

## Splitting the Group

Splitting a Bible study group is one of the hardest aspects of group life. I've been involved in three attempts to split a group, one successful and two unsuccessful.

What often happens is that when a group grows in numbers a decision is made to split that group into two smaller groups. The one successful split was done on the basis of where people lived but it also involved coincidentally a good personality gel of one half of the split. Our group had grown to 22 members if everyone came and we split into a group of 12 and a group of 10. I was in the group of 12. We all lived fairly close to each other and the group of 10 lived close to each other too but in an area apart from us. Our 12 got on well with each other. The other 10 had some quirky individuals but liked each other well enough. There was no shortage of leaders because everyone could have a go at leading a study and most people took up that opportunity. After the split our 12 kept functioning as before and slowly started growing in numbers again. We missed the others but most people in our group regularly saw the people in the other group because they all went to the same church<sup>1</sup>. Our group was still going when I left four years later. I'm not sure what happened to the other group. I wasn't going to their church and didn't hear much about them. I don't know if the split was as successful for them as it was for us.

Of the unsuccessful splits, one group began with two leaders and 10 other members. Some members missed the other group so much that they gradually drifted back there, including one of the leaders and his wife. This put an extra burden on the one remaining leader who struggled at times. The group went well but stopped after 5 years and then most of the remaining people went back to the group they originally split from. I'm not sure how you judge the success or failure of a group. I don't think 5 years could be described as a failure but the fact that most people returned to the original group suggests it didn't really work out.

The other split involved a group that grew very quickly and made the split before settling in the new members. The new members were the ones that were moved to another group and they were not pleased about being moved. The original members carried on but felt guilty about the split. I don't know what happened to the people who were moved out.

There are lessons to be learnt from all this. Both halves of the split must have enough committed leaders and enough committed members. There needs to be enthusiasm for the split. If you split because you think the group is too big so you have to do something and there is reluctance to split, then it probably won't work. You need time to think about the implications of the split: what it will mean for the quality of teaching, what it will mean for the relationships between people and what it will do for the dynamics of the group.

When the split happens you need to remember that the old group is finished and you now have two new groups. Karen and Rod Morris in Leading Better Bible Studies (pages 142 to 145) have a section on called "Finishing well". The new group may not seem new because you may know all the people but things will be different: you will miss people from the other group, inter-personal relationships will be different, the meeting location may be different etc. It will be time to acknowledge that this is a new group. Celebrate the good times you had with the old group and look forward to the new possibilities in the new group without harping back to the way things were before.

One way to avoid the hassles of splitting or ending a group is to have a "sunset clause" when the group begins. This sets your expectations at the beginning and lessens the disappointment at the end. A convenient sunset is at the end of the year. New groups can start in the new year. Sometimes the same group of people will re-form at the beginning of the year so the idea of a sunset clause is ineffective for them.

A completely different take on all this comes from Larry Osborne who wrote a chapter in Sticky Church (chapter 15) called "Why Dividing Groups Is a Dumb Idea". He says "For decades it's been an unquestioned canon within the small group movement that healthy groups multiply by continually growing and splitting into new groups. Groups that stay together too long are considered stagnant. Those that fail to aggressively add new members are written off as uncommitted to the Great Commission. Any group that insists on remaining together gets tagged as selfish.

Admittedly, dividing to multiply is an idea that looks good on paper. . . . It offers the potential for unlimited kingdom expansion. . . . It forces new leaders to step up and take the reins. . . .

Except for pastors, staff members, and church leaders who are professionally responsible for the growth of the church, you'll find that hardly anyone thinks it's a good idea – especially those who are fortunate enough to find a group filled with significant relationships.

To most of them it makes no sense at all. After finally finding some people with whom they've closely connected, they don't want to split up and roll the relational dice once again.

It's too risky. It's painful. It's even a little bit cruel. . . .

It's simply that for many of them, their small group is the first time they've experienced the authentic and transparent relationships they've always been told Christians should have with one another. It's understandable they're reluctant to let it go. They know the odds of finding it right away in another group aren't too high. . . .

In much the same way, church members who repeatedly experience the death of their small group to start a new group begin to operate in a self-protective mode. They learn to keep relationships at a safe level – one that won't cause them too much hurt when the group disbands.”

Instead of splitting up groups Osborne suggests starting new groups for new people and training apprentice leaders to lead those new groups. Osborne is very careful about getting apprentice leaders to lead new groups. Everyone has to agree to the move: the minister, the Bible study leader and the apprentice leader. If anyone says no or not yet then it doesn't happen. He doesn't want people filling positions grudgingly or out of pressure or guilt.

So, do you split groups or let them get bigger? Which is more important, splitting the group or maintaining authentic and transparent relationships? Do you move new people into their own group with a specially trained leader? How do you train leaders? Do old leaders need training too? Why can't everybody in the Bible study group lead studies? The issue gets more involved when you think about splitting churches in order to plant new ones. Whatever decision you make it needs time and a lot of wisdom. Pray for help to get it right.

1. What I mean by church is that organisation you go to, usually on a Sunday, where you sing hymns or songs, someone reads from the Bible, someone preaches for about 30 mins, someone prays etc. – you get the idea. If “church” is a gathering of Christians (= *ekklesia*) then what we do in a Bible study group is also church but in common language it's not described that way. For the purpose of this document I will make the distinction by using “church” and “Bible study group” as completely different things.