

**FIRST STEPS DISCIPLESHIP** | 2024 WHITE PAPER

# ONE-TO-ONE DISCIPLESHIP & MOST SMALL GROUPS: OIL & WATER!

## A DISCIPLESHIP BRIEF

If small groups were adequate for discipleship, Christians would be transformed, and churches would produce disciplers.



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# One-to-One Discipleship & Most Small Groups: Oil & Water!

A Discipleship Brief by Dr. Ron Braley

**Overview.** Amid superficial relationships and a business focus prevalent in most Western Protestant churches, there's a tendency to promote small groups as the discipleship motor. While both small groups and discipleship are essential, they shouldn't be seen as competitors. However, despite their value, many small groups fall short as a discipleship medium due to their lack of deep relationships, focus, and accountability. Consequently, they often fail to produce disciples or disciplemakers. To illustrate this, we'll contrast small groups and one-to-one discipleship, starting with the latter. First, let's establish a clear definition of "small group" in the context of this paper.

**Small Groups Defined.** The term "small group" can mean many things today. In some cases, it represents the two-to-three-member *Life Transformation Group (LTG)* introduced by Neil Cole.<sup>i</sup> They contain the deep trusting relationships, focus, and accountability found in one-to-one discipleship and provide a transition from *foundation* to *formation*.

Some consider the 10-12-member intimate cells promoted by John Wesley (founder of Sunday School and Small Groups) small groups. Like LTGs, the focus was discipleship-like intimacy, training, and accountability, which are not typically seen in most Western church small groups today.

However, today's typical small group resembles a free-range assembly of as many as 30 people, lacking the essential elements of discipleship found in LTGs and Weslian cells. These groups, unfortunately, cannot adequately substitute for discipleship. This raises the question, why not, and what are the consequences of attempting to do so?

**Reasons.** Discipleship is not a one-way teaching through finite programs, as many church leaders and laypeople mistakenly believe. It's meant to be a fluid, interactive journey, a walk with others in their rhythms of life. It's a process of continuous modeling, imitation, and replication. However, despite knowing better, some church leaders and laypeople still rationalize using small groups for discipleship. In essence, they understand the importance of discipling and fostering one-to-one discipleship, but they don't or can't for various reasons. Why is this?

First, discipleship is neither taught nor modeled in most Western churches.<sup>ii</sup> So, leaders and churchgoers don't tend to understand or practice mandatory discipleship or discipling.

Second, deep relationships needed for discipleship are few; discipling are fewer.

Third, a lack of expectation-setting pre- or post-conversion precludes a discipleship mandate.

Fourth, a lack of understanding and modeling/imitation prevents church discipleship culture. And finite programs and book learning alone don't contribute to culture change!

**Results.** If small groups were adequate for discipleship, Christians would be transformed, and churches would produce disciplemakers. The opposite is true: less than 5% of Western churches turn out disciplemakers,<sup>iii</sup> and churchgoers look like the world as spiritual maturity declines. So, what is the life-changing, culture-building discipleship Christians should engage in?

**The Stuff of Foundational One-to-One Discipleship.** Jesus' approach to discipleship was simple: build several **deep** trusting relationships, impart knowledge to the disciples, model how to apply the knowledge, test, correct, and send. The process was, and should be, intimate and full of accountability and correction. One-to-one discipleship is life-changing. And what is taught must be standard for all new believers (e.g., foundational prayer, Bible study, and building faith).

Here are critical points about one-to-one discipleship:

- If possible, it must be done within several months of conversion to keep converts from leaving their newfound faith.
- Provides the foundation upon which all else forms.
- Offers intimacy, prayer, study, accountability, and correction through trusting relationships.
- Facilitates biblical "one another" mandates.
- Requires expectation-setting, attendance, and interaction.
- Sets the stage for imitation and replication modeled by Jesus, Paul, Timothy, and others.

So, one-to-one discipleship (or LTG-style formation) is deep, foundational, and transformational, which isn't necessarily true of small groups.

**Formational Small Groups: Why and When.** While one-on-one discipleship is broad, holistic, and foundational, small groups lend themselves to *formation* and target specific recipients and topics. Examples include men's and women's groups, Celebrate Recovery, Bible studies, divorcees, and widows/widowers. The people are friendly and come and go as they please. The relationships tend to be shallow, and there are few, if any, expectations. Who is likely to attend Bible studies or similar small groups? Probably the 20% of the 20% of converts who stayed and actively engaged their faith.<sup>iv</sup> In other words, their sights aren't set on discipleship or discipling.

Here's a list of small group highlights:

- Targeted topics and audiences (some can be used for spiritual *formation*).
- Often encouraging and fun with plenty of fellowship and testimony opportunities.

- Shallow relationships, few expectations, and the freedom to *come and go* negate the relational, accountability, and correctional aspects of discipleship and discipling.
- Don't lend themselves to building a discipling culture.

**How Discipleship and Typical Small Groups Compare.** The following table contrasts one-to-one discipleship and small groups. The comparison suggests there are too many differences between them to expect effective small-group discipleship.

Discipleship Tenant	One-to-one Discipleship	Small Groups
Deep relationships	✓	Sporadic/personal
Accountability/Correction	✓	X
Culture-changing	✓	X
Training through teaching, modeling, and testing	✓	Ad-hoc at best
Creates a holistic Christian foundation	✓	X
Requires expectation setting & presence	✓	X

**Summary.** Authentic discipleship requires deep one-to-one relationships for confidentiality, accountability, and correction. They become pathways for building a holistic, standard Christian foundation from which all else forms in the convert or renewed believer. On the other hand, small groups tend to target individuals and topics. They set no expectations or require deep relationships. And they often represent finite opportunities for fellowship and comfort but limited spiritual growth—unsuitable for discipleship. Therefore, one-to-one discipleship and small groups are like “oil and water” and should be used for their intended purposes.

<sup>i</sup> Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1999).

<sup>ii</sup> Only about 18% of churchgoers engage in anything resembling discipleship (e.g., foundational mentoring or spiritual disciplines of charity, Bible study, fellowship, and accountability), according to Barna (<https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/> (last accessed March 11, 2024). And “fewer than 5% of churches in the US have a reproducing disciple-making culture.” (<https://crosswalkcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/National-Study-on-Disciple-Making-in-USA-Churches.docx.pdf> (last accessed March 11, 2024)).

<sup>iii</sup> <https://crosswalkcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/National-Study-on-Disciple-Making-in-USA-Churches.docx.pdf> (last accessed March 11, 2024).

<sup>iv</sup> At least 80% of people entering the Christian faith will leave it within several weeks if no one discipled them. And out of the mere 1-20% who stay, only 15-20% will actively engage the Faith and be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Put another way, no more than 40 out of 1,000 people attracted to Christianity will likely be fruitful and grow into something worthy of imitation by others without discipleship.