

Are You Feeling "At Home" in Your Small Group?

Examine these four levels of fellowship with God and others to see where you stand.

Most of us love the feeling of being "at home"—which often has more to do with the people you are with than the place you are in. Likewise, we long to be part of a church community where we feel at home. We can put a lot of stock in this feeling, often to the point where we switch groups or churches frequently in search of it.

But what can we realistically expect from a small-group experience? When I've talked to people who have left a small group, many say they just didn't sense they were being "fed" in that group. Or they didn't sense the Lord's presence in the midst of that group. In some cases those assessments may have merit, but many are really seeking an experience or a feeling is not reasonable or spiritually healthy.

Aside from the roles that leadership and group dynamics play in small groups, there are important spiritual truths to consider when evaluating our group experience—and we have to work on discerning between perception and reality. Here are four ideas that may help you think about your commitment to your current group—four levels in which God's presence exists with us:

Level One

This is what some theologians call *omnipresence*. It means God is everywhere. He is present in all places at the same time. Not only that, you can't ever go to a place in this realm of understanding where his love and power are not constantly at work. Romans 8:38–39 says: "... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So, regardless of how you feel about your current small-group experience, your small group cannot get a way from God's love—no matter what!

Try this: To test this, consider a difficult situation you have experienced in group life and ask this question: Is God's love prohibited from transforming this situation? Biblically, the answer is always no. Every person and every group has God's love at work within them, and the potential for transformation is there, regardless of the current situation.

Level Two

The next level takes things a bit farther—it's here God makes his "home" with us. John 1:14 says: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Matthew 18:20 says: "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Whenever and wherever a group of believers gather, Jesus is in also there; he is "at home" with us. But we still have to invite him in. Revelation 3:20 says: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." Most agree this verse is referring more to fellowship with Jesus than salvation. So fellowship with God—both individually and as a group—is dependent on us, as much as Jesus.

Sadly, even though Jesus is in the neighborhood, some small groups still haven't opened the door to welcome him into their group fellowship. And that may be one of the factors that leads some to conclude they just don't feel "at home" in their current small group.

Try this: Take a minute to try the driveway test. If you don't feel that "close to home" excitement when you pull into the driveway of where your small group meets, or if you dread being with your small-group family, then it's likely you are not inviting Jesus into your gathering. Yes, Jesus' presence may bring about conviction of sin or tension about unresolved relational issues, but the presence of a major dysfunction usually means that his presence and power are not manifest in the fellowship of your group. In other words, when a small group gathers together in the presence of Jesus, very few people will dread the encounter.

Level Three

This is when a group moves toward unity in welcoming Jesus into their fellowship. Not only does Jesus move into the neighborhood, the group feels as much at home with Jesus as he does with us. That doesn't mean that all problems and consequences of our fallen-ness are gone, but we are moving toward healthy Christian community.

But wait, there's more! When you do finally let Jesus move in, it's not just the two of you; he has a family that comes home with him. That family is the Church. It's interesting that John 1:14 doesn't say Jesus made his home just with you. He made his home with us. So being at home with God means being at home with his people, too. It's a package deal. And, in fact, being at home with God is inseparable from being at home with his people. John wrote about this in 1 John 4:20–21: "If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their Christian brothers and sisters."

Try This: If you struggle to connect or make deeper friendships with the people of your group, then consider this. When you first move into a new physical home, do you feel "at home" right away? Probably not. Usually it takes some time living there before that happens. Likewise, what causes us to not feel at home with God and others? Mostly it's a lack of time just "living" there. Sometimes it's just as simple as disciplining yourself to be together with God and others more of the time. It's not likely you will feel connected if you are only meeting these people during group gatherings. You need to spend time together outside of a weekly meeting. Once you commit the time and effort to make deeper relationships, there's a good chance the group will become a home for you.

Level Four

This is God and us at home together. This is what we think of as God's heavenly presence—God's original intention for the Garden of Eden. It will be all God, all the time, without all the sinful distractions and second guessing and weirdness that almost every relational interaction in this world has the potential to create.

We won't experience this level of connection with God while treading this fallen world, but we do know that our time on earth prepares us for the heavenly presence of God. Still, we do get special glimpses of it occasionally. Sometimes God pulls back the curtain and gives us a mountain-top

experience. And while these are wonderful, we shouldn't live for them. Even more, we shouldn't judge the quality of our small group in light of the quality of those experiences.

Try This: Remember that in Matthew 17, Peter wanted to build shelters on the Mount of Transfiguration to preserve and extend his mountaintop experience, but that was not God's plan. The next time your group has an experience where God pulls back the curtain and gives you a special glimpse of his glory, take time to thank God for that privilege—even allow yourself a way to recall the experience as time goes forward. But in the same breath that you celebrate it, remember that *all* of our life in community with God and others is designed to get us ready for heavenly community.

Our "home" is not just in the mountaintop experiences. Our home is in all four levels of God's presence with us. It doesn't matter if we share that community with people who drain us or energize us, agree with us or disagree with us—when you are together with God and his people, you are closer to home than any place on earth.

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