

being a **small group** leader

Richard Sweatman



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Being a Small Group Leader

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Introduction

Small groups (or home groups) shouldn't really work at all. We take ten to twelve flawed and sinful Christians, put them under the leadership of an equally flawed and sinful Christian leader, and get them to study the Bible—which is full of things that can be hard to understand or even controversial. On top of this we expect people to love and care for each other while sharing just how flawed and sinful they are. When you put it like this, small groups sound more like a formula for dysfunctionality, conflict and discouragement. They shouldn't really work at all.

But by God's kindness and the work of his Spirit, they do work. Despite the limitations, the small group activities of Bible study, prayer and relating together *do* grow people as Christians. Sure, there are sometimes people who seem to be spiritually treading water or drifting away; but on the whole most people in a group will have grown together as Christians over the course of a year. Somehow they will have become a bit more like Jesus.

Being a leader in this awkward set-up is both challenging and rewarding. It's *challenging* because it's hard work. Leading involves preparing studies, making phone calls and being concerned for people. Moreover, in leadership we come face to face with many of our own sins and weaknesses. But it's also *rewarding*. Even though we are flawed and sinful God does use us to grow his people. Most leaders can look back over a year in leadership and see how their group members have actually grown as Christians together.

But what makes someone a good small group leader? Is it enough to have the desire and availability? These things are obviously necessary (1 Timothy 3:1 talks about someone ‘aspiring’ to be an overseer), but the Bible has a lot more to say about what makes someone suited to leadership. There are lists of qualities, job descriptions and teaching about what leadership involves, and much of this can be applied to leading small groups. As I’ve trained and appointed small group leaders I’ve found it helpful to organize these qualities under five areas or headings. I’ve called them the ‘five core competencies’ of small group leading.

‘Competencies’ may seem like an odd choice of word at first, because we often use it synonymously with the word ‘skills’. But I actually mean competencies in a broader sense—that is, all the things about a person that make them an appropriate person for the job. Those things generally mean *more* than just their skills. For example, a ship’s captain may have all the training and seamanship skills needed, but if he is a drunkard, he’s not the one you want at the helm. As you’ll see in a moment, issues of personal character very much come within what I mean by ‘competence’.

And why ‘five’? Well, five seems about the right number; besides, any more and nobody can remember them. And it’s also five because from the Bible and my experience as a pastor these are the ‘core’ competencies—they are vital for leading. But it’s worth highlighting here and now that ‘competencies’ are about being capable and growing in each area—not about being perfect, or even outstanding for that matter. If we wait for people to reach perfection before they start leading, we’re going to have a lot of leaderless groups! If you are already leading then you will no doubt already have realized that you are not perfect. And sometimes that can have us question whether

we've got what it takes to keep going. As you read this book you will be encouraged to keep growing, to keep striving and to keep trusting God to grow his people through your ministry.

Listing these leadership qualities helps us to think about what leading involves, how we're going in these areas, and what goals we can set. It's also helpful for pastors as we think about appointing people for leadership.

So what are they? The five core competencies of leading small groups are:

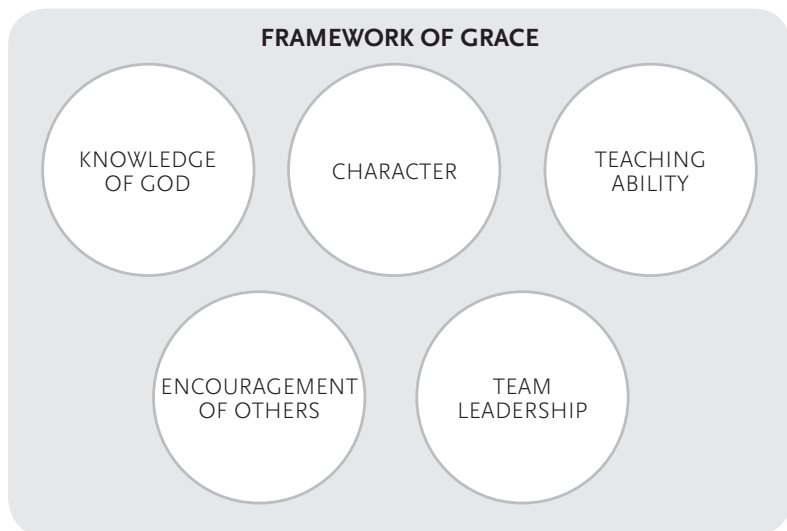
1. Knowledge of God
2. Character
3. Teaching ability
4. Encouragement of others
5. Team leadership

Hopefully, as we look at each competency you'll be encouraged to see that you're doing okay in some areas and you have room for growth in others. At the end of each chapter there will be some questions to help you reflect on what you've read and set some goals. I want reading this book to be a helpful and practical experience.

Before launching into the self-reflection and goal setting, one thing that's important to remember is God's grace. That's why in the diagram below the five core competencies sit in a 'framework of grace'. The Bible teaches that not only are we saved by grace, but everything to do with ministry (including small group leading) is about grace. Our ministries (whatever they are) are given to us by grace (1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 4:1) and whatever godliness or gifts we have are also by God's grace (2 Thess 1:3; Rom 12:6-8). Any ministry 'success' is by grace (1 Cor 3:5-7), and even ministry 'failure' is a kindness from God

that teaches us dependence on him (2 Cor 1:8-10). Remembering this will help us not to despair if we're struggling in some areas and not to be proud if we're doing well in others. Rather, we can be people who give thanks to God for everything and see every weakness as an opportunity for prayer.

Understanding grace should also drive us to be people of prayer for those in our small groups. *No matter how 'competent' we are as leaders, those we lead will not grow without the Holy Spirit being at work in them.* It is, in other words, *God* who gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6-7). So we must express this in our regular and faithful prayers for people throughout the week. All that follows in this book presumes this undergirding commitment on our part to prayer and to asking God to be at work. Indeed, our prayerfulness flows as a natural outworking of our *knowledge of God* as the sovereign ruler, and from our *character* as faithful and dependent leaders.



‘Growth Groups’

You might have noticed that so far in this book I’ve been referring to the groups we’re leading as ‘small groups’. Perhaps your church has another name for them, like ‘home groups’ or ‘connect groups’. But I’ve started off using the somewhat generic term ‘small groups’ because I think most church people will know the sort of thing I’m talking about.

Now perhaps it doesn’t matter what we call them, so long as there’s not confusion about what we mean. But on the other hand, it *can* matter, because what we *call* things often shapes our view of them and communicates what we think and believe about their nature and purpose.

If that’s the case, maybe ‘small group’ is actually a slightly ineffective name. It doesn’t communicate much about the group’s purpose—only its size (and it’s even a bit vague about that).

Now I don’t want to be overly prescriptive about it, but to signal that the sort of groups I am talking about have a goal and purpose, I’m going to call them ‘Growth Groups’ from this point on in the book. And I do that because I believe that our groups exist to help people *grow* in Christ and towards maturity in Christ over time. And also because it’s always good if groups grow as they work together to make new disciples of Christ and welcome new people into their group.

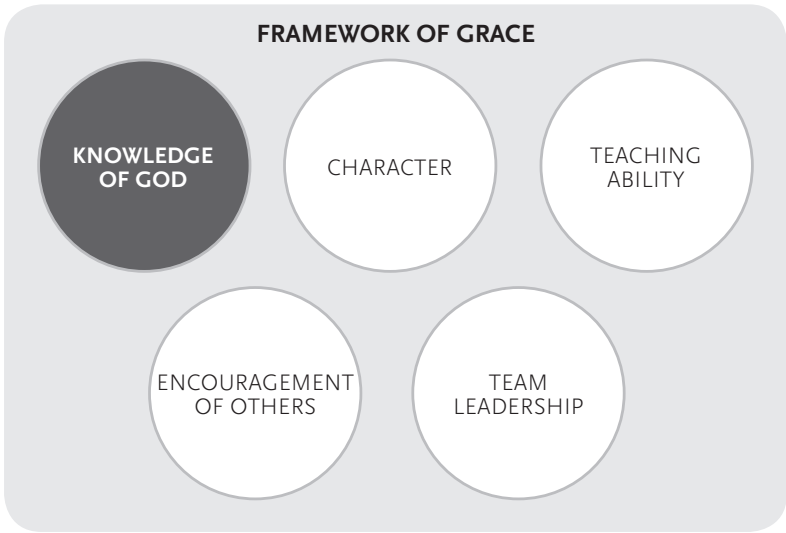
I’ll say a little more along the way about what a Growth Group is for. But I want to encourage you to think more deeply about this key question of the group’s *purpose*: what are you seeking to do when you get together? Your role as a leader is very much determined by the overarching

goal for your group: just where are you leading people as a leader? This is definitely something you need to wrestle with deeply... with your Bible open. To that end, I want to encourage you to make use of *The Small Group and the Vine*, a Growth Group leaders' training course that explores this issue in greater depth than I will be doing in this book.

Questions

- At first glance, what do you think about the 'five core competencies' of Growth Group leading?
- Why is it important to remember God's grace as we think about all this?
- How are you feeling about Growth Group leadership?

1. Knowledge of God



The first area of competency for Growth Group leaders is *knowledge of God*. From prison, Paul wrote about this to Timothy:

...the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for *I know whom I have believed*, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Tim 1:10-12)

You can see that Paul's knowledge of God helps him endure suffering and persevere in his ministry. Even though we might not end up in prison, the principle is the same for us: *knowing God* is at the heart of who we are and what we do.

But what does it mean to know God? Do we need to become

Bible experts or reach some new spiritual state of intimacy with God? A topic like this raises all sorts of questions. Fortunately, it's not too hard to explain.

The knowledge we're talking about can be summed up under four headings.

Relational knowledge

It's important as Christians and leaders that we don't just know *about* God; we must actually *know* God. Our knowledge must be part of a genuine relationship with him. It's like the difference between knowing the Prime Minister and knowing your friend—both kinds of knowledge involve information, but only one involves a personal relationship.

Thankfully, God takes the initiative in making himself known to us. It's only by grace that we come into a personal relationship with him. In fact, the Bible sometimes reverses the way we usually think about knowing God: "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God..." (Gal 4:9a).

Clearly we're not talking about a detached academic knowledge of God, but rather a warm and personal knowledge that's part of a genuine relationship. Knowledge like this means things like faith, trust, love and joy. It will flow on to prayer and a desire to know God better.

Scriptural knowledge

True knowledge of God will not only be relational, it will also be *scriptural*. The Bible is the way God makes himself known, so it's important that our knowledge of him comes from the Bible and fits with the Bible. You can find this theme everywhere, but Psalm 119 talks about this especially. The whole psalm is worth reading, but verses 129-132 give a good taste of the idea:

Your testimonies are wonderful;
therefore my souls keeps them.
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.
I open my mouth and pant,
because I long for your commandments.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as is your way with those who love your name.
(Ps 119:129-132)

The psalmist clearly loves God and longs to read and understand God's word to know him better.

You can see how knowing our Bibles well is not about being 'Bible experts' for the sake of it. It's part of how we continually grow in our knowledge of God. For Growth Group leaders this will mean some competency in being able to read and understand the Bible (this is often called *exegesis*). It will also mean at least a basic understanding of how the Bible fits together and makes up one coherent whole (this is often called *biblical theology*).

Thoughtful knowledge

Knowledge of God is not just about becoming familiar with the Bible. We are also called to *think* about God and his word. You can see this in the way the writer to the Hebrews challenges his readers:

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness,

since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

(Heb 5:11-14)

Basic and simple knowledge is good, but the writer wants them to learn and think and grow. So we want to have a deepening, *thoughtful* knowledge of God (this is sometimes called *doctrine*). It's about understanding God more and connecting ideas in the Bible. Growth Group leaders do not need to be tertiary trained experts, but they should have some competency in doctrine as part of their knowledge of God. Titus 1:9 says that the elder must “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught”.

So as we know God, we want to be thoughtful about the Bible and hold to the “trustworthy word as taught”.

Practical knowledge

According to the Bible, true knowledge of God will affect our lives; it will be *practical*. James says in his letter:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (Jas 1:22-25)

You can see from this passage how important it is that our knowledge of God from the Bible translates into action. Bible reading skills and doctrine don't mean much if they don't transform us—if our lives are more or less the same as everyone else in the world around us.

So knowledge of God must be practical. It will mean wrestling with how to live and making real changes to our thinking, our speech and our actions.

To sum up then, the sort of knowledge we're talking about is relational, scriptural, thoughtful and practical. It's a genuine and exciting knowledge of our great God and creator. It's actually something we'd want for everyone at church, whether or not they are in leadership.

Why it matters

Knowledge of God is great, and God is God and he deserves to be known, loved and worshipped! But why is it especially important for leaders? There are at least three reasons the Bible gives for this.

1. Leaders set an example

We will see in the next chapter how leaders set an example for people in their Christian character. The same is true for knowledge of God. Knowing God is essential for every Christian and so it's important that leaders live this out and model it to group members. Even if there were no other reasons for leaders to know God, this would be enough to make it a priority.

2. Leaders teach

A second reason leaders need to know God well is that leaders teach (I'll say more about this in chapter 3). Teaching involves the sharing of knowledge, so obviously leaders need to have some knowledge to share. Paul compares a leader to a worker with the Bible as his tool:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15)

To be effective teachers, leaders need to know the Bible and have sound doctrine.

3. Leaders protect

A third reason is that teachers need to protect the people they lead from false teaching. False teaching is a constant threat to Christians according to the Bible (e.g. Col 2:16-23; 2 Thess 2:1-3; 2 Tim 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2). Sometimes this is explained as Satan's work to ruin people's faith in Jesus (Rev 2:20-24). Into this hostile environment Jesus has provided teachers to help us stand firm (Eph 4:7-16). So a competent leader will know doctrine and the Bible well enough to be able to do this. Paul puts it this way in his letter to Titus:

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:9)

The leader with Bible knowledge and understanding (i.e. sound doctrine) will be able to recognize when people teach wrong ideas, and challenge them.

It takes some wisdom to know when an idea is wrong or dangerous and what sort of steps need to be taken. Thankfully, this wisdom is something that itself comes from knowing God better. The Bible also gives guidance about figuring out the difficulties of false teaching (e.g. 2 Tim 2:23-26; Titus 3:9-10). And God will have usually provided the church with more experienced pastors who are able to help in these tricky situations.

So to sum up: knowing God is crucial for leaders because they set an example, teach others and protect the people they are leading from false teaching. A leader who is competent and growing in this area will, under God, be a great blessing to the people he or she leads.

Before we look at practical ways to grow in this area, it's worth noting how connected this is to character. Knowing God changes our character, and a humble and godly character will lead us to want to know God more. There's a great verse that puts the two ideas together:

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.
Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself
and your hearers. (1 Tim 4:16)

Our life and doctrine really do matter—not just for ourselves, but for the people we lead and teach as well.

Growing in our knowledge of God

Hopefully this chapter has served as motivation to continue to grow in your knowledge and understanding of God. Here are some practical ways to do this.

1. Prayer

Prayer is a great place to start because it reminds us of God's grace. Knowledge of God is something that God gives us, and prayer reminds us of that. So the best thing to do is ask God to help us grow in our knowledge of him. Look at this great promise in James:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. (Jas 1:5)

I've always loved this verse because I constantly feel like I lack the wisdom to manage life, let alone lead other Christians. It has regularly encouraged me to pray to God and ask for wisdom.

2. Bible reading

There's no way around this. Knowing God better means reading our Bibles. Unfortunately, sometimes we don't read as much as we'd like to or know we should. I think the best way to grow in this is to figure out your theological convictions about Bible reading and establish some good habits that reflect those convictions. Let's look at both of these elements in turn.

A theological conviction about Bible reading is something that motivates you to read. Ideally it will be something that you can put in your own words that makes sense to you. There are many different reasons to read the Bible, but usually there'll be one or two that resonate deeply with us. I'm fairly logical and clinical by personality so a motivation that works for me is: "God has said that Bible reading is good for me, so I'm going to do it". You might find other theological ideas more motivating, such as our love of God or the work of the Spirit. The important thing is to find a theological motivation that you can put into your own words, believe and act on.

The second way to grow as a Bible reader is to establish some good habits. Here are 10 tips you can try:

1. **Read regularly.** Try to find times in the day that work for you. It's different for everyone.
2. **Start small.** Don't set goals that are unrealistic. Just get reading, even if that's only a few verses or a paragraph three or four days a week. As you build habits, the chances are that you'll start to read more and more.
3. **Pray before and after you read.** It's great to pray for God's help in understanding, and then pray that God would help you apply what you just read. You can pray even if you don't feel like you've understood everything. For example, you might pray: "Dear God, thank you that you were in control

of what was happening with the Israelites. Please help me to remember that you are in control even now.”

4. **Read big and small sections.** Sometimes it’s great to read just a few verses and think deeply about them. Sometimes it’s great to read large chunks and let the words and ideas wash over you. Both are good.
5. **Read with other people.** Try reading the Bible with friends or your spouse or family. Invite other people to encourage you in your Bible reading and ask you how you’re going.
6. **Keep track of your progress.** Most people find it encouraging to tick off chapters in a Bible reading plan (they are easy to find online).
7. **Try using different Bible reading guides.** There are guides from Matthias Media or the Good Book Company (see footnote 1 in chapter 2). You could also try making notes about what you’ve been reading. Some people even highlight verses in their Bibles and jot things in the margins.
8. **Try listening to an audio Bible.** Some people do this during their daily commute.
9. **Read even when you don’t feel like it.** Satan sometimes tricks us by getting us to think we need to be in ‘the right mood’ to read the Bible. This is getting things the wrong way around. Reading the Bible will help your mood, so don’t let Satan trick you—just get into it and read.
10. **Use a paper Bible.** It’s handy to have our Bible on our phone but there’s something about having the whole Bible in front of you. It helps us remember that every verse is part of a chapter, which is part of a book, which is part of the whole Bible, which is the unified message of God.

3. Theological reading

Good Christian books will help us grow in our knowledge of God. They don't do this by adding anything to the Bible—it's still the Bible alone that reveals God. Rather, good books help us understand the Bible better and get more out of it when we read. Many Christians can look back and see how they've been pushed along in their Christian maturity by good books.

I love books and reading so I need to be aware of my own personal bias, but I think reading is better than listening to sermons online. I find I am passive as a listener but active as a reader as I seek to understand and engage with what the author is saying. For me reading is harder work, but better value.

What if you're 'not a reader'? That's okay; some people naturally enjoy reading more than others. But it doesn't mean we don't read at all. Ideally, a desire to grow in maturity and serve the people we lead will spur us on to increase our understanding by reading some helpful Christian books.

If you're just starting out, you're best off taking on short books that are easy to read. I'd suggest setting a modest goal of reading two or three over the next twelve months. It might also be worth reading with someone else who can encourage you to keep going. Catch up with each other regularly to discuss a chapter or two and keep each other accountable to finish the book.

Here are some good books for anyone starting out in Christian book reading:

- Some children's resources could be a good start if reading is something you generally avoid. *The Big Picture Story Bible* by David Helm (Crossway), *The Gospel Story Bible* by Marty Machowski (New Growth Press) and *The Biggest Story* by Kevin de Young (Crossway) all show how the whole Bible

fits together as one big story. (You can pretend you're buying it for your kids or for kids' ministry.)

- *Gospel and Kingdom* by Graeme Goldsworthy (Paternoster Press). This is a biblical theology classic. It explains how nearly everything in the Bible has got to do with God's people living in God's place under God's rule.
- *God's Big Picture* by Vaughan Roberts (InterVarsity Press). Vaughan Roberts loved *Gospel and Kingdom* but wanted to teach the ideas even more simply and clearly to his congregation. This book came out of the teaching course he ran.
- *Know and Tell the Gospel* by John Chapman (Matthias Media). John Chapman was a giant among Australian Christians and left a huge legacy in excellent teaching of both evangelism and preaching. This book not only explains the gospel clearly but offers a lot of encouragement to explain it well to others.

If you enjoy reading then there are plenty more great Christian books to read. After a while you'll realize that there are different categories of Christian books. It's worth reading from each category and reading old books as well as new. Here's a basic list to get started (in addition to the ones listed above), but it's worth asking your pastor about extra ideas.

Biblical theology

- *According to Plan: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* by Graeme Goldsworthy (InterVarsity Press)

General doctrine

- *Big Truths for Young Hearts: Teaching and Learning the Greatness of God* by Bruce Ware (Crossway)
- *The Everlasting God* by DB Knox (Matthias Media)
- *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* by Bruce Milne (InterVarsity Press)

- *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* by JI Packer (Tyndale House)

Specific doctrines

- *The Cross of Christ* by John Stott (InterVarsity Press)
- *Knowing God* by JI Packer (InterVarsity Press)
- *Guidance and the Voice of God* by Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne (Matthias Media)
- *Prayer and the Voice of God* by Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne (Matthias Media)
- *God's Good Design* by Claire Smith (Matthias Media)
- *The Essence of the Reformation* by Kirsten Birkett (Matthias Media)

There are lots more great books I could suggest but I don't want to get carried away here. The point is that we read and read well.

4. Theological training

If you're up for it then some sort of theological training will help you grow in your knowledge of God. Correspondence courses can be a convenient way to do this—for example, the courses available from Moore College in Sydney. The first subject of the Moore College course is 'Introduction to the Bible', which many have found to be very helpful. You could also ask your pastor for recommendations.

Conclusion

So there you have four ways to grow in knowledge of God—a knowledge that is relational, scriptural, thoughtful and practical. But remember God's grace! He is the one who, by his Spirit, will bring about growth in us. Hopefully any further growth will lead to greater humility, not pride.

Questions

- Try to express the four ways of describing true knowledge of God in your own words (relational, scriptural, thoughtful and practical). What do you think of these? Do you naturally tend to emphasize one or two of these at the expense of others?
- Why is it important for leaders to be competent in their knowledge of God?
- What motivates you theologically in Bible reading?

- What practical tips did you find helpful? Can you make a plan to put them into practice?

- What Christian book would you like to read next?

- Write down some goals in the table below for growing in your knowledge of God. I've included an example.

Goal	Plan	Time period
Grow in my understanding of biblical theology.	Read <i>According to Plan</i> by Graeme Goldsworthy. Find a friend to read and discuss it with.	Aim to finish it in two months. Start today!