

LEADER'S GUIDE



# LAUNCH

A 10 WEEK JOURNEY INTO RELATIONAL CHRISTIANITY



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 nextlevel

## Introduction

### The Purpose of LAUNCH

- This material is designed to help new groups get started on the right path, to be “launched” in the right direction.
- The focus of this series is on **community**. It is designed to convince brothers to spiritually connect with other brothers. This will be presented in two ways:
  - **Biblical evidence.** Community is central to the gospel. God chooses to use relationships as the medium in which He will transform men into the likeness of His Son. The entire Bible supports this—especially the life and teaching of Jesus. This series of meetings will lead men through these Scriptures helping them understand that this is God’s design for their walk of faith.
  - **Personal experience.** Men will be given opportunity to progressively experience relational and spiritual interaction with other men in ways they may never have before. Once men experience for themselves the powerful effects of intentional brotherhood, they will hopefully commit themselves to reorienting their lives to this new (original) paradigm of Christian living. Hence the material culminates in a challenge to make a mutual covenant to live in spiritual interdependence on other brothers in Christ as we each move forward on the Way.
- Before men or groups move into other subject matter that is relevant to men’s spiritual formation, it is critical that they first establish healthy relationships with each other. These strong relationships will maximize their spiritual development, providing encouragement, accountability and prayer support for the next steps in their journey. Therefore LAUNCH is strongly recommended as the first step in a Covenant Group’s life together.

### The Role of the Leader

It is crucial from the outset of your leadership that you clearly understand your role. It might be best to begin with an understanding of what your role is NOT:

- You are not a **Bible scholar**. You need not have answers to the many biblical questions that may arise in your discussions. You are simply asked to come prepared to lead men into the Scriptures related to the topic (having first studied them yourself), enabling them, as best you can, to see the primary or relevant observations and applications. The Holy Spirit will be the Bible Teacher as He gives insight to each man who, in turn, through your encouragement, will add his contribution to the discussion at hand.
- You are not a **counselor**. You are encouraged to make every effort to observe and listen intently to each man in order to understand his particular and present needs. However, you won’t be expected to give counsel or advice, at least no more than any other group participant. The Holy Spirit will be the Counsellor who will come alongside each man at his point of need, to give strength, counsel and comfort.

While each man in the group will be cautioned to be slow to give advice (especially unsolicited advice) or to “fix” their brother, it must be also understood that the Holy Spirit very often uses the words and actions of a community of believers to provide wisdom, challenge and encouragement to those in need. So you as a leader are simply asked to be sensitive to the timing and the leading of the Spirit in these situations.

- You are not a **super-Christian**. You are certainly encouraged to do your Spirit-guided best to live a life that honours God in all areas. Your example is your greatest strength as a leader of men. But you are, like each participant in your group, an intentional follower of Jesus Christ who is still “a work in progress”. So there is no need to be anything or anyone other than who you are and where you are on your journey toward Christ-likeness. It is critical, in fact, that you be honest and transparent, letting others see and hear about your struggles and failures both past and present. The men also need to hear of the victories the Holy Spirit is producing in your daily life as you humbly progress toward Christ-likeness. Together these will give you credibility and approachability as a leader and will deepen your connection with the other men.
- Here are three ways you could see your role as group leader.
  - **Player-Coach**. A player-coach provides direction for a team but also plays on the team.
  - **Team Captain**. This player makes calls on behalf of the team when called upon, but contributes an equal part as a player.
  - **Quarterback**. This role involves calling and helping to execute plays for your team, most of which come in from the coaches on the sidelines. This requires quickly handing off or passing the ball to others on your team. It also implies a healthy knowledge of the defence, how to avoid them and how to penetrate the territory they are guarding.
- In addition to these analogies, you can also see yourself as a:
  - **Discussion Facilitator**. Your role is to encourage and assist others to talk about the material being addressed. This usually means talking less than the others, ensuring that there is equal contribution from each participant. You will guide the discussion to its desired end, guarding the group from getting off track, and bringing the topic to a constructive summary and application.
  - **Listener**. Perhaps the greatest need men have is for someone to listen to them, really listen. You will assist each man to practise the art and discipline of active listening. This involves the skill of asking questions that follow through on what a man is saying, until he is fully heard.
  - **Overseer**. Someone needs to keep the big picture in view (and in everybody’s view) all the time. You are that person. The men need to be reminded constantly why they are in this group and how each discussion and activity contributes to that purpose.

## Our Call to Make Disciples

- We just finished speaking of the leader’s role of keeping the big picture before each man in the group. There is yet a bigger picture that is often neglected and obscured,

namely, the Christ-commissioned responsibility to make disciples. *Every aspect of Nextlevel Covenant Groups has this as its ultimate purpose.* The process of discipleship never ceases in the life of every believer until he or she is called Home by his Creator. Every man in your group will be at a unique stage in his spiritual formation. Our disciple-making call is to find out where they are at spiritually and to move them forward in their transformation into Christ-likeness.

- Christ has invited every single one of his followers through the ages to “go and make disciples”. This invitation is also a command to be obeyed and this obedience is accompanied by significant spiritual blessings. (Disobedience has its negative consequences as well, things like spiritual stagnation and the self-sabotaging of our promise to accomplish great works in the name of Christ.) Your leadership of this group is an opportunity for you to disciple other men while you yourself are being disciplined. It’s a win-win situation.
- Your role is to help men discover (together) what it means to follow Christ in every aspect and every arena of their daily lives. Full surrender to the Lordship of Christ will bring untold blessings and will make an eternal impact on every person in their lives.
- Perhaps one of the greatest misconceptions for believers is that making disciples is reserved for believers in an advanced stage of spiritual maturity. This is often measured in terms of years in the faith, biblical knowledge, personal skills, spiritual gifts, religious education (e.g., Bible college or seminary) or a host of other watermarks of spiritual maturity. This one fallacy has kept countless believers from engaging in the disciple-making adventure. The truth is that anyone who has been a genuine follower of Christ for even a short while is then capable and called to help someone else move forward from non-faith to faith or from small faith to greater faith in Jesus Christ.
- Nextlevel Ministries exists to do its part in both discipling men and helping these same men become disciple-makers.
- You are strongly encouraged as a leader to invite each man in your group to be a fully devoted disciple *and* to disciple others. (These “others” will include their immediate family of origin, their friends, their wives, their children, their colleagues and their neighbours.) Your role will be to help shatter the “myth of maturity” that prevents men from believing (and acting upon) the truth that they, with the help of the Holy Spirit, are qualified to disciple other men.
- One possible avenue of disciple-making will be for each man in your group to become a leader of a Covenant Group or to simply come alongside another brother in Christ to help him on his journey of faith.

### **Your Primary Leadership Responsibility is PRAYER**

- Jesus said: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). We practically demonstrate our absolute dependence upon Christ when we pray.
- We don’t change people; only God can do that. We can, however, make ourselves available to God to use. When we humbly ask Him for wisdom, strength and skill to lead a group of men, He will provide all we need for the task. Conversely, to fail to pray for each man in your group is to demonstrate a self-reliance that God cannot bless. This will result in the men not experiencing the spiritual development and spiritual accomplishments they are designed for.
- When we intercede on behalf of each man in our group, the Holy Spirit goes to work in their lives to accelerate their spiritual growth. This discipline is the most productive means of discipleship at our disposal.

## **CONNECTING** Part One

### **The Purpose of Session One**

This session is designed to help the men in your group discover (through group discussion) that all men have a need to substantially connect with other men. They will discover the reasons men are relationally isolated and the consequences of this isolation. They will also begin to realize the extraordinary benefits of having strong spiritual relationships with other men.

### **Your Role as a Leader**

Your job is to facilitate a discussion with the intention and prayer that, in a rudimentary way, the “lights will come on” for these men, bringing an awareness of their needs, what they’re (probably) missing, and what “could be” if they were to experience this kind of spiritually-based interaction on a regular basis.

Near the end of this session you will present the *opportunity* for these men to *prayerfully consider* a 12 week commitment to participating in a newly formed NL Covenant Group. Please note that in the next session more will be said about commitment and the nature of the LAUNCH material so don’t swamp them with too much information in this session so as to not overwhelm them. Allow the Holy Spirit to speak them about this matter in the days to come.

### **About Commitment**

It is important to advise the men during this session that a commitment will be required upon the completion of week two. (Note: This commitment should not be confused with the full covenant that will be presented near the end of the LAUNCH material in sessions 8 and 9.) After week two each man will be asked to commit to completing the full 10 week journey.

- The level of commitment they will be expected to make should be introduced in this session but will be laid out in further detail in Session Two and Three. This initial commitment is two-fold:
  1. to faithfully attend each session, and
  2. to promise to keep everything that is said in the strictest confidence (including sharing any sensitive information with their wife)
- No exceptions should be entertained. However, with respect to attendance, it is understood that there will be men who know in advance that their schedule has them pre-committed for one or perhaps even two sessions. These should be high-priority commitments (e.g., business travel; ministry pre-commitments; significant family engagements [like wedding anniversaries, graduations ceremonies, and birthdays]; etc.) Men who have one or two of these kinds of scheduled commitments, and advise *in advance* the other men in their group (or you the leader), may be encouraged to participate contingent upon making a FULL commitment to *all the other weeks* of the LAUNCH experience. An anticipated absence of more than two weeks will significantly minimize the effectiveness of the experience for the man himself as well as the entire group. This man should be encouraged to wait for the start-up of another group at a time when his schedule will permit his full engagement. Undue leniency at this stage will undermine the entire purpose of the LAUNCH experience.

- The men should also know that no new men will be added to the group after week two unless circumstances strongly warrant doing so. (One such instance could be that too few men have chosen to continue, so additional men will be invited.)

## Existing Groups

For those who are leading an already established group through LAUNCH:

- You may choose to forego Session One if you deem it to be redundant or already obvious to your group at its stage of development.
- You may already have a high level of commitment in the areas discussed in the early sessions of LAUNCH. If so, you are encouraged to discuss it, at least briefly, as a means to reinforce an already existing group value.
- It is hoped that you will strongly encourage each man in your group to approach the LAUNCH material in two ways: (1) as a fully-engaged participant, and (2) as a future leader (or co-leader) of a Covenant Group that he himself will assemble and lead in God's will, strength and time. It would be prudent to extend a *personal* challenge to those men who you feel are ready and qualified to take on this kind of ministry. In this way you will encourage these disciples of Christ to move to the *next level* of faith and obedience as a disciple-maker.
- Discussion...

## LEADING THE DISCUSSION

Read (and re-read) the opening thesis statement.

Thesis: **Men connect to God when they connect to other men of faith.**

***Conversely, men will remain disconnected from God as long as they remain disconnected from other men of faith.***

**This group (and this ministry) exists to remedy this problem.**

Restate the thesis in your own words, or say something like:

***"So that's what this group plans to discuss [tonight]. You may agree or disagree with this statement; that's okay. But let's take a deeper look at the possible effect that healthy relationships with other men (or the lack thereof) have on the quality of our relationship with God."***

Men and Their Needs

***"To explore this we will first break into groups of two or three. Simply respond to the 5 True or False statements on your "Men and Their Needs" handout.\*\* Each man is encouraged to give his opinion and his reasons. There is a follow up question after each statement if you have time to discuss that as well. After about [5 minutes] of discussion, I will invite you to move to the next T or F statement. After that we will return for an all-group discussion where you will be asked to share what you talked about together. Go!"***

\*\* An optional handout has been included in your leaders guide. This handout has only the "Men and Their Needs" statements and questions (the same questions that are in the boxed area of the LAUNCH notebook). You may choose to use this optional handout for the following reasons:

1. This will allow each of the men (or just the spokesmen) to hurriedly jot notes on this sheet in order to remember their points for the follow-up discussion.
2. It also allows for this discussion to be used prior to distributing the LAUNCH notebooks (which might be better scheduled during week two, after men have likely decided if they want to continue with the group).
3. This could be used as a primer discussion at any men's gathering as a springboard to generate interest in (and reveal the need for) a NL Covenant Group.

**Sensitivity Alert:** You may know some of the men in the group and whether they would be uncomfortable discussing these things with men they don't yet know. If so, make sure you include them in your own break-out group (or include them in a group of three or more). Also, do your best to mix talkers with non-talkers, more spiritually mature with less mature. Groups of three are preferable to groups of two. Keep your eyes and ears open in order to move the groups forward to the next topic. You will almost certainly have to cut off some good discussion, knowing you will come back to it later.

After some [15 to 25] minutes of small group discussion, call everyone back to the large group in order to report what the groups discussed. As each group shares what they discussed, you might want to ask others if they agree or disagree, or ask for additional insights, or add your own comments. It is very important, however, to keep the discussion moving briskly; as soon as a point is made be quick to move to the next point. (Think of yourself being on radio: don't allow for any dead air!)

### **“What if” Scenarios**

The content is intended to be somewhat provocative; disagreements are welcome. It is hoped, however, that you would be steadily moving toward a consensus, namely, that the thesis statement is valid, and that it is supportable based on the observations made from the men in the room.

In the weeks ahead, you will progressively roll out other support, especially biblical support, for the thesis. But for now, this is not a Bible study; it is more of a free-for-all atmosphere where every man gets to speak and to be heard. Every opinion should be respected and affirmed, even if you don't agree. The Holy Spirit is able to shape a man's heart and his opinions to eventually align with His. Be patient and forbearing. You, of course, have the right (and at times, the responsibility) to speak your mind when it is morally appropriate. You may choose to agree to disagree on some points. Sometimes it is wise to lose a battle in order to win the war. Your gracious spirit and generous encouragements will go a long way in setting the tone for the group for the weeks ahead.

### **Summary and Application**

Right after the “Men and Their Needs” discussion, there are two final steps intended to move each man from general opinion to personal application.

Encourage each man to place himself on the “shallow\_\_\_\_\_deep” continuum line in the second to final question. Provide pens and about one minute to allow men to reflect and then (actually) put an ‘x’ on the line. This will drive home the reality of his need for spiritual relationships (since, typically, men will place themselves somewhere left of center). Have as many men as are willing share where they placed themselves on the line. Give each man a brief moment, if they choose so, to comment on their present experience with respect to having (or not having) “life-enriching relational interaction” with other men.



The final question will give an opportunity for the men themselves to produce convincing reasons for men to participate in a life-transforming small group. Keep this brief.

**Discuss the possible benefits that would result from participating with a group of men who had it as their goal to move each other ever farther to the healthy side of the continuum.**

Draw the men's attention to the simple (yet profound) assignment:

**Be asking God throughout the coming week what He thinks should be the next level in your spiritual growth.**

Ask the men to take the prayer assignment seriously, and to pray it every day (even many times a day) in the coming week.

Close in a very brief **prayer** that expresses *gratitude* for each man as well as *anticipation* for what God will do in the weeks ahead. For example:

***"Lord, I thank you for each man here, and for what You have done in our lives. Thanks for bringing each of us to this meeting and for speaking to us personally about the role other men can play in improving our relationship with You.***

***We look forward to how You will continue to speak to us this coming week as we each ask You what You would suggest we do to move to the next level in our spiritual growth. We are excited about what You will do in and through this group. By faith we anticipate great things. I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen."***

## LAUNCH LEADER'S GUIDE

### Session Two

## **CONNECTING**

### Part Two

### **The Purpose of Session Two**

This session is designed to help the men in your group grasp the role and purpose of this group in their lives. The men will be presented with a strategy for accelerated spiritual formation. The strategy is the group itself (or rather, the relationships which the group will help birth). They will be challenged that there is more, much more, that they can experience in their Christian lives. Spiritual formation is not achieved by the passive, or the fainthearted, or the isolated but rather by those who are intentional, courageous and relationally connected. The costs as well as the benefits will be discussed in this session.

Perhaps we can think of this with the help of an analogy. What the men need is a vehicle to get them to their desired destination: this group is that vehicle. But while the group is the vehicle, it is not the only means for their spiritual development; this vehicle needs a driver: the Holy Spirit. We can never get to our spiritual destination, fulfill our human destiny, without the Holy Spirit being in control. But to ensure we head in the right direction, we also need a map. The Bible will help us chart a course that will guide us on the right road to the desired destination.

### **This Is Not the Same**

Some men will have come into this group having had a previous experience in a men's (or mixed) small group. That experience may have been healthy or it may have been unhealthy; it may have been significant in their spiritual formation or it may have done little or nothing to help them grow in Christ. This group is riveted on the goal of ensuring measurable and sustainable spiritual advancement in the life of each man.

Most church small groups focus primarily (or solely) on Bible study where the goal is to increase one's knowledge of Scripture. While this is certainly an important and healthy need to address in men's lives, life-transformation only happens when one chooses to be, as Jesus and James cautioned, a "doer of the Word". NL Covenant Groups are intended to be a place where the Bible is taught in a relational environment where immediate application is encouraged, expected and enabled. In the context of a loving and challenging community where affirmation is mingled with accountability, doing (obeying) the Word is strongly emphasized over merely hearing (knowing) the Word.

### **Your Role as a Leader**

The leader's job in this session is to join with the Holy Spirit in persuading the men that their spiritual development can be accelerated as a result of participating in this group. You will argue the case that through an aggressive and sustained engagement in this newly formed brotherhood, each man can realistically expect a fresh work of the Spirit for their journey into Christ-likeness.

However, you must also balance this invitational tone with a firm, challenging tone. This is the week to weed out those who are not ready to actively participate. Those who take a cavalier approach to their part in this group will end up disappointed with the results. They will also

significantly impede the advancement of the rest of the group. Set the bar high, high enough to challenge but not so high as to overwhelm. The benefits promised are not idealistic; these are realistically attainable to every man in the group who gives his best effort to the means of growth. Be sure to let each man know that spiritual growth takes time, more than three months! But the life-transformations will be evident in due time as each man puts his hand to the plough and doesn't turn back.

### **Administrative Tasks**

Before you begin the study this week, there is some important preliminary housekeeping.

1. LAUNCH notebooks can be distributed to the men. (Because some men may not continue beyond this meeting, you may choose to initially hand out just the session notes, which the men can put into their books later.)
2. Collect the agreed-upon cost of the materials this week or next. If possible, ask an assistant or your co-leader to do this.
3. Hand out the group contact list and ask each man to print their personal information clearly and completely (including a full mailing address, home and work email addresses, cell phone number, as well as the names of their wife and children, if applicable). This handout is included in your Leader's Guide packet. You should distribute this typed and finalized contact info to the group in the following week or two.

### **LEADING THE DISCUSSION**

While every group is different, it is recommended that you incorporate a brief time of informal chatting until everyone is settled. However, it is most important to start soon after your stated arrival time (regardless of absentees or latecomers).

Begin this week (and every week) with prayer and an opening statement, in whichever order you prefer. Prayers should be brief and centred on the topic you will cover that evening. An introductory paragraph usually accompanies each session and provides the purpose and direction for the topic. This can simply be read, without alteration or comment. (You may, of course, reinforce this briefly with your own comments if you choose.) After a few weeks you may ask others in the group to read this opening paragraph.

We begin to look at several passages of Scripture in this session. You should study these beforehand and become familiar with the context and meaning of the verses. However, it would be wise to choose which verses to read together as a group and which texts you will simply refer to. Don't do a group "Bible study" of these verses. Simply utilize them to drive home the general point being made. (Deeper biblical investigation and discussion will follow in the weeks ahead.)

### **Spiritual Formation and Goal**

These two categories will clarify the purpose of the group. The goal is to have Christ formed in us. Paul in Galatians 4:19 used the expression "until Christ is formed in you". By drawing a comparison to our physical development in the womb, he conveys the idea of our spiritual development into the likeness (form) of Christ.

Note that in this context Paul was frustrated by the slow progress made by the Christians in Galatia in that they were returning to their embryonic state rather than moving forward in

maturity. He felt he was going backward rather than forward with them. You as the leader could make the comparison that many of us men today have not matured to the point we should have. This group is intended to help us move forward to the place where Christ is formed in us.

### Means

Have different men in the group read each of these five “means of grace” while having others read (some of) the scriptural references. You may make some brief comments on each one.

Note that #4, “The Spiritual Disciplines”, is a topic that warrants a concentrated study and will be offered as an option for your group in the future. However, the disciplines mentioned here (scripture reading, meditation, prayer, and solitude or Sabbath-keeping) are foundational to spiritual growth, and the men will be regularly encouraged to practice them.

Reinforce that #5, The Brotherhood, is the focus of these 10 weeks together. “Men, this is the key ingredient that will make this approach to spiritual formation (likely) different than our previous efforts. Now we will do it *with help*. Not we will do it *together*.”

### Approach

Here is where you as a leader need to be at your best as a motivator. You need to change your tone to that of a serious challenge. You need to be like a coach before an all-important game, calling the players to rise up and give their very best. This is where you ask them to step up or step back, to give their very best or leave the team - literally. The men will have to make a final decision if they will commit fully for the following eight weeks. Tell them that you will respect their choice to bow out now rather than proceed in a half-hearted way. But also tell them that you will respect them for taking on the challenge of becoming all that Christ intended for them when He gave His life for them.

Be clear. Be direct. Set the bar high. Remind them that there really is no other way to approach spiritual growth than by being intentional and highly-committed.

No-nonsense: There is much at stake and so we will be serious about spirituality. This should not be understood to mean that we won’t have fun and plenty of laughter as part of our meetings. Rather it means that we will know why we are here each week and what we intend to accomplish.

Highly intentional and aggressive: We will be obsessive about reaching our spiritual goals and will expend whatever effort is necessary to accomplish them.

Prioritized commitment: For this to work, this commitment must trump many other commitments in your life. While it is true that your wife and children come first in your life, keep in mind that this commitment you are making to your spiritual development will have a primary and powerful impact on them, and will be the greatest gift you can give them. As for your commitment to your job, remember that this commitment to spiritual excellence will spill over into your “nine-to-five”, enhancing your job satisfaction and performance.

\*\*We will use the term “commitment” at this point in our group discussions. Near the completion of the 10 weeks of LAUNCH we will introduce the (biblical) concept of “covenant” which carries greater weight and responsibility. It would be premature to discuss or expect this at this stage in the group’s development.

Full engagement: Give your very best, your all, to becoming who God designed you to be.

Transition: *If you will approach this 10 week Journey into Relational Christianity like this (i.e., seriously, intentionally, aggressively, as a priority to which you will give yourself fully), then you can expect some amazing results!*

### Effect / Benefits

Once again have different men read each one of the benefits. Each of these will build upon, and flow out of, the previous one. In other words, as you experience *personal growth* in character, it will invariably affect your *reputation*, which will increase your *influence* on others, which will make a spiritual *impact* on many people in many ways, all leading to a profound sense of *personal fulfillment*. This is the life we all want to experience!

This is where you as a leader might want to first ask yourself—and then your group: Are we promising too much? Aren't we setting expectations too high? Is this idealism—is it unrealistic to expect these kinds of results? You as a leader need to grapple with these questions and come to a place of strong personal conviction about this.

Nextlevel Ministries holds these convictions regarding the issue of discipleship expectations:

- Present day Christianity has generally come to expect (and be satisfied with) too little change over too much time; God, however, wants to conform us to the image of His Son radically and as quickly as possible
- God can change anyone who submits himself to the means of grace God has provided for our transformation into Christ-likeness
- Healthy spiritual community will radically enhance the spiritual maturation process
- Spiritual formation takes time – far more than 10 weeks! This curriculum is designed to *launch* men into an accelerated method of spiritual growth
- Sustained intentional effort, together with biblical exposure and personal application, in an environment of encouragement and accountability, produces genuine transformation
- Men begin at different places and and so grow at different paces
- Much initial spiritual transformation goes unseen because it starts in the heart and works itself out in observable behaviour over time
- Faith is the act of trusting God to hear our prayers and utilize these discipleship methods to conform men to the image of His Son

Having confidence that God can produce amazing changes in men, we can encourage each man to “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him”! (Philippians 3)

Read through these “effects/benefits” as a group. Don't rush from one to the next. Give each point time to sink in. Then ask the men if they think such results are possible? Assure them that God can do these things if we will do what He asks. Each man in your group has the potential to experience all these benefits.

### Sharing

Here is your opportunity to invite the men into a time of personal sharing. Expect some men to be wide open while others remain somewhat guarded. Encourage each one to speak but be careful not to “go around the circle” so as to put undue pressure on those who are not quite ready. There will be plenty of time for growth in trust and transparency.

There is one main question (*What is your personal “next level”?*) and three sub-questions to bring clarity to that main question. Read all four questions. Invite the men to share their response to whichever question they choose.

#### Recommendations:

Priming the pump: If there is someone who you know would be comfortable in starting things off, ask them sometime *before the session* to be the first to share. Ask them to be sincere and brief. This will encourage others to share and set a pattern for those who follow.

Be clear and stay focused: As a leader, you will need to continually ensure that the men respond only to the question being asked. Sometimes this will mean telling them what we don't want them to share (e.g., their entire faith story; a lengthy or detailed account of their present circumstances). Oddly enough, a man who divulges too much personal information at this point may scare off others who are “not ready for such a group”. So be clear in what you want them to share or not share at this point. There will be opportunities for fuller disclosure as time goes on.

#### Prayer

Close the sharing time with a brief prayer. Your prayer should address the issues just discussed during this session. Pray for each man by name. For those who shared their personal next level, mention those specifics when praying for that man. For the others, pray generally that God would use this group to lead them to His desired next level for them.

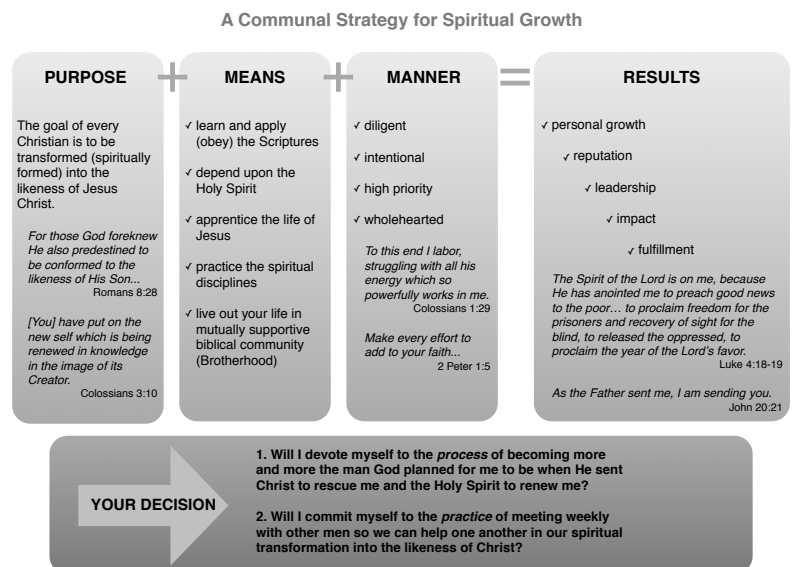
#### Assignment

In closing, draw the men's attention to the memorization assignment. Strongly urge them to complete this by the next session. They will be asked to recite the verse at the beginning of Session Three. Remind them that it is a simple, but profoundly helpful, verse to commit to memory. This verse captures the primary purpose of this journey together: to help each other live like Jesus.

#### Summary Chart

Use the handout “A Communal Strategy for Spiritual Growth” either as a summary at the end of this session (or, if you choose, as a beginning review next week).

Give special attention to the *decision* the men need to make regarding the next 8 weeks of their lives.



## **COMMUNITY** Part One

### **The Purpose of Session Three**

The next two sessions deal with the topic of community. You can assume that at present, for most men, community is a concept they have heard of, not a reality they have experienced. Remind them that in Session One we discovered together and (mostly) agreed that men in our culture (and often in our churches as well) live in unhealthy isolation. Today's session will address the topic by defining community (or describing it) and discussing why the communal experience is so elusive for us men.

The flow of the session will be *from* why we are ultra-cautious about sharing deeply *to* why we must make the effort and take the risk. Keep in mind that men often have good reasons for not being fully transparent... because they intrinsically know that certain "conditions of vulnerable sharing" must be established before they will be comfortable doing so. And these conditions are what will be addressed *and stressed* in the session and the next.

Having said all this, it would be wise to limit your expectations of sharing. Be careful not to *push* men into an area they are not quite ready for. Instead, *guide* them (by *walking* them through the reading and the discussions of the weeks ahead) and by being a model of trust and transparency.

**Before** having the men open their notebooks, **hand out the Discussion Guide** that covers the material in this session but has stripped out the "answers". (Only Leaders have this Discussion Guide; you should have received it during your training sessions.) It is important that the men do their own thinking and self-discovery during their mini-group discussion time.

### **LEADING THE DISCUSSION**

**Opening\*\*** *"Welcome guys. Let's begin".*

**READ:** Have one of the men read the opening paragraph. You may then feel free to briefly underscore the purpose of the session. (You may also choose to say nothing.)

\*\*Do NOT open by asking how everyone is doing. It is almost never a good idea to start a group that way. Save that question for later in the session, or the end of the session, or leave it for the weeks to come. It is usually best to complete the discussion material prior to sharing personal issues and prayer needs.

**PRAY** that God will lead you all into healthy Christian community as a result of the discussions about to take place. Sample prayer:

*"Lord, we're all here because we have acknowledged, to some degree at least, that we are relationally disconnected. This has produced some spiritual and emotional distance between us Christian men. We want to know more about biblical community -- what kinds of relationships You have designed for us men. Guide our discussions and our discoveries by your Spirit. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen."*

## Mini-Group Discussion

Move right into a time of discussion by dividing your group into two's (or in some cases three's, depending on your group size).\*\* Generally you can pair the men up according to where they are seated. Hand out one Discussion Guide per mini-group. Have one person agree be the note-taker and reporter who will share when the entire group reassembles.

\*\*Give some pre-thought on how certain men might be paired. For example, avoid paring two men who are brand new to the faith, or two men who are non-talkative, etc. Also, groups of *three* might be preferred to groups of two. If you have a venue that permits you to move to different rooms, do so. If not, always attempt to have three or more groups in one room so as to not easily hear distinct conversations.

This discussion may take some 15-20 minutes. This means about 4 or 5 minutes per question. Prior to sending the groups into their discussion time, let them know that you (or your co-leader) will give them a signal to move on to the next question. Appeal to them to keep close to the time limits, neither moving ahead or lagging behind. Keep in mind that you will ALL re-discuss these questions when you reassemble.

## True or False

This statement is meant to be “black and white”. It is designed to get men discussing (agreeing on and disagreeing on) what a “spiritually healthy person” is and what a “spiritually healthy community” is, and what exceptions there might be to this rule. By and large, they will likely conclude that environments (contexts, communities) strongly affect the individual participants. For good or for bad, we are strongly influenced by our culture or sub-cultures (like churches, schools, tribes, ethnic groups, sports teams, work places, etc). If the environment is healthy, we can become healthy; if it is unhealthy, we can become unhealthy.

The good news is that we followers of Christ can *create* a (small group) culture of trust and transparency and mutual concern that will profoundly impact the spiritual health of each individual. That is the goal of this 10 week journey into relational Christianity.

## Large Group Discussion

When the group reassembles, have the men turn to Session Three in their LAUNCH notebook. Go through questions 1 to 3 of the Discussion Guide. After each question you can refer them to some of the (additional) responses in the notebook. There are, of course, no right or wrong answers. Each person's contribution will be valuable to our understanding of why men tend toward guarded and superficial sharing. Once we understand the difficulties, we can address them.

Prior to discussing question 4, direct the men to the section called “**Before I bare my soul...**”

**1. I have to know this information is SAFE with you.** Confidentiality is crucial to healthy community. We will NOT share any personal information that may be embarrassing, shameful, weak, or sinful... if we think there is a chance someone beyond the group will hear that information and think poorly of us, or use that information in inappropriate ways. For this reason, we feel that there needs to be a very strong commitment \*\* on the part of each guy to not divulge (not now, not ever) anything shared in this group. This includes (and especially includes) sharing with our wives. If any man cannot commit to this, he cannot remain in the group. Confidentiality (secrecy) is foundational to trust which is foundational to transparency. At or near the



end of this session, have the men reaffirm their conviction about, and commitment to, complete confidentiality on all group discussions. (\*\* The term *commitment* will eventually be intensified to the term *covenant* in the final sessions of Launch).

**2. I have to know you CARE.** I may arrive at the place where I know that what I say will be held in confidence, but I am not likely to share if I am not convinced that you really care about me. Once I know I am loved, I am free to share the bad and the brokenness of my life without fear of condescension or condemnation. I am also free to share the good and the success of my life without fear of jealousy or envy. Confidence in your genuine concern for me will always precede my willingness to be emotionally and spiritually vulnerable.

**3. I have to know there is VALUE (mutual benefit) in my sharing.** It is quite possible that if I have the previous two conditions met within my group, I still may not share deeply, honestly and vulnerably. I am motivated to be transparent with my life when I truly believe it will somehow benefit me *and* be a help to someone else. Most men are not convinced of the therapeutic (healing) power of transparency and confession. I am released from the weight of many burdens when other brothers hear my confession and step in to carry some of my load. Bondage to sins can be broken. But in addition to all this personal benefit, those hearing me share are *set free to do the same*. They can also experience the joy of ministering to me through words of encouragement and theological confirmations. And so this final condition is essential to the authentic community each man seeks in this group.

Question 4 of the Discussion Guide can now be discussed. Have the mini-groups share what they wrote down. Then have each man read one of the 8 bullet points in the LAUNCH book.

**RISK** (sidebar): With so many benefits, vulnerability is clearly worth the effort—and the *risk*. Yes, it is impossible to eliminate risk. It *is feasible* that someone will break a confidence and breach a trust. It's possible that we will experience some of the responses that have always kept us from sharing deeply. There is a chance we will be hurt. These risks are inherent in any community comprised of flawed individuals. But consider the alternative: an isolated, lonely, guarded, shallow, self-protected life. This is the kind of life to be avoided at all costs. It is, then, quite accurate to conclude that the real and greatest risk a man could ever take would be to never engage in deep and authentic relationships. To counter this male proclivity, this group will make every effort to move steadily toward the genuine experience of biblical community.

#### **Risk**

What's really more costly:  
transparency and  
vulnerability OR  
hiding and self-protection?

## **ASSIGNMENT**

Bring to the group's attention the article (The Porcupine's Dilemma) to be read before your next session. Encourage the men to start early on their reading, and to highlight or underscore the points that impact them the most. They will be asked to share these insights and observations next week. There will be significant time for discussion of this article and so it is most important that they complete this assignment. Also let them know that it is a very easy and enjoyable read. (Send each guy an email reminder within 3 or 4 days of your next meeting.)

### Expectations on Assignments

**NOTE:** Some men may have not completed the assignment, especially the highlighting and notating aspect of it. (Reasons: they forgot, left it too late, were prevented by circumstances, etc.) We don't want to expose or embarrass them. You may simply ask them for their overall impressions of the material they did read... or ask them their additional thoughts to another man's reading or comments.

However, when presenting the next reading assignment (this week or next), make your **expectations** clear. Tell them that this active-reading exercise will increase the value to them personally, and to the entire group, who will benefit from their insights.

You may also gently refer back to Session Two where they were each asked to give their **wholehearted** commitment to this 10 Week Journey into Relational Christianity (*no-nonsense, highly intentional and aggressive, prioritized commitment, full engagement*). This will give you an opportunity to reinforce this attitudinal approach to community. If you are slack here, it will convey that this is just another do-what-you-please group and will significantly decrease the transformational impact of this group in their lives. Be clear and bold, and appeal to their personal desire to grow in the Lord. But be careful not to be threatening, condescending or graceless.

### PRAYER

Close your time in prayer, being sure to focus on the thrust of the session. Ask God to help you become a strong spiritual community, for each man's good and for God's glory.

## LAUNCH LEADER'S GUIDE

### Session Four

## **COMMUNITY**

### Part Two

### **The Purpose of Session Four**

Community has the power to enrich and expand a man's life, to move him from isolation to relational wholeness. It can even be the remedy that leads him from brokenness to wholeness, by bringing him closer to Jesus, the life healer.

This session is intended to take the group deeper into the kind of community where this can happen.

### **OVERVIEW**

The men's thinking on community will have been stimulated by their reading of "The Porcupine's Dilemma" article. Therefore, significant time will be given to discussing the overall impact of this article and the specific insights each man gleaned from his reading.

Men will then have the opportunity to (though not be pressured to) be transparent about some of their flaws and shortcomings. Since we all come "as is", now is as good a time as any to begin unveiling who we really are (perhaps beginning with where we've been and what we'd like to change). There is an extraordinary freedom in being able to be exactly who we are with other men, with no pretence or posturing to appear better than we are. We can liberate one another to experience this kind of community.

After this discussion, an exploration of Mark 2:1-12 will help reveal the power of spiritual friendship.

### **LEADING THE DISCUSSION**

**Opening** *"Welcome guys. Great to see you again. Hope you had a good week. Let's jump into our session".*

**READ:** Have one of the men read the opening paragraph. You may choose to add some of the thoughts in the *Purpose* section above OR you can close this entire session with those thoughts instead.)

**PRAY:** Ask God to be present to lead you all into deeper relationships centred around Jesus Christ. Ask for the courage and trust to be honest and trusting with one another.

Sample prayer:

*"Lord, we invite You into our community time. Please take us deeper into You by taking us deeper into one another's lives. Give us the courage to be real. Continue to build the honesty and trust in our group, so that we can help one another grow as men of faith. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen."*

**Review:**

“Let’s review what we covered last week. Joe, would you mind reading the first part of the *Review* (the three points). Thanks.” ...

Additional comments: “In other words, no one will ever be fully transparent, and community will never thrive, unless we all agree to operate on these essentials of honest self-sharing.

“The Review continues.... *What does my my transparency and vulnerability accomplish?* Let’s each read one bullet point. Don’t rush through the list, so we can reflect for a moment on each point. Dave, why don’t you start us off.”

**Previous Assignment**

“We were all asked to read the article entitled ***The Porcupine’s Dilemma*** this past week. Let’s discuss the article. Here’s how we’d like to do this:

- Take a full minute to go back over your copy of the article in order to find **one or two** of the highlights or notes you added. This will give you a chance to refresh your memory. Keep your finger there, so when your time comes you can share with us what impacted you and why.
- I will now ask each man to share these thoughts and impressions with the rest of us. While he is sharing, please give him your full attention. (Try not to be thinking of what you’re going to share!)
- Here’s how we’ll do it: Tell us what page you are on, then what paragraph. Give us ample time to find where you are. Then read to us the sentences that you want to share with us, followed by any comments you have with respect to:
  - how it impacted you
  - why you agree or disagree
  - what contribution this makes to our understanding of biblical community
  - etc.
- Does that make sense? [Repeat instructions very briefly, if there appears to be any confusion as to what to do.]
- So let’ take a full minute to review the article and our highlights and notations...
- ... Joe, why don’t you start us off. [Option: You as a leader or co-leader can start them off, setting a pattern for how this discussion exercise will proceed.

**Discussion: We all come “as is”...**

This is an opportunity for the group members to share more deeply about themselves. Let them know that this self-revealing exercise is optional, but also strongly encourage them to begin now to take courageous steps in transparency that will let the others know that they are trusted. It is highly recommended that you, the leader(s), should model these first steps of vulnerability. So be honest about something you have gone through in your past or some issue (personal or circumstantial) you are presently facing.

Say something like: “Since we all have flaws which will eventually surface, why not share *now* something about yourself that you have previously kept safely guarded from others. It need not be something “big” -- just something that says *‘In this group I intend to be real’*.”

**Guidelines:**

- Don’t “go around the circle”. Start with yourself and ask who wants to go next.

- Don't rush this sharing time, yet don't leave extended silence which will leave men feeling uncomfortable that they are not sharing.
- Be certain to thank each man who shares. (It is possible, and okay, that no one will share other than the leader.)
- At times it may be appropriate to pray for the situation just shared, particularly if it is something that is happening in the present.
- It may be appropriate to ask some simple, non-intrusive follow-up questions to gain clarity and/or to express genuine interest and concern.
- On other occasions it might be appropriate to publicly thank God for His work of grace in this man's past.

When it appears no one else plans to share, simply thank (again) all those who shared, and let everyone know that there will be many opportunities to share in the weeks and months ahead.

### Discussion: Mark 2:1-12

The following discussion methods are only recommendations. Feel free to lead this Bible study and application in a way that fits your group dynamics and your time parameters.

Read the passage together. Because of the narrative nature of this text it is best read aloud by one person. Read aloud **Questions 1-3** and ask if the questions are clearly understood. Then divide into groups of two (or three) to have them discuss the questions. Allow approximately 4 minutes per question. (If your time is short, assign a different question to each group.) After that time reconvene to discuss their findings. Take another 10 minutes to do this together.

This is primarily a Scripture *observation* exercise. Stay in the text! Don't let the group move into application until the end (i.e., beginning at "Group 7 -- Modern day readers" of Question 4).

There are other subjects that could be addressed within this text (e.g., forgiveness, Christ's deity). These may be talked about briefly. However, keep in mind that the purpose of discussing this particular passage, with this new group, at this time, is to discover from the Bible the power of community and the life-changing impact Christian friends can have in each other's lives as they "bring one another to Jesus".

Read aloud **Question 4**. This exercise in *conjecture* is intended to use our logic, imagination and spiritual sense to guess what likely would have been the effect of this miracle in the lives of those who witnessed it. No one would have left that house that day without this "double" miracle (a spiritual and physical healing) impacting their life in some way, immediately and long-term.

Divide the group again into the same pairs or triplets and assign them two each of the people/groups in the biblical account. Take approximately 8 minutes (total) for the groups to write down the short- and long-term effects of those who witnessed this miracle.

Return and for another 8 minutes share your thoughts with one another. Keep this discussion moving quickly. The purpose of these speculations is to broaden your minds to envision what can happen when people encounter Jesus.

Now, together as the larger group, lead everyone to consider how we can **apply** this historical account to our present time, and to this small group in particular.

Witnesses		Short-term Impact (weeks)	Long-term Impact (years)
1	Paralytic		
2	Friends		
3	Disciples		
4	Religious leaders		
5	Townspeople		
6	Jesus		
What does this story tell us about the <b>potential</b> and <b>privilege</b> of this newly forming community? (As spiritual friends, what <b>could</b> we do, and what <b>should</b> we do, to carry each other's mats? Give examples.)			
7	Present day readers (us)		

## Summary Principles and Application

Have two group members read the two Summary Principles.

Read (or have someone else read) the Application paragraph.

## PRAYER

It is imperative that we immediately talk to God about what we have all just discovered from His Word.

- **Thank** God for the insights from this biblical event:
  - Jesus proved His deity by authoritatively forgiving sins, and through this miracle of physical healing
  - Jesus is compassionate to those who are spiritually and physically broken
  - Jesus is pleased, and responds, when He sees faith in action

- **Ask** God for His wisdom and enablement as you endeavour to create a spiritual community that cares for one another the way the paralytic's four friends cared for him.
- **Commit** (offer, surrender) your group and each participant to the Lord

## ASSIGNMENT

Bring to the group's attention the article *The Fellowship of the Mat*, to be read before your next session. Encourage the men once again to start early on their reading, and to highlight or underscore or even notate the points that impact them the most. Again, they will be asked to share these insights and observations next week. (Send each guy an email reminder within 3 or 4 days of your next meeting.)

## LAUNCH LEADER'S GUIDE

Session Five

### **ENCOURAGEMENT**

#### **Part One**

Start this session by telling the men what we've covered thus far:

- **Connecting:** (two sessions) the vital importance of deeply connecting with other men in order to deeply connect with God, and (with their help) to become all He saved us to be.
- **Community:** (two sessions) the power of authenticity (men intentionally revealing to other men who they really are) to create genuine spiritual community, which in turn produces *true* spiritual friendships

#### **Review**

Have someone read through the bullet point review of the previous session. Ask if there are any additional highlights that someone might want to share.

#### **Previous Assignment**

As in the previous session, take some unhurried time to reflect on the reading assignment, in this instance, *The Fellowship of the Mat: True Friendship*. Have each man lead the others to a paragraph in the article that you will all read together; have him share how it impacted him. Affirm the man for his insights and how it has been helpful to the group. Always encourage follow-up discussion, then move on to the next man. At the end of this exercise, wrap it up with the main idea of the article: true friends care enough about their friends to make every effort to "bring them to Jesus". That's what this group is all about—helping one another get closer to Jesus, who loves us, forgives us, heals us, and frees us!

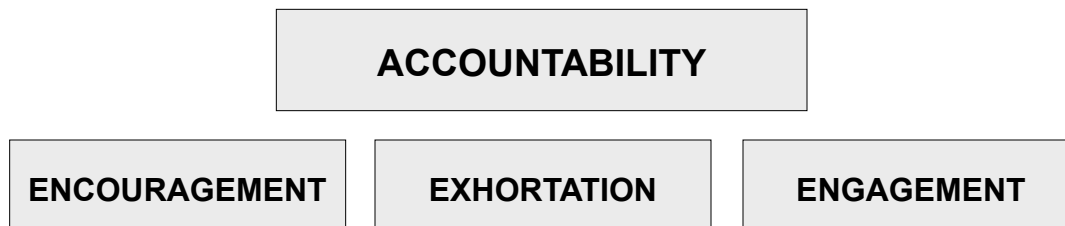
"That's where we've gone. Now here's where we're going next."

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#### **The Purpose of Session Five**

The next three sessions deal with the topic of **accountability**. Draw to the attention of your group this transition into new subject matter.

Accountability is a popular term among men's groups. It's pretty difficult to define or describe. It's even harder to achieve. We will attempt to take the concept and divide it up into three sessions which will cover three aspects of living in a community of accountability. These three sessions *together* will serve as a description of this hard-to-pin-down practice. Accountability is *developed* and *expressed* through encouragement, exhortation, and engagement.





## Accountability

Read the definition of “accountability” by Randy Frazee (pronounced *FRAY-zee*). This is an excellent definition that captures the essence of this practice, or better, this *lifestyle*. The men will be asked to memorize it in the coming week. Take a few moments to point out some of the key terms in the statement:

- **inviting:** This practice, to actually work, can never be forced on a person; a man can’t be arm twisted into sharing his personal issues and decisions or his private thoughts and feelings. One has to willingly invite others into his life, to “open the books” (an accounting term) for the others to see the inner workings of his life, to *welcome* others into his spiritual journey. *As trust grows*, men will progressively give more and more access to the other men in his group.
- **constructive:** We will invite others into our life so they can build us up, encourage us, and make us better men. Nothing will be said that is not thoroughly helpful, productive, profitable... and requested.
- **feedback:** Each man will be encouraged to solicit from the others information that can be “used as a basis for improvement”. In essence, he will be asking: “What do you see that I can’t see? What might I be missing? Am I on the right track? Do you agree with my judgement and my actions in this matter? How could I better approach this situation?”

Discuss the **two quotes** by John Ortberg.

- Why is accountability “a *gift* we give to one another”? Do you agree that there are levels of “growth we could never know” without mutually accountable relationships? Why?
- Superficial sharing kills small groups. If this is true, why does it happen? How does a group “lose power” when it falls back into “vague sharing”? Have you experienced this in a small group? **How can we avoid it in *this* group?**

## Why invite mutual accountability: The Forehead Exercise (A)

Using the supplied sheet of character trait stickers (or writing out 6 or 7 traits of your choice on sticky notes) stick them to each person's forehead (without the individual seeing the word, and cautioning everyone to not say the word out loud).

Then explain that we are trying **to learn to speak words of affirmation** to others, particularly about character traits that a person may not be aware are developing (and showing up) in their lives, i.e., they are **blind spots** that they can't see unless they are told by someone else who observes them OR they see them in a mirror\*.

HONESTY  
COURAGE  
JOYFULNESS  
CONTENTMENT  
GENEROSITY  
AFFIRMING  
INTEGRITY  
PATIENCE  
SELF-CONTROL  
MEEKNESS

Then go around the circle and have (some or) all the participants describe the character trait they see in that person (without using the actual word). They, of course, need to fabricate a story, an incident, etc, in which they have observed this character trait being displayed. The recipient should eventually guess what the trait is, but NOT until everyone has had the chance to express their affirmation. The purpose is to develop the skill (and mindset, and habit) of affirming others regarding the positive things we see in others' lives. It can be uncomfortable at first, but becomes easier as we practice it over time.

This sets up the assignment for the coming week: to write out one positive character trait you have observed so far in the lives of each of the other participants in the group.

*“Here’s a suggestion, men: Pray and ask God to help you, to reveal something that would actually encourage and affirm each of the others.”*

#### Inviting feedback from God

The Bible is likened to a mirror\* in the NT, and can rightfully be considered a means whereby what is inside us—both the good and the bad—is revealed or *reflected back* to us in what we see there. So we should read it with a view to discovering what God wants to tell us—about where we have work to do but also, and this is important, where in our lives we are developing Christ-like character traits!

**Summary: God wants to AFFIRM us—by the Bible and through the Brotherhood!**

#### Scripture: Hebrews 3:12-13 and 10:25

The purpose of this exercise, this brief Bible study, is to consider an account of how powerful the act of encouragement was among believers in the first century. To effectively lead the group through this, it is strongly recommended that you as co-leaders spend some personal study time, with the use of a commentary on Hebrews or a Bible with good study notes. Ask the Lord to reveal to you the power of words of encouragement to “inspire others with renewed courage, spirit and hope”. (Swindoll) [pronounced *swin-DAWL*]

The simple purpose of this study is to show that the writer **used words**

- to revive the flagging spirits of suffering believers who were tempted to doubt their faith in Jesus, to stop meeting with other believers, and even to return to their Jewish religion (i.e., to defect from Christianity).
- The author calls them to look at Jesus, to see how He is the supreme Son of God, the perfect mediator (High Priest) between God and mankind, the final and only substitutionary sacrifice for sins, the One who will eventually reward them for their faith.
- They are encouraged to find renewed resolve by remembering that when Jesus suffered He did not give up, and that many before them kept their faith in the midst of trying circumstances and are now experiencing the joy of their perseverance.
- AND, the author challenges them to “ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER” to stay true to Jesus and to one another, to not give up meeting together, to keep hoping, to spur one another on to love and good deeds, and to keep in view The Day of Christ’s return to judge and to reward.
- The words were **effective**: many stayed faithful, encouraged other believers, helped those in need, ran the race set out before them, fixed their eyes on Jesus... all because someone (the author AND their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ) cared enough to **use words** to inspire them with renewed courage, spirit and hope!

#### Men can lose heart...

Split your group into three (if possible) and have each sub-group discuss examples of how men can lose heart (courage, resolve, passion, faithfulness) in their work, their marriage or their faith. (These need not be actual examples, but scenarios where men could lose heart.)

Have them return after 5-7 minutes to share with the whole group their examples.

Then give the men an opportunity to share of a time when they *personally* lost heart in one of these areas. (Note: they could be in one of those seasons right now.)

## What to say?

**Appreciation:** a man can be encouraged and revived when someone notices something he has done (or not done) and **says words** of acknowledgement and gratitude

**Affirmation:** a man can be encouraged when another man speaks words that tell him he is valuable; words that declare something noble about him and his character

**Hope:** a man can be encouraged when others help him turn his gaze upon Christ and His many promises made to him and about him specifically; he can be helped to see beyond the present circumstances (and his present brokenness) to the future God has in store for him

DISCUSSION: What words could someone say to help a man in such times? Using the hypothetical (and perhaps the real) examples just shared, have the same three sub-groups come up with actual words which would help men in such times and circumstances. Return and discuss these words of encouragement in the larger group.

**Summary:** WORDS MATTER. Words of encouragement can make a colossal impact on those who need them and hear them. This group will become a strong spiritual community to the degree that we *learn* to consistently (weekly) speak affirming words, cheering words, believing words, inspiring words and hopeful words to one another.

## Assignments:

1. Memorize the definition of accountability. Tell the men you will ask each of them recite it next week. Assure them that this definition will be helpful to them for many years to come.
2. Optional personal study this week: Look up in a Bible concordance all the verses that have the word “encourage” or “encouragement” in them. Read the context and the circumstances for their usage. Ask God to help you be an encourager.
3. Write one positive trait for each man in the group. Be prepared to share that with them during the next session.
  - Note 1: This is very important. Anyone who fails to do this will feel some regret the next week when others are saying affirming things to him but he has not prepared to share affirming things with them.
  - Note 2: This exercise can be challenging in that the men have not known each other very long. Advise the men to pray first and ask God for insight. The trait could be a simple observation of kindness, good sense of humour, insightful comments, sensitivity, attentiveness when others speak, willingness to be vulnerable... anything that is positive and worthy of affirmation.

Launch v3

## Nextlevel Covenant Groups

LAUNCH: Session Six  
Version 3

## ACCOUNTABILITY

### Part Two: Exhortation

It is recommended that this opening paragraph be read by someone AFTER the Review and the Previous Assignment exercise.

#### AFFIRMATION EXERCISE:

Focusing on one man at a time, have each group member share one or two positive character traits they have observed in his life in the short time (likely) that they've known him.

Discussion: After completing the affirmation exercise, ASK:

1) Why did we put character trait stickers on each other's foreheads? (Because even our positive traits, areas where we have grown in Christlikeness, can be all-but-invisible to us, unless someone tells us what they see. God can use His family members to affirm us in our development.)

2) What did it feel like to RECEIVE these affirmations in this way? (e.g., I felt...good, uncomfortable, inspired, it was hard to accept or believe, emotional, encouraged...)

3) What did it feel like to GIVE these affirmations? (supportive, difficult, fun, I felt like God's messenger, honoured...)

4) What do you think it would be like to be in a setting every week where this was the prevailing tone, where this was the group "culture"? (THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT WE ARE SEEKING TO CREATE IN THIS GROUP!)

A Good Sorrow: The point of this short reading is to show that it is both difficult to GIVE an exhortation as well as RECEIVE one; it can really hurt in both cases. BUT because so much is at stake, it is extremely valuable, and loving, because it can be used by God to bring about spiritual restoration.

Transition: "Speaking of things that could jeopardize one's spiritual well-being"...

Have every man read a bullet point each, reading slowly, and giving a time of brief reflection (4 seconds) before the next man reads. "Do you agree that these are barriers to spiritual health?"

In this session we will look at another aspect of accountability: the willingness to lovingly address a brother about an area in his life that is not in alignment with his personally expressed desire to become more like Christ. We will discuss the communal value of this difficult act of love and how to do it effectively and sensitively. We will also discuss how to receive such words with humility.

#### Review

*Last week we said...*

- Genuine community can only be created if there is mutual accountability between its members.
- Accountability: "Inviting constructive feedback on my walk with the Lord" (Frazee)
- "When small groups shift from mutual accountability to vague sharing... they die." (Ortberg)
- EnCOURAGEMENT: "The act of inspiring others with renewed courage, spirit and hope." (Swindoll)
- Friends actively encourage their friends with words of appreciation, affirmation and hope.

#### Previous assignment:

- Memorization of definition for "Accountability".
- Speak words of affirmation to one another. Write the descriptive words spoken to you.

	Name	Your words of affirmation to the others	Record what is said about you
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			

#### Definitions and Quotes:

- **Confront**: to face boldly; to bring face to face; [French: *confronter*; *front*, the brow]
- **Exhort**: to incite by words of advice; to advise strongly; to admonish earnestly
- **Admonish**: to reprove gently; to instruct or direct; rebuke; [Latin: *ad monere*; to warn]
- **"Godly Sorrow"** Read 2 Corinthians 7:8-11. Paul had previously sent a "hurtful" letter of exhortation that produced "godly sorrow" in his readers. In this letter, he reflects on its value.

"[Paul] was determined, by God's grace, to allow neither concern for [the Corinthian Christians'] feelings nor unwillingness to give offence to [prevail] in such a way as to make him keep silence, instead of dealing with them as a faithful father, and thereby to jeopardize their spiritual well-being". Philip E. Hughes, 2 Corinthians 7:8-10, NICNT

#### Discussion:

Consider how the following behaviours could hurt a man and "jeopardize his spiritual well-being":

- hypocrisy, duplicity, posing, pretending
- lies, deceit, exaggeration, bending/twisting/inflating the truth
- judgementalism, critical spirit, fault-finding
- sloth, apathy, indifference, insensitivity, laziness
- pride, boasting, self-centeredness, hyper-independence
- lust, sexual impurity, roving eyes, inappropriate sexual talk
- greed, lust (for things), discontentment, ingratitude, complaining
- fear, timidity, cowardice, faithlessness, worry

#### Think About It

What hurts a man more:  
unchallenged sin or words of  
correction from a caring friend?

Jesus is not saying we should not make moral judgements or exercise moral discernment about people (their behaviour, their beliefs, etc) but rather that we ought to apply the same rule of moral judgement to others that we want others (and God) to apply to us. Additionally, this teaches us to not be self-righteous in our moral evaluations of others.

Place stickers on each guys forehead. Be sure no one says the word that is displayed. One by one, have each man FABRICATE an account where he observed this negative behaviour in his brother. Then using the one of the five "Gracious Openers", graciously and truthfully "restore your brother gently" by bringing to his attention that which he may be unaware of (a blindspot). After EVERYONE has had a chance to speak, allow the man to guess the word on his forehead. This exercise is intended to BEGIN to develop the HEART and ART of exhortation in an accountability relationship. The men may use their own "gracious openers" if they choose.

**NOTE:** This practice is NOT encouraged or expected until the group has developed a strong foundation of TRUST, and after a culture of affirmation has been firmly established. This may take many months. When the time comes and necessity requires that a loving correction be spoken, it will be given and RECEIVED more lovingly and gratefully once a positive, humble, high-trust, others-centred environment becomes a weekly reality.

"Brothers": written to Christians; Christians sin

"caught": think more of being ensnared by sin than discovered in sin

"spiritual": think "you who are born again or you who are Spirit-led" rather than "you who are extra- or super-spiritual"

"restore": to bring back to its original condition; not "shame" or "condemn" or "ostracize"

"gently": how we do this is as important as that we do it

"watch yourself": don't lose sight of your own proclivity to sin

"tempted": either tempted in the same moral area, or, tempted to feel or behave with superiority

If any of these behaviours were to surface in your life, would you *really* want a concerned friend to tell you? Why or why not?

How would you want them to approach you?

(Under what circumstances and by what means: by letter? email? personally? with a brother?)

Read Matthew 7:1-5. What is Jesus saying here about **judging** and *how does it apply here?*

What *steps* could we take to avoid self-righteous judgementalism while properly exercising moral judgement (discernment) when expressing our concern for a friend?

### Galatians 6:1

**Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself or you also may be tempted.**

What does this verse add to our understanding of the motive and means of exhorting a brother?

**The HEART of accountability:** *Motive* "Speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15)

Because you honestly care about [name], tell him what you observe in him that you feel will:

- ...hurt those closest to him if left unchecked
- ...be a poor example to his children and other Christians
- ...mar his reputation with friends and professional colleagues
- ...restrict his spiritual development
- ...minimize the impact of his Christian service and close doors of opportunity

**The ART of accountability:** *Means* "full of grace, seasoned with salt..." (Colossians 4:6)

Gracious Openers:

1. "I'm sure you want to be known and respected as... but you might not be aware that..."
2. "You've said that you highly value... so I thought you would like to know that..."
3. "I care too much to leave this unsaid and thereby jeopardize your spiritual health."
4. "You may not be aware that in these situations... you do or say..."
5. "Can I share something I have observed in you (which doesn't fit who I know you to be)?"

**Why invite mutual accountability?**

- 1) to help us realize our highest aspirations, ethical conduct and life goals
- 2) to lovingly reveal our "blind spots" (good and bad)
  - "forehead exercise" (A) (last week)
  - "forehead exercise" (B) (this week) Develop the skill of gracious, truthful correction.

### Summary and Application

In order to create an environment that will fuel our spiritual formation, each of us must be willing to give and receive helpful feedback on our walk with the Lord. As our community becomes more saturated in words of encouragement, then we will find ourselves increasingly open to words of challenge and correction when they are needed.

When you feel ready for it (and as an act of courage and trust), *invite* the brothers in this group to help you see any behavioral blind spots in your life that will stunt your growth, hinder your relationships, or stain your reputation.

### Assignment for next week:

1. Ask God every day this week to give you the love and courage to *give* correction and the humility to *receive* it.
2. Memorize Galatians 6:1.

At the outset, remind the group that we are in the midst of addressing 3 aspects of accountability.

The first was **Encouragement** which is the foundational, primary and essential practice of a spiritual community. A healthy community is comprised of hearty affirmers.

The second was **Exhortation**, the relational responsibility to speak life-giving truth into one another's lives, and doing so motivated by love and spoken with grace. Sometimes this will take the form of a humble correction, at other times as a motivational challenge to a friend to become all God designed him to be.

Today we come to the third aspect of healthy accountability—**Engagement**, which insists on moving a small group from just a weekly meeting to a true community of interdependent and interconnected spiritual friends.

After this reminder, **PRAY** that God will help each one grow deeper in their understanding of grace-filled accountability and their practice of it.

Take time to have the men recite this verse, and to ask the question about the previous week's practice of prayer. Note: Assignments that are not consistently followed up on (inspected) will eventually not be taken seriously and left undone. If some participants have come unprepared, then challenge them to do so each week without fail, for their own benefit and the good of the community. Remind them that the exercises are simple and are designed to enhance community.

The previous session taught us how inspirational and strengthening it is to speak words of appreciation and affirmation. Though we are moving on to a new topic, this brief (5 minute) exercise will give men the opportunity to further develop the practice of encouragement. Do it weekly!

Simply read these definitions. Like interlocking stones in a retaining wall, remind them that by "engagement" we intend to interlock or interconnect our lives with one another.

Have a good reader read this paragraph.

reinforce the goal of belonging

weekly proximity is required for us to notice and respond

## Nextlevel Covenant Groups

LAUNCH: Session Seven

Version 3

## ACCOUNTABILITY

### Part Three: Engagement

While accountability begins with and grows by the act of affirming others often, and exhorting others occasionally, it doesn't end there—there is much more. Accountability must move forward into relational **engagement**. Community is deepest and most effective when men *invite* other men into the whole of their lives, into the hours of their lives between meetings. This deeper level of interdependence is life-transforming, knowing that a few other men are tracking with you through the personal, daily stuff of life—all of it, all the time.

This interconnectedness is most crucial at times when, for various reasons, we might stray from the group or from the Lord. In those seasons when we lose heart, or lose focus, or lose a moral battle, part of being a band of brothers means that we may need to chase someone down, or be chased; to rescue, or be rescued. This session will guide us deeper into the heart of relational Christianity.

### Review

*Last week we said...*

- Accountability is truth-telling that helps a brother grow while creating deeper community.
- Accountability in its exhortation form is an **art** that takes **heart**.
- Without heart (love, concern for one's welfare), accountability is harmful, not life-giving.
- Without art (grace, sensitivity, timing) accountability is hurtful, not liberating.
- Truth-telling takes courage and love. Truth-receiving takes courage and humility.

### Previous assignment:

- Recite Galatians 6:1.
- Are you praying this prayer?

*"Lord, please give me the love and courage to give correction and the humility to receive it".*

- Do you have any words of **encouragement** for someone here today?

### Definition:

- **Engage:** v. to connect, fit into place, take on, become involved; to *interlock*
- **Chase:** to pursue, to run after (Latin: *capture*, to seize)

### LOST AND FOUND *For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost. Luke 19:10*

Did you ever get lost? How would you feel if no one ever came looking for you? If those closest to you hadn't noticed you were missing, how would you feel about their claims to love you? How important would you feel?

Sometimes we get lost spiritually. We lose our way, and before long we are in a distant or dangerous place. Finding our way back can seem hopeless—unless someone comes and finds us where we are and guides us back to where we truly belong. When they do, we feel loved.

**Genuine Christian community means we belong and we are valued.** There are times when it is necessary to demonstrate this to those in our community who lose their way. Sometimes we men lose our spiritual bearings when we lose sight of what is important and invest our time and energies in trivial pursuits. Sometimes our eyes take us down paths that lead to impurity and addiction. At other times we get pulled back into old (preconversion) patterns that keep us centered on us and not the Lord. The narrow path seems easily departed from. This experience is common to us all. However, when we have Christian brothers who love us and are **close enough to us to notice** when we begin to stray, we can be brought back to the place we really want to be. Loyal brothers will go to great efforts to chase us down when we wander, regardless of the costs.

That's the kind of community Christ had in mind for us all. That's the kind of community we all need. That's the kind of community we are forming right here and now.

TRANSITION: We have just read how common it is for men to lose their way along their spiritual journey. Now we will read what Christ had to say about this inclination to wander, and how He feels and acts toward the lost.

The reason Jesus tells this parable (and the two that follow) is found in the opening two verses. He is responding to condescending judgements ("muttering" see 16:14; 19:7) from the religious leaders. They can't understand why a rabbi, a holy man, would keep company with sinners, ceremonially defiling himself by eating with them.

So Jesus tells these "religious shepherds" a story about how thoroughly reasonable it would be for a sheep owner who loses even one of his 100 sheep to "GO AFTER the lost sheep until he finds it" (v.4). The finding of the sheep would bring such joy that he would throw a party to celebrate its recovery. And (unlike these grumpy legalists) his friends and neighbours naturally rejoice with him.

And that is why Jesus pursues these "sinners"—in the hope that even one would repent. And when even one does so, all of heaven breaks forth in rejoicing!

The Father is the sheep owner; Jesus is the rescuer. It is thoroughly reasonable for them to chase down (seek and save) their own lost sheep.

The only person who cannot be rescued is the one who doesn't realize he is lost and in need of being found (v.7)—like the religious and "moral".

This story tells us that God the Father is compassionate and forgiving, and that God the Son is on a rescue mission to go after all those who "like sheep have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6). The religious leaders were self-righteous and judgemental. This story is an indictment of their cold-hearted shepherding of the people under their care. We learn this about ourselves: we are deeply loved and valued by our Maker and Owner. He has rescued us and now we "twice" belong to Him.

Recommend that the men begin scheduling at the end of this meeting.

John is getting "lost" in his work. How should he be pursued?

Anger is the presenting emotion or experience. How can we chase this back to its roots.

Relational or emotional distance must not be ignored but rather graciously sought out.

Love doesn't keep attendance but it does care enough to call and ask.

**Scripture:** Read Luke 15:1-7

1. What does Jesus' parable tell us about Himself, the Father, the religious leaders of his time, and us? (See Luke 19:10.)

**Prone to wander,  
Lord, I feel it.  
Prone to leave the  
One I love.**

Robert Robinson

2. As we strive to become more like Jesus, how can we practically emulate our Chief Shepherd in light of this parable?

3. Read (again) Galatians 6:1-2. Read James 5:19-20. What parallels do you see between these two texts and the Luke passage?

**Benefits of belonging:** From your own experience, share an example of a difficult time when another Christian brother or a Christian community made you feel valued and "pursued".

**The Practicalities of ENGAGEMENT:**

John Doe has been part of your group for quite some time. His heart is good and he has expressed publicly his desire to follow Christ closely. Recently, however, it becomes obvious to several men in your group that John...

- Is spending an inordinate amount of time at work, at the expense of his family, his health, and his regular attendance in the group, or
- Is angry about something or someone, maybe even God, or
- Has been uncharacteristically quiet and distant in the group, or
- Has been absent from church for several weeks.

In groups of two, choose one of the above scenarios, and answer the following questions:

- What steps of pursuit would you take (and in what priority) to address the matter?
- When would it be appropriate to pursue and engage John *one-on-one*, and at what times should your group (or part of it) show their *corporate* concern?

**Summary**

A spiritually healthy community is one in which the participants engage each other's lives deeply. When living in close connection to one another, if one stumbles or strays, the others will come to his rescue and support. This deepest level of accountability fosters security, strength and joy. And as others look on, they will know we are His disciples by our love. (Read John 13:34-35.)

**Assignment for next week:**

1) **Meet** with another man from this group in the coming week. Seek to get to know each other better and deepen your relationship as brothers in Christ.

2) Is there a brother in Christ you know right now who has wandered spiritually, morally, or relationally? In what practical ways THIS WEEK could you personally or corporately SEEK and restore this brother?



## Nextlevel Covenant Groups

LAUNCH: Session Eight  
Version 3

## COVENANT

### Part One

There remains one final and essential step to building community: **we must commit to it.** This commitment, to be effective and durable, must take the form of a covenant. Today we will look at the rationale for making relational promises as well as the **costs and benefits** of living in covenantal relationship with each other.

### Review

*Last week we said...*

- Community at its deepest level demands that we **engage** in one another's lives.
- This deep relational connection requires that we connect on various levels throughout the week.
- Accountability means we commit to **follow through** on our encouragements and exhortations.
- Accountability is an economic term: we "open the books" on our most personal aspirations and then invite others to regularly ask us to "**give an account**" of our challenges and our progress.
- Accountability that builds community often requires that we **chase** after (lovingly and persistently pursue) those who drift away from the community. (See Lk. 15:1-8)

**Accountability:**  
*Fellowship with follow-through*

### Previous assignment:

- Tell us about your mid-session meeting with another brother this week.
  - What did you learn about him? What do you think you have in common? In what ways might this have deepened your relationship as brothers in Christ? How do you think doing this as a regular practice might build and strengthen our group community?

### Definitions: (Webster)

- **Covenant:** a mutual and solemn agreement; a compact; a written agreement
- **Vow:** a solemn promise made especially to deity; to devote; to consecrate or dedicate by solemn promise
- **Solemn:** marked or performed with religious ceremony; impressive; serious; grave; *solemnize:* to perform with ceremony or legal form (L. *sollemnis*, yearly; solemn)
- **Grave:** *adjective.* solemn, serious, weighty; important (L. *gravis*, heavy)
- **Grave:** *noun.* a place of burial (this covenant marks the death of the self-sufficient life!)

### Covenants in Scripture

Though there are many covenants in the Bible, let's consider three relational categories.

#### 1. Between God and Humanity

God has established relational agreements with humanity which He has recorded in the Bible. These covenants are intended to guide and regulate the relationship between man and God.

##### Old Covenant ("First Covenant")

*"Now if you obey Me fully and keep my **covenant**, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession"... The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." Exodus 19:5;8. (See the core of this covenant, the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20. Read the "terms of the covenant" [blessings and cursings] in Deuteronomy 28 & 29.)*

##### New Covenant

*"The time is coming", declares the LORD, "when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers..." declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Jeremiah 31:31-33. (Read Hebrews 8:6-13.)*

*[Jesus] took the cup, saying, "This cup is the **new covenant** in my blood, which is poured out for you." Luke 22:20. (See 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Hebrews 9:15 for Jesus' role as new covenant mediator.)*

3. Just before reading this paragraph, remind the group that the past three sessions addressed three essential aspects of **accountability**: encouragement, exhortation and engagement (or cheering, challenging and chasing). If all three of these are employed with grace and love, then a healthy, natural (unforced) kind of accountability will be established between members.

4. Read the opening paragraph. High commitment is so important that we will spend two sessions discussing it.

5. Pray an opening prayer that is related to the subject and purpose of the session.

1. Begin the session here. Invite individuals to read each point. (Don't read the Scripture passage.)

2. Lead into this with a reminder, once again, that we are seeking to build a strong Christian community. This requires investing some time together sharing and listening to one another's stories and hearts. The challenge sometimes is to keep this time real, personal and spiritual. So ask the men if they struggled sharing about their spiritual journey, it's challenges and blessings. Upon completion of the sharing, encourage the men to meet this coming week with yet another man in the group that they don't know so well.

The term "covenant" is a rarely used term in our times. It was widely used and understood in ancient times. God likes the word: it is a central term and theological concept in the Bible. Points one and two are simply to be read as a reminder that this is a good Bible term and a powerful one in conveying a very high level of commitment. There is no need to look up the actual Scriptures referred to in brackets, but be sure to read out the verses as well as the references as a reminder that for us Christians "covenant" should not be a foreign idea or a scary word.



Read all these Scriptures in order to discuss the five questions below.

This verse is included to show what a person does who is committed to the welfare of another person regardless of the personal risk and cost. Jonathan risked the ire of his jealous father-king, Saul, as well as the unpredictable nature of David's protective outcasts.

This phrase is key: it best describes the nature of the mutual covenant we want to make with one another. Use it often!

This is the motivation behind making a covenant of friendship—our love and concern for each other's spiritual and relational welfare.

Read these questions, and discuss the answers based on your previous Scripture reading.

As co-leaders, be sure to have considered this and have written responses for each question. Then you can supplement the responses shared by the group.

Jesus advised those who would enter a covenantal relationship with him to "first sit down and estimate the cost" (see Luke 14:25-33). In the same way, when entering into this kind of friendship covenant, it is wise to first think through the costs. Don't minimize these—there WILL be challenges when persistently pursuing this deep level of relationship. But be sure to emphasize the remarkably greater benefits to those who will make this choice.

Don't skip or rush this point! Use a white board or easel chart to make this list. Include all the benefits you have already been experiencing, as well as the many that will follow in the months and YEARS ahead as you are "devoted to one another".

This is an optional group exercise, but it is recommended. IF you do this, do it before the group reads through included Covenant of Brotherhood.

The plan is to all sign next week. However, if more discussion or agreement or time is required or requested, then the signing can be postponed. Also, ALL group members must be present for the signing, so you MAY have to delay to ensure this.

The early church community is a great example of extreme commitment to one another's well-being. This verse shows both the costs and benefits they experienced. Philippians 2:3-4 is another great example of a community of believers who were challenged to put the interests of others ahead of their own. (See also the sacrifice of the Macedonians who gave out of their poverty (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

LAUNCH: Session Eight

2

## 2. Between a Woman and a Man

The marriage covenant is considered the most binding of human covenants.

*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.* Genesis 1:24. (Read about God's view of the **marriage covenant** in Malachi 2:13-16.)

In a wedding ceremony, love and fidelity is promised until the death of one or both parties. A mutual oath is made to "forsake all others". The covenantal vows are made "before God" and also witnessed by family and friends in a public ceremony that is both solemn and celebratory. The enduring quality of the covenant is symbolized by the exchange of rings.

## 3. Between a Man and a Man

Consider the friendship covenant between David and Jonathan.

*Jonathan made a **covenant** with the house of David... And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself... "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD is witness between you and me... forever.'" 1 Samuel 20:16-17;42. (Read 1 Samuel 18:1-4 and 23:16-18.)*

*Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God.* 1 Samuel 23:16

This is the kind of covenant we desire to make with one another – a "sworn friendship" out of love for one another. Using the above Scriptures, discuss aspects of the Jonathan-David pact that we could learn from and emulate:

- What did it cost Jonathan to make this covenant with David? (List everything he personally sacrificed.)
- What risks did Jonathan take in this sworn friendship?
- What lengths did Jonathan go to strengthen David in his faith? Why did David need this encouragement?
- What did David contribute to Jonathan in this covenant relationship?
- What were the *mutual benefits* of this friendship? Did they outweigh the costs? If so, how and why?

### Costs and Benefits:

To be part of a covenantal community like this certainly has its benefits, as learned and experienced in previous weeks. It also has its costs. It is wise to count the cost, to weigh the investment, that this kind of community requires. Speaking very practically, discuss some of the possible costs to committing to this kind of community?

- What relational risks might you encounter?
- What emotional output might be necessary?
- What scheduling inconveniences might you experience?
- What financial burdens might you bear?
- Now... write a list of *benefits* (short-term, long-term, eternal) that would outweigh the costs.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. Acts 4:32

### A Covenant of Brotherhood:

Make a list (on paper or a whiteboard) of the key issues you as a group think should be included in a small group covenant. Discuss. (Optional.)

Together, read through (without analysis) the recommended covenant. (You may choose to utilize this covenant or craft your own.) Next week we will discuss each point and its implications before signing.

### Summary and Application

To make a community covenant is to enter into a mutual agreement of the strongest kind. It constitutes a vow to never again roam in the wastelands of self-sufficient isolation and relational independence. It is to make a promise to other brothers in Christ that TOGETHER we will do everything in our power to operate at the level of interdependence and assist each other to live in biblical dependence on the Holy Spirit.

### Assignment for next week:

Read through the recommended covenant carefully. Then read the **Covenant-Making FAQ's**. Next week we will all sign the covenant. It is most important that you acknowledge the gravity of this written promise and its implications. You are strongly encouraged to NOT sign the covenant unless you fully agree with it and are willing to fulfill it.

Because a group covenant is so important to the success of a group (and an essential ingredient in the NL discipleship model) we will spend another session addressing it and discovering its beauty and power.

Another way to understand the concept and value of covenant is to see it as a "social charter". Such documents establish "articles of agreement"—rules of social interaction and fair play. Countries use them (e.g. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms) as means to protect the political, civil, religious and human rights of its citizens. Universities use them to guide student life. Hey, even pirates use to use them to ensure equal compensation to all sailors! Every social group is wise to draft and follow a strong promissory charter.

For many, a covenant seems like a burden, a law, a restriction. But it is, in fact, the opposite: it ensures/inspires great freedom. For this reason we will look at it as a relational adventure—a group journey into unfamiliar, uncharted territory—compete with risks, challenges, growth, and joys. Buckle up!

People are hungry for purpose and meaning in their lives. We all long to do something important with our lives. What could be a greater cause than helping others become the best version of themselves—the version God has planned and enabled them to be through Christ? That's discipleship. That's our group mission!

This book and movie is an inspiring story of covenantal friendship. It provides a current cultural example of a group embarking on a cause depending upon, but greater than, any one of its participants. For fun, and for deeper impact, consider showing a clip or two from the movie.

At this point in the session, keep the discussion limited to the book or movie and these few questions.

## Nextlevel Covenant Groups

LAUNCH: Session Nine  
Version 3

## COVENANT

### Part Two

Covenants provide guidance for a group and ensure its short-term effectiveness and long-range health. Today we will consider helpful analogies to better understand a friendship covenant. We will endeavour to recognize this fraternal enterprise as part of a momentous cause, one that aligns with God's rescue mission of mankind. Then we will reason through the implications of making a covenant with each other.

### Review

*Last week we said...*

- **Covenant:** a mutual and solemn agreement; a written agreement
- Three categories of biblical covenants:
  - Between God and Humanity
  - Between a Woman and a Man
  - Between a Man and a Man
- The kind of covenant we are making with one another is a "sworn friendship" out of love for one another.
- There are benefits and costs attached to the fulfillment of our vows. Benefits far outweigh costs.
- *Without* covenant, genuine community cannot develop.  
*With* covenant, community of the deepest kind is inevitable.

### The Adventure of Covenantal Relationships

#### Definitions:

- **Adventure:** an unusual and exciting, typically hazardous, experience or activity
- **Expedition:** a long journey or voyage undertaken for a specific purpose
- **Enterprise:** a project or undertaking, typically one that is difficult or requires effort
- **Cause:** a principle or purpose that, because of a deep commitment, one is prepared to complete or defend

**Exploits** Consider how the following three stories (the first mythical, the latter two historical) parallel the adventure of starting off on a "journey into relational Christianity".

1) **The Fellowship of the Ring** (J.R.R. Tolkien) is the epic story of a hazardous and unpredictable expedition undertaken by nine unlikely companions (2 men, 1 elf, 1 dwarf, 1 wizard, and 4 hobbits). These strangers choose to become comrades and *covenant* to accomplish an urgent and monumental cause greater than any one of them could accomplish on their own (namely, the delivery of a powerful ring to the place of its creation so as to destroy it lest it get in the hands of a powerful dark lord). This shared enterprise produced a loyal and intimate bond of friendship that made each adventurer better—more noble, sacrificial and courageous. Only *together* (with time, determination, and loyalty) were they able to succeed in their mission.

#### "I made a promise"

**Frodo:** Go back, Sam! I'm going to Mordor alone.  
**Sam:** Of course you are. And I'm coming with you! *[Sam wades in the water]*  
**Frodo:** You can't swim! Sam! *[Sam sinks below the surface]*  
**SAM!** *[Sam nearly drowns, but Frodo pulls him up into the raft]*  
**Sam:** I made a promise, Mr. Frodo. *A promise!* "Don't you leave him, Samwise Gamgee". And I don't mean to! I don't mean to.

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, New Line Cinema

- **Why** would a covenant be wise, even necessary, for such an undertaking?
  - (Conversely, how might the lack of covenant undermine the expedition?)
- In what ways did their common mission serve to strengthen their bond of friendship and make them better men?

In addition to this account of the bravery and devotion of **men**, consider looking at the account of the bravery of Deborah. Read Judges 4 (esp. vv. 8–9). As Israel's leader, Deborah rose up to fight for God's honour against the Canaanites. Note how she challenged Barak to action and agreed to work together with him in this mighty exploit. See also their victory worship song in Judges 5 (esp. vv. 2; 7–9).

We have already looked at the life of Jonathan in the previous session, but we include it here to highlight his courage, love and loyalty as he honours the covenant he made with David. Feel free to adjust your discussion time on this according to how fully you previously addressed it.

Take some time to summarize the themes of these stories in order to help your group understand the significance of what can be accomplished when people **AGREE** to work **TOGETHER** for a common cause.

This one-page exercise sheet follows page three of this session. It is designed to further explain the power of a covenant and to address potential questions about the nature of relational covenants. This exercise should take 15–25 minutes, depending on related discussion.

It takes men of character to **MAKE** a covenant and to **KEEP** it. As time passes, these qualities (results of the life-transforming Spirit) will increase in each man's life!

One doesn't have to be perfect at keeping a covenant, just faithful to continually returning to it. Also, participants in a **CHRIST-CENTRED** covenant need not all be wired the same, have the same interests, etc. Your group can experience joy, peace and unity among diversity.

Read this chart (from left to right). The similarities and differences to a marriage covenant are instructive and inspiring.

2) **Read (aloud) 2 Samuel 23:13-17.** Here are some **men** who are so committed to the welfare of their friend and leader, David, they go on an expedition, risking life and limb, to meet his need and to express their devotion and loyalty to him. (They are forever remembered as "mighty men".)

- Discuss in what ways this risky "exploit" is similar to the "daring feat" of entering covenantal community.
- Share why you think you, and all men, might also need a few loyal friends like this.

3) **Read (aloud) 1 Samuel 23:16.** **Jonathan**, the prince, embarks on a precarious journey into the wilderness to find David, the fugitive. In doing so he risks the brutal anger of his unstable and insecure father/king, *and* the unpredictability of David's feisty band of mercenaries (see 22:2). And why?—to meet David's spiritual need of the moment, namely, to help him find strength in God.

- How do you think the covenant Jonathan previously made with David (20:16-17) affected his decision to undertake this perilous venture? (Did he sense an obligation... as a "sworn friend"? Did his covenant produce feelings of concern?)
- What was at stake if Jonathan hadn't gone to David in his time of need? Would it be accurate to call this a spiritual rescue mission?
- How do you see a covenant group as a mission to help men "find strength in God?"

**Connecting the dots.** Here are three stories about covenantal fellowship, relational loyalty, urgent mission, and true friendship.

**Discuss:** How do these three accounts inspire and inform us about **WHY** a covenant is important and also **WHAT** worthy tasks can be accomplished when a covenant is utilized?

**RECAP:** Seen in the larger context of God's rescue plan, making and fulfilling a covenant with a band of brothers is like heading off on an epic journey. It will be challenging, adventurous, and extraordinarily rewarding. For God to accomplish His purposes He chooses to enlist the help of men, men exactly like you. But He always works in and through community. And God will enlist you to help others become everything He intended to make them in Christ.

**Covenant-Making Worksheet** To deepen our understanding of the power of establishing a friendship covenant, discuss the following three areas utilizing the worksheet.

**Four Qualities of a Covenant-Maker** This exercise will help us reflect on what character traits are important in those who choose to enter into a friendship covenant.

**Two Non-Essentials of a Covenant-Maker** When making a covenant with brothers, here are two areas to consider that are *not* required.

**Comparing Covenants** In order to better understand a covenant of friendship, it might be helpful to compare and contrast it to the covenant of marriage and the covenant of salvation.

After completing the Covenant-Making Worksheet, you now return to the final page of a long (two-week?) discussion about the value of—the necessity of—establishing a social charter for your group. You are now going to call your group participants to action. Your TONE is important as you (as leader) read this section aloud. Note the tone of challenge in the text. Note that the challenge is to step out in FAITH. It is an act of TRUST—in God and in your brothers. It is an act of COMMITMENT. It is an INVITATION to others to help one another live lives that truly honour God. Be bold, clear and firm. Be persuasive.

Undoubtedly there will be questions as to how this covenant will be lived out in practical areas. This exercise will address the FAQ's others have had, and that your group naturally will be asking as well. So before reading through the Covenant of Brotherhood, say something like: "If you're like me, no doubt you still have some questions about the implementation of a covenant for our group. Questions are good! Let's read what others have asked at this point, and see what we can learn." (You may have opted to have your group read through the FAQ's this previous week so they would be familiar with it. Regardless, be sure to read through the 10 questions aloud together. Take turns so every person can read a question each.)

Last week you finished your session by reading through, without comment, the Covenant. Read through it again, this time considering how each "article of agreement" could play out in your group.

This paragraph is included to realistically acknowledge that making a group covenant doesn't guarantee that the actual group will always be together, or that individuals may not move away. This condition is stated unequivocally so as to ensure that everyone knows that EVERYTHING they say in the group is to be FOREVER held confidential. This is foundational to trust and open, honest sharing.

In a circle, sign and date the covenant, and then pass it to the person on your right while you receive a copy from the person on your left, until everyone has signed.

It's time for a meal! The Lord's Supper will remind you of the Lord Jesus who died to invite you into His Community, and to make this kind of community possible. A potluck or restaurant is highly recommended. This is a big deal—CELEBRATE!

LAUNCH: Session Nine

3

## The Faith Challenge

Enough of casual, non-committal Christianity! If God has designed His kingdom to be an interdependent community where every participant is to operate in a mutually-supportive role, then let's do it NOW. Let's be done with our self-sufficient and self-centered manner of Christian living, and let's choose to live the Christian life *His way*—in authentic, committed, loving community.

If that's not for you, then this group is not for you. But if that's what you want, then **take a step of faith** and **commit** yourself to the spiritual and relational welfare of the guys in this group, and **invite** them into your life to strengthen and encourage your walk with God.

## The FAITH Factor

Entering into a covenant requires FAITH: We need to trust *ourselves* and our brother. But it is mostly a matter of trusting God.

## Previous assignment:

- What are your thoughts on the Covenant-Making FAQ's? What questions remain?

## A Covenant of Brotherhood:

Read and discuss, line by line, the implications of each component of the covenant.

This covenant remains binding as long as you are an active participant in the group. Should the group discontinue, the confidentiality clause will always remain in effect. And though the group should ever **disband**, it is hoped that the relationships that have been built will continue to develop on a one-to-one basis, providing prayer, encouragement and accountability for a lifetime.

The reason you are asked to sign this covenant is to make a public statement that you promise with God's help to *never again* live your Christian faith in relational isolation but in communal interdependence. So this covenant is not meant to "bind" you but to liberate you to enjoy the Christian life as God intended it!

## Sign the covenant. Pray. Celebrate.

Note: Some groups might choose to celebrate this event by sharing the Lord's Supper (Communion) with one another and/or by going out for a meal together. You may even choose to solemnize and celebrate this covenant by including family and friends.

**Assignment for next week:** We will discuss these questions next week. Please PREPARE.

- Review Sessions 1-9. Do your best to recall what God was saying to you at that time. As you consider the personal discoveries of those sessions, take time to thank God for the helpful nudges forward in your understanding of what it means to follow Jesus in the context of community.
- If you were to explain to someone what we have attempted to accomplish these past ten weeks, what would you say? (Each of us will take a turn at verbalizing this next week... so practice your response!)
- What, for you personally, has been the *relational highlight* of our journey together?
- What, for you personally, has been the *spiritual highlight* of our journey together?
- Our ultimate goal has been to get closer to God and to better follow Jesus. In what ways has this happened (or begun to happen) for you?

Nothing will ever be the same. We have all just set out on a life-long journey of joyful mutual support. We have been in the PORT preparing for our departure. We've been busy getting to know one another, assembling a sturdy "ship" to travel on together, forming a social charter that we all agree will help us become more like Christ who is our Captain. We have much to explore and many ports of call to visit. Bon voyage!

Have each man read a bullet point. Don't rush to the next point. As a leader feel free to comment on some or all the points.

Read through this summary together (on next page). Have each person read a summary point or two. After each two weeks that are read aloud, ask the group what they remember thinking and feeling at that time. How was God beginning to stir?

Explain or describe the goal of the Launch journey. This is an important exercise because it causes one to distill 10 weeks into a paragraph! This is also a good written exercise.

This has been a RELATIONAL journey. What has stood out as a highlight, either collectively or with an individual or two in the group?

This has also been a SPIRITUAL journey. What new spiritual insights have you gleaned—about yourself, the Lord, or the Gospel? It may be that some in the group have realized afresh how much they need to grow in spiritual maturity or relational interdependence.

Community is a sweet benefit, but a deeper communing with Christ is far better! As a leader, be the first to share in this area. Encourage EACH ONE to respond to this question.

## Nextlevel Covenant Groups

LAUNCH: Session Ten

Version 3

### OUR JOURNEY

Congratulations! We have completed this leg of our journey into relational Christianity. Your investment and commitment has paid off—we are all more closely connected as a result of your desire and efforts to create genuine Christian community. This is cause to celebrate!

Today we will **look back** at the highlights of our past ten weeks, pausing to give thanks to God for what He has done in us. We will also **look ahead** to what we can do now that we have developed this "band of brothers". The journey has just begun! And we are not alone – there are many other Covenant Groups on a similar journey. So we will **look around** at what God is doing, and wants to do, among the men in this region. Let's consider what we can do to invite other men into the experience of relational Christianity in order to help them get to the next level in their walk with the Lord.

#### Review

*Last week we said...*

- Spiritual friendship on a covenant level can be likened to going on an epic adventure to help one another become all we are designed to be in Christ
- To make a covenant of friendship is to join forces in a God-aligned cause, the cause of being present and available to help one another find strength in God
- True covenantal friendship takes faith, courage, loyalty and love
- Entering into a covenant requires faith: We need to TRUST ourself and our brother... but mostly GOD
- To make a friendship covenant is to enjoy the support and spiritual companionship of brothers in Christ

#### Previous Assignment

1. Read together "A Summary of Our Journey Into Relational Christianity". As you revisit the content of each week, do your best to recall what God was saying to you personally at that time. While sharing the discoveries of those sessions, take time to thank God for those helpful nudges forward in your understanding of what it means to follow Jesus in the context of community.
2. If you were to **explain** to someone what we have attempted to accomplish these past ten weeks, what would you say?
3. What, for you personally, has been the **relational highlight** of our journey together?
4. What, for you personally, has been the **spiritual highlight** of our journey together?
5. Our **ultimate goal** has been to get closer to God and to better follow Jesus. In what ways has this happened (or begun to happen) for you?

#### The Big Picture: Nextlevel Ministries, Your Church, Your Friends

1. Let's look at what God is doing on a larger scale through **Nextlevel Ministries** in this region.
  - What should our Covenant Group do next (and how can Nextlevel help us)?
  - Why should our group partner closely with Nextlevel?
  - What is distinctive about this ministry model for men?
  - How is Nextlevel financed?
  - What is Nextlevel's relationship to the local church?
2. What possibilities do you see for ministry to men in **your church**? What action steps can you take immediately to help other men discover and enjoy this kind of genuine biblical community?
3. If this has been of spiritual value to you, can you think of 2 or 3 of **your friends** you believe would benefit from being involved in a NL Covenant Group? List them below. Pray for them.