked at Christ United Methodist Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, when he was the senior pastor.

I am also thankful for the investment that Seedbed has made in this book. Their immediate enthusiasm for this project and their emphatic agreement on the need to reclaim the class meeting reflect the kind of investment from a publisher for which any author would be grateful. Holly Jones was a wonderful production director. This book is also better because of the attention given to it by the copy editor Renee Chavez; the page designer and typesetter Kristin Goble at PerfectType; the cover designer, Nick Perreault; and the proofreaders, Amanda Sauer and Bill Fentum. Thanks are especially due to Andrew Miller and J. D. Walt, who both read the book at various stages with care, were unfailingly patient with me, and offered encouragement throughout the writing process.

Finally, I thank my family. My parents have been a constant and unfailing source of love and support. I am blessed to be married to Melissa. More than anyone else’s, her love, support, and encouragement have made this book possible. If not for her, it would never have been written. She often joined me at the kitchen table when I was writing after our kids were in bed, and she never complained about frequent interruptions of her reading with the incessant questions authors ask when they are

in the midst of writing or editing and have a captive audience. Melissa, thank you for always staying at the table with me! And to my children, Bethany, James, and Eden, I will always love you. This book is dedicated to you, with the prayer that the Holy Spirit will provide you with the kind of community described in these pages and that it will help you grow in your love and knowledge of the One who loves you even more than I do.

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1

A New (Old) Kind of Small Group

We have no doubt, but meetings of christian brethren for the exposition of scripture-texts, may be attended with their advantages. But the most profitable exercise of any is a free inquiry into the state of the heart.¹

—Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke

What Is a Small Group?

Small groups may be one of the most frequently endorsed and least understood pieces of the Christian life. A Google search of the phrase “small groups” retrieved a ridiculous 21 million results. A search of the same phrase from the books listed on Amazon.com

yielded 16,296 results.² And yet, despite the amount of information about small groups, I often find myself scratching my head when reading about small groups. Does anyone really know what a small group is? Is it simply a group that is small?

A recent study sought to identify what factors are most important to congregational vitality. The study found that one of the key “drivers” of vitality was the number of small groups.³ Initially, I was thrilled (though not surprised) to see that small groups were so visibly recognized as key to the vitality of a congregation. This is, after all, widely recognized by pastors. Large churches will often talk about how small groups helped them grow larger by becoming smaller. Yet, studies like the one just cited often have either very vague definitions of “small group” or no definition at all. What does it really mean to say that the number of small groups is a factor in the vitality of a congregation, particularly if there is no definition of what a small group is? Here is one example of why this matters:

Not too long ago, a church had a campaign to start new small groups. The church advertised the drive each week in the Sunday morning bulletin and in the church newsletter. Members of the church were asked to think about what type of small group they might like to join. The results of this project were telling. New small groups were started; however, none of the groups had any explicit emphasis on Christian faith. Most surprising to me was the formation of a “Red Hat Society.” If you don’t know what these groups are, I will just say that they do not appear to have much of anything to do with Christian formation, though they do have something to do with wearing red hats (look it up). While I certainly hope that this church is an exception and not the rule, it made me wonder if the key factors in successfully

starting new small groups are low Christian commitment and hobbies that members already have. If the vision for small groups is this shallow, how can they be considered a driver of congregational vitality? Is there a difference between the body of Christ and a social club with people in it? I believe that there is and that we must cast a more robust vision for small groups within a Christian context.

Not all small groups are created equal! Some small groups are better than others.

As I have interacted with various approaches to small groups, I would say that there are three main approaches to small groups in contemporary Christianity. First, there are affinity groups. These groups are organized around common passions, interests, or hobbies. Examples would be: a cooking club, a bowling league, or a book club. The small group campaign previously mentioned ended up starting affinity groups. While the desire to participate in such a group is not bad, this is not what I mean by a small group within a Christian context. Furthermore, I think they should be the lowest priority of a Christian church's small group ministry, as they are the least effective in helping people become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Information-driven groups comprise the second type of small groups. These groups are focused on conveying information and are organized by a common curriculum. Examples would be: Sunday school, a Bible study, or a study of any other book or curriculum. In these groups, members gather together to learn more about their faith. An assumption of these groups is that knowledge is essential for maturity of faith, or that right living is dependent on right knowing. In my experience, this is the kind of group most people have in mind when they think about a small group. At their best,

these groups push participants to apply what they are learning to their lives. At their worst, they can be poorly conceived and organized and have no impact on the way group members actually live. Ultimately, I think there is a role for small groups that study curriculum in Christian settings. Biblical literacy and awareness of basic Christian doctrine are important for faithful Christian living. However, information-driven small groups are *not* the most effective way to help people become mature Christians.

The third type of small groups are transformation-driven groups. These groups focus not on discussion or mastery of content, but on changed lives, on group members' experience of God. These small groups are organized around a common desire to support one another in their efforts to become increasingly faithful Christians who are growing in love of God and neighbor. Examples would be: accountability groups, fellowship groups, cell groups, class meetings, and perhaps even house churches. These groups are primarily focused on living and not on learning. They are especially focused on being made new by the grace of God, not only on receiving new ideas about God. These groups consist of people who want to more effectively practice their faith. This book argues that *it is these types of groups that are the most effective at making disciples of Jesus Christ, and as a result, churches should be the most invested in establishing, promoting, and nurturing them.*

In fact, this book is an introduction to one particular group in this category, the class meeting. A class meeting is a small group that is primarily focused on transformation and not information, where people learn how to interpret their entire lives through the lens of the gospel, build a vocabulary for giving voice to their experience of God, and grow in faith in Christ. Class meetings were the most important and most basic practice of

early Methodists, which was one of the fastest-growing movements of Christianity in America. So what happened to class meetings? This question will be further explored in chapter 4, but for now it will suffice to say that Methodists became addicted to curriculum and gradually turned to information-driven small groups and away from the class meeting.

Addicted to Curriculum

Over the past several decades there have been some poor quality small group studies published; however, there have also been some exceptional studies that are well conceived, well written, and designed with maximum forethought. One of the best recent examples of the latter is *Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study*.⁴ *Disciple* is a thirty-four-week study that requires deep commitment from participants. I have witnessed the effectiveness of *Disciple* both firsthand and at a distance. It does the best job of any curriculum-driven approach to small groups that I have seen. In fact, *Disciple* self-consciously strives to bridge the gap between informational and transformational approaches to the Christian life. As the title of the first book in the series suggests, a major conviction of *Disciple* is that discipleship happens through studying the Bible. In *Disciple*, participants read significant passages of Scripture during the week, as well as a study guide that helps them think about these readings. During the small group time, the participants watch a movie clip, discuss key themes of the reading, and challenge one another to apply what they have read to their lives. I would be willing to go so far as to say that *Disciple* does this better than any other study that I know of. And yet, as good as *Disciple* is, it is still primarily

a curriculum-driven study. And its success actually illustrates one of the tendencies of information-driven approaches to small groups more clearly.

Curriculum can become addicting. The deeper question for Christian leaders is: Which form of small group experience is most effective at helping people become disciples of Jesus Christ: an informational small group primarily focused on content and that asks questions of application as time allows, or a transformation focused small group that provides space for the participants to wrestle with the particularities of what is going on in their lives with Christ (like the class meeting)?

From my perspective, the more time Christians spend on curriculum-based studies, the more dependent they become on them. Instead of releasing Christians to love God and neighbor with their lives, curriculum often seems to make people feel less confident in their own ability to understand and respond to unexpected circumstance in their lives. Ask yourself a question: What did you do the last time you were particularly earnest in your desire to grow in your faith? Did you ask someone you perceived to be an expert to recommend a book? I know that I have often asked that question, and when I was the pastor of a church, these types of questions were the ones I was most frequently asked.

But the Christian life is not primarily about *knowing* the right things. It is about *living in Christ*. Christians, particularly those who are predisposed to participate in a small group, often already know a lot. In fact, many Christians know far more than they practice. Christian discipleship, then, is more like an apprenticeship to Jesus Christ than it is about mastering a body of knowledge. Jesus came so that we could have abundant life, not merely so that we could have the right ideas about who he is. Class meetings

provide a format that helps people actively grow in their faith in Christ together in community, not just study information.

At this stage, let me clarify that I am not saying that information or ideas are irrelevant. Some ways of talking about Jesus are better than others. In fact, some are wholly inadequate and should be rejected by Christians. Doctrine matters. It is essential. Christians should be introduced to and taught sound doctrine. And yet, as important as Christian doctrine is in informing the Christian life, it was never intended to be an end in itself. Doctrine provides boundaries and direction that can help one discern what they ought to do and what they should not do. It provides necessary guidelines for living the Christian life, but one still has to actually begin living such a life! Moreover, many informational approaches to the Christian life aren't even focused on doctrine, they are primarily focused on life strategies, self-help guidelines (and often you could come to the same conclusions these books come to without the "Christian" content), or basic mapping of the content of Scripture.

Class Meetings Promote Active Faith

In class meetings, however, participants actively discuss the state of their current relationship with God and how they are living out (and sometimes failing to live out) their faith. In curriculum-driven small groups, participants are in a passive posture, receiving information that is given to them through the book that is being studied, or through the leader, who is the expert. One of the common bonds of the group is the curriculum that is at the center of the group. In this way, curriculum can provide helpful focus and organization to the group (the group can literally be

“on the same page”). On the other hand, curriculum distances the participants from their own lives. For people who feel a bit uncomfortable talking about their relationships with God, a study can be less intimidating because they can talk about the content instead of really talking about their relationship with God.

In many ways this is understandable. It can feel uncomfortably vulnerable to share with other people what is going on in your relationship with God. You may fear being ineloquent, not having something profound to say, or being judged by other members of your group. In contrast, a study is usually more straightforward. If you read the material and come to the group prepared, you can be relatively confident that you won't embarrass yourself. The problem is that these types of groups rarely act as a bridge to deeper and more meaningful conversations about the state of one's soul. In fact, I have had several encounters with people who have been a part of a Sunday school class (which is the grand experiment in the informational approach to Christian discipleship) for almost their whole lives. I hope I am wrong, but my experience has shown me that there is not necessarily a meaningful connection between faithful participation in Sunday school and maturity in Christian discipleship. Sunday school does not make saints, because (pardon the cliché) it is primarily focused on helping people talk the talk, but not walk the walk.

Let's use this book itself as an example. The goal of this book is to convince you to participate in a particular type of small group—a contemporary class meeting. The strategy for achieving this goal is to use a curriculum (this book) to study the class meeting and to gradually transition from a study to a class meeting. In other words, this is intended to be a resource that will help you join a small group where you, with others,

learn how to increasingly filter every part of your life through the lens of the gospel, increase your ability to give voice to your experience of God's presence and action in your life, and grow in your faith in Christ. One of the ways this will be accomplished is through the organization of the small group time. In the discussion questions for each week, there will be questions about the chapter content and a question about your life with God. This question is designed to help you begin to risk sharing with other people how things are going in your walk with God. If you have not been in a group where you talked about your experience of God, the questions at the end of the study may initially make you a bit uncomfortable. You may even find yourself hoping there isn't enough time to get to the question that is focused on your life with God!

In this chapter, for instance, it might require less risk for you to talk about the difference between informational and transformational approaches to small groups than to actually enter into a conversation about how God has worked in your life through a particular form of small group. In this example, talking generally about the difference between various kinds of small groups is most representative of an informational approach to small groups. Talking about how God has worked in your life through a particular small group experience, on the other hand, is most representative of a transformational approach to small groups. And yet, convincing you of the value of transformational small groups is of little value if you do not decide to actually participate in such a group. What good would it do for me to convince you to join a group that was focused on your journey with God if you did not actually join such a group? Too often, studies focus on trying to convince participants that ideas are true without

helping people live based on this newly discovered truth. Information-driven groups are most effective at the intellectual level. They do not do nearly as good a job leading to meaningful conversion, changed hearts, and changed lives. Class meetings are focused on precisely these things—how is the amazing grace of God changing your heart, your life, and your relationship with other people?

Let me put this more boldly: information-driven small groups that do not lead to a changed life are no more valuable for Christian discipleship than a weather report that does not impact the clothes you wear. If I turn on the Weather Channel and am told that there is a 90 percent chance of rain today, I will bring my rain jacket with me when I leave the house. This book hopes to help you form a class meeting, where you will actively pursue deeper faith in Christ with others. At times, participating in this group may stretch you a bit, because the group is about more than your ideas about Christianity. The group is about your relationship with Jesus, the Son of God. And Jesus does not want to change only our minds, or what we think; he wants to change our hearts and how we live. So, I hope you will take this step, because the history of early Methodism is a testament to the way the Holy Spirit has used the class meeting to help people come to know Jesus Christ more intimately.

The Goal of This Study

The goal of this study is twofold. First, I hope to convince you that a group like the early Methodist class meeting is the most important type of small group of which you could be a part. If you can only be in one small group, I hope to convince you to

choose to be in a class meeting, because it is most likely to help you become a more faithful and more committed Christian. Yet, it would be an ironic failure if this book, above all books, only impacted your thoughts. The second goal of this book is to help you actually try out this kind of group. This book is both a study of the early Methodist class meeting and a gradual introduction to experiencing what it would be like to be in this kind of group. A guide for the small group time is provided for each week that has both discussion questions about the content of each chapter and one question that focuses on each person's experience of God. The goal is for these questions to stretch you a bit each week, so that by the end of the eight weeks, you will be ready to pursue Christ together in a class meeting. If you find the last question a bit intimidating, you can always read it before the group meeting so you have plenty of time to think about your answer.

My hope is that you will be willing to try this kind of group. The point is not that the class meeting has magical powers, or that it is the key to our salvation. Only Jesus can save us. The class meeting is valuable because participating in a group that asks you weekly how you are doing in your relationship with God is one of the most effective ways you can plan to stay focused on your growth as a follower of Jesus Christ. My own experience has repeatedly shown me that this is essential for my relationship with Christ. Many Christians who have gone before us have similarly testified that "watching over one another in love" has been of deep significance for their relationships with God.⁵ This approach to small groups is also making a difference in the lives of many contemporary Christians. Here is one example: Nick Weatherford, a lay member of Munger Place Church⁶ in Dallas,

Texas, has said of his initial experience with a class meeting and the impact it had on his faith:

I have come to realize the importance of being called into community with one another and of God's unrelenting grace. We are not asked to, or intended to do this alone. I would argue from personal experience that our faith will wither away over time if we are not proactively involving ourselves in community with other believers.

In contemporary churches, there seem to be ample opportunities for Bible studies and other programs, but it is much harder to find a group that is primarily focused on your relationship with God. Kitchen Groups (this is what we call our class meeting-like groups at Munger) don't follow any particular curriculum. We just ask you to analyze your own experiences through the lens of faith. What has God revealed to you this week? What do you need to work on? What is holding you back? It doesn't ask you to measure up to any particular standard other than a genuine desire to be more of who you are being called to be as a follower of Jesus.

Kitchen Groups foster a community of honesty and personal accountability. The accountability comes not in any prescribed set of rules or confessions but in learning to understand and respond to all of our experiences, good and bad, through the perspective of our relationship with God. I think more about my faith than I ever have in my life, asking myself more and more often "How is my life in God?" even outside of the group setting.⁷

Ultimately, we cannot stand still or tread water in the Christian life. We are either moving closer toward God and learning to better love our neighbor, or we are missing opportunities to further express our love for God and neighbor and gradually moving away from God. The goal of every Christian should be to become a disciple, a follower, of Jesus Christ. People do not learn how to follow Jesus by reading books about following Jesus. We learn how to follow Jesus by following him, even if by fits and starts.

Many church leaders recognize that small groups are an invaluable tool for helping people learn how to follow Jesus. But again, *not all small groups are created equal*. The community that can be fostered through small group formation is a dynamic asset in helping people become more like Christ. This kind of community is created when people join together to support one another on their journeys, and when the journey itself is the focus of the community, not a book about the journey.

In the passage above, Nick testified to the importance of community for his own faith journey. As he gathered together with other Christians to talk about his life in God, he found not only that he learned how to better talk about his life in God during the group time, but also that this helped him to live out his faith in more and more of his life. My hope is that the Holy Spirit will use this book to help people who are seeking God learn how to bring themselves more fully to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and to support one another in this journey.

Guide for Small Group Discussion

At the end of each chapter, there will be a guide for the time spent together as a small group. The actual meeting should be an hour and fifteen minutes each week. The organization of the group will vary slightly from week to week as the group gradually moves away from a study of transformational small groups to *becoming* a transformational small group.

At the time the group is scheduled to start, the group leader should call the group together, thank everyone for coming, and open with a prayer. The next fifteen minutes should be spent providing the opportunity for group members to begin to get to know one another. Each participant should be invited to share their name, how long they have been involved in this church, and what made them interested in being a part of this group. (Leaders should feel free to use their common sense in adjusting these questions based on the dynamics of the group. For example, people don't need to introduce themselves if everyone already knows each other and this would be artificial.)

The next forty-five minutes should be spent discussing the content of the first chapter, using the "Questions for Discussion" as a guide to the discussion. (It is okay if you do not discuss all the questions. Feel free to dwell on one question as long as the conversation is lively and focused on the general theme of the chapter.)

The last fifteen minutes should be spent discussing the Transformation Question. The leader should keep track of the time and make sure that the discussion of the chapter is brought to a close in time to get to the last question, which is really the most important question for the week. (Leaders: It is okay if

you can't think of a smooth transition from one topic to the next. You may simply say, for instance, "Now, I'd like us to shift our focus to our last question for tonight . . ." You should be prepared for the last question to perhaps make people a bit uncomfortable; there may be a bit of a tendency to try to filibuster, or run out the clock, to avoid the question. One of your most important jobs is to be willing to shift the conversation to this question.) It is important that every person has an opportunity to answer the question. Finally, the leader should close with a prayer.

Organization:

Open with a Prayer

:00--:15 Introductions

What is your name?

How long have you been involved in this church?

What made you interested in being a part of this study?

:15-1:00 Questions for Discussion

1. What were your general thoughts or reactions to this chapter? Was there anything particularly exciting or challenging to you? Why?
2. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses as you see them of the three types of small groups discussed at the beginning of this chapter (affinity groups, information-driven groups, and transformation-driven groups).
3. Of these three types of small groups, which one do you have the most previous experience with? Describe what this group did well and what it may not have done well.

4. Do you agree that groups that are focused on transformation are likely to be most effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ? Why or why not?

1:00-1:15 Transformation Question

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the farthest you have ever felt from God, 10 being the closest you have ever felt to God) what number would you give to how close you feel to God today? Why?

Close with a Prayer