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Book Review: Leading Small Groups with Purpose: Everything You Need to Lead a Healthy Group by Steve Gladen

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Steve Gladen, *Leading Small Groups with Purpose: Everything You Need to Lead a Healthy Group*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012. 232 pp, \$19.99.

Reviewed by Robert L. Turner, Ph.D., Teaching Pastor, Apex Community Church, Kettering, Ohio.

Few in Christian leadership would disagree that Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, has contoured and shaped much of American ecclesiology. The publication in the mid-nineties of *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren virtually created a cottage industry of conferences and numerous reorganizations of many local churches' governance and philosophy of ministry. What is particularly influential within Saddleback's local ministry context is their expansive network of 3,500 small groups overseen by Steve Gladen. From his thirteen years of experience, Gladen has recently written an accessible book entitled, *Leading Small Groups with Purpose: Everything You Need to Lead a Healthy Group* (from here on referred to as LSGP). The following review will respectfully address strengths, questions, and concerns regarding Gladen's important contribution to the growing field of small group ministry.

127

It is evident that Gladen seeks to de-mystify what it means practically to lead a small group. Toward that end, this book accomplishes that purpose admirably. Within these pages are numerous suggestions that cover the gamut of small group ministry that serves both to introduce the praxis of small groups to the novice and provides an objective refresher to the veteran. The conceptual framework that Gladen utilizes to communicate these practices is by organizing the crux of the book around the five purposes of fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship. Within each of those purposes are action items that are simple ("Crawl"), intermediate ("Walk"), and difficult ("Run"). This earthy perspective of leading small groups provides readers with an understanding that is developmental in nature but yet communicated in a way that is overtly pastoral.

The explicit pragmatism (which is not necessarily a criticism) that is a hallmark of the Saddleback ministry philosophy created an expectation from this reviewer of a book that would plunge straight away into actions with no theological or philosophical attachments. It was a pleasure to be misguided in some of those expectations by Gladen's immediate emphasis on character issues within small group leaders themselves. Every Christian leader, not just small group leaders, should heed these words: "The fundamental issue that determines the extent to which God can bless your leadership is your heart. If you and I are honest with ourselves and with God, it will not take us very long to identify areas of our hearts

and lives that are divided, self-centered, and generally not honoring to God. If we leave our hearts unmanaged, they will eventually be our downfall” (32).

The primacy of this leadership from the heart is operating from a leader’s own relationship with Christ. Gladen asserts that “if you have that, everything you do will flow from that relationship, and you will show your group members how to worship God rather than merely telling them how” (109). It has long been voiced within leadership circles that self-leadership is the most important and difficult leadership, and Gladen’s immediate emphasis on this is helpful and much needed.

Anyone who has led groups for a period of time would attest that discerning the overall health of the group or team can be difficult. The default diagnostics of many churches and organizations tend to measure the simple output or production of the group’s goals. Gladen makes a cogent remark when he states that “churches measure by attendance because it is easy, but is that right? It’s much harder to measure a work of grace in someone’s life or discern whether a man is a better husband this week than he was last week. These type of measurements are what we call the **soft measurements** (emphasis mine) of discipleship, but they are the most important” (74).

Contained within the pages of LSGP are two tools used by Gladen to capture and measure these “soft measurements.” They are called the *Spiritual Health Assessment* and the *Spiritual Health Plan*, and both use the five purposes (fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship) as the standards of measurement. Gladen is careful to exhort the reader that he or she does not have to use these exact instruments, but this reviewer found them useful and needed for anyone who desires more objectivity toward the health and progress of individuals and the group as a whole.

While reading through LSGP, three questions arose within this reviewer. This first question is: *What does the full extension of church discipline look like within Gladen’s small group ministry philosophy?* If individuals in a small group are being exhorted to grow in conformity to Christ, and transparency is highly valued, sinfulness inevitably comes to the surface. Toward that end Gladen refers twice to Matthew 18:15–17 as a guide to “conflict resolution” (102, 211). These words spoken by our Lord are not simply for the purpose of resolving conflict as they are a means to resolve sin and foster repentance! Curiously, LSGP leaves out the difficult but possible conclusion of exclusion of a member from the small group that is explicit in verse 17. A small group network of Saddleback’s size is bound to have many instances of members who are recalcitrant and therefore dangerous to the spiritual health of the rest of the group. Commentary on how Saddleback

Turner: Book Review: *Leading Small Groups with Purpose: Everything You Need* walks through this command of treating unrepentant small group members is necessary and needed.

Gladden believes there are “three essentials” in leading a small group: with heart; with compassion; and with motivation (37–38). These three attributes are indeed important, but is there a reason for the absence of “with *competence*?” It was unclear to this reviewer if Gladden uses a baseline expectation on the teaching of competence of small group leaders. This is not to say that small group leaders are to be thoroughly trained expositors of Scripture, but if learning those Scriptures is a high value within the practice of small groups, then should not a level of competence be encouraged (James 3:1)?

Gladden also continually emphasizes the need for small group members to deeply minister to the needs of each other, and this reviewer wholeheartedly agrees. The question must still be asked, “At what point does a small group encourage a member to seek outside help or counsel?” The complexity of our fleshly struggles discourages a “one size fits all” approach to the care of persons, but are there general principles or practices that guide Saddleback small groups toward the referral of struggling members to “professional” help such as counselors or those within the medical community? If Saddleback utilizes certain principles and practices for this difficult facet of small group life, it would have been informative for many practitioners of this popular ministry philosophy.

129

Practical ideas for leading and assessing small groups are the clear strength of *LSGP*. Unfortunately, this strength causes significant concerns for this reviewer. The litany of practicalities can unintentionally cause a reader of *LSGP* to surmise that instituting behavioral strategies will equate to a successful small group. This is surely not Gladden’s intent, and to his credit, he does address the importance of trusting God in leading small groups. The problem is that intention is buried by the book’s overall tone, which is fairly mechanical and does not give what this reviewer feels as sufficient attention to human complexity and spiritual maturity.

It is difficult in a review such as this one to consider or “look past” phrases that could be purely semantic in nature, but the first section of *LSGP* entitled “Before You Begin Your Group,” contains concepts that concern this reviewer. This concern can be articulated in a general way as a propensity for *LSGP* to speak in very humanistic terms with a thin layer of theological gloss. An example of this is Gladden’s exhortation to apprehensive small group leaders, “Look at it this way. God believes in you so much that he entrusted to you his most valuable possessions on this planet—people” (36). A few pages earlier Gladden states candidly that “we don’t have to be qualified; we just have to have God on our side. If he has called you to lead a small group, then he will give you the ability to do so” (28). These

statements have kernels of truth (i.e. the value of people, God's enablement), but they smack of the language of human potential instead of our humanity "in Christ."

It is a deep conviction of this reviewer that we cannot grasp our need for community outside of our union with Christ. This union with Christ (Rom 6:4–14) is an implication of the triune nature of God, which is community in its most glorious and redemptive form (John 5:18–24). This triune relationship was so important to Jesus that He prayed that it would imbue the communal lives of future believers (John 17:20–26). Gladen, in a quick paragraph, does mention the importance of understanding our identity in Christ but fails to teach us *how* to understand it. Understanding our union with Christ is not only our means of understanding community, but it also defines our goal of being in community—conformity to Christ (Col 1:28). Within the pages of LSGP an emphasis on this important and foundational doctrine is marginalized at best, absent at worst.

130

Though struggling with redundancy and at times written in a disjointed fashion, *Leading Small Groups with Purpose* will be a welcome addition to many who desire a "nuts and bolts" treatment of small group leadership. It takes a variety of methods to cultivate and maintain a healthy culture within a small group, and for that Steve Gladen serves us well. Unfortunately, this book lacks a strong Christological focus and weighs too heavily on the scales of human behavior. The quality of Gladen's work would have been stronger if he had emphasized more on the head (cognitive, theological) and heart (affective) of small group leadership. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* and Jim Wilhoit's *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* are two volumes that can easily supplement for the weaknesses found in *Leading Small Groups with Purpose*.

Kenneth A. Matthews and M. Sydney Park, *The Post-Racial Church: A Biblical Framework for Multiethnic Reconciliation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011, 280 pp., \$19.99.

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Kenneth A. Matthews did his Ph.D. studies at the University of Michigan. He serves as professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School where he teaches Old Testament studies and biblical interpretation. His previous publications include *The Paleo-Hebrew Leviticus Scroll, Genesis* (The New American Commentary), and *Leviticus: Holy God, Holy People*.

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