**Through the Eyes of Heaven:**

**Does "Talking It Through to Find Peace" bring Shalom?**

By Jim Wilder and Ed Khouri

*For your heart will always pursue what you value as your treasure.*

 — Matthew 6:21*,* *The Passion Translation*

Life experiences and relationships shape us. For those who follow Jesus, it matters how we look at both. If you and I don't know how to shepherd our thoughts about our circumstances and interactions with others, the sense of who we are and what we need easily becomes distorted. Those who care about spiritual transformation have three big questions to answer:

1. Do we believe in talking through problems and pain to find peace?
2. Would we rather live with earth's eyes or heaven's eyes?
3. Are we part of a small group community that can help guide us away from our distorted views and toward God's heavenly perspective when things are difficult?

**Talking our way to transformation and identity?**

Unfortunately, many who design, lead and participate in small groups have learned to live within their own distortions. We spend a lot of our time in small groups connecting with the inaccurate images of others, trying to *talk things through to find "peace."* When groups are designed around such conversations, we see ourselves and other group members inaccurately through earth's eyes. Beyond our small groups, these distortions also govern how we see and interact with others, reflecting a false impression of what we need. Trying to encourage and counsel one another toward "peace," we relate as if our false images and ideas are genuine.

The truth is, interactions like these magnify that we have lost — or perhaps never found — an honest understanding of our true identity and needs, not to mention the identity and needs of others. Only when we understand God's design for our lives, attachments, and identity will we perceive the great opportunity small groups afford us to join God in His transformational work. His goal? To grow us into the new identity we've received in Christ until we fully reflect Him face-to-face.

**Small group dynamics reflect the things we value most**

Christ-centered gatherings and interactions expose how we see ourselves and others in our relationship with God. Our conversations and actions reveal our hearts, foundations, and what we treasure. Is our perspective based on earthly or heavenly insight — fear or grace? Scripture tells us, "For the overflow of what has been stored in your heart will be seen by your fruit and will be heard in your words" (Lk 6:45 TPT). The conversations we have, as well as our actions, reveal our hearts and what we value most. Either way, our foundation is exposed.

* Are we driven by the absence of grace, peace, and God's presence? …or…
* Are we consumed by the abundance of God's grace, peace, and the pursuit of Him?

**The Foundation of Fear**

God designed our Spirit and brain to respond to grace. He created us with the need to see ourselves through those eyes! From the moment we're born, we're looking for someone to reflect our value and worth as "special and favorite" back to us. The question is: will we find it?

Sadly, many of us grow up in homes where grace is absent or weak. We don't see anyone that way — especially not ourselves. Because we've never experienced the kind of grace that transforms how we see ourselves and others, it is a mystery to us. Our need to see ourselves and others through God's eyes remains unmet. This lack of grace has two tragic consequences.

First, in the absence of grace, fear remains our spiritual and neurological default system. Spiritually, we learn from Hebrews 2:15 that "bondage to fear" is the natural state of all humans apart from God. We are born with it, which drives our behaviors until it is removed in Christ. John tells us that "God is love" and that "perfect (mature) love drives out fear" (I Jn 4:14-18 NIV). Only when we connect with God and experience His love interactively can our in-born foundation of fear be displaced. In the same way, repeated, grace-filled interactions with God's loving, mature people replace fear as our dominant motivation.

Second, the absence of genuine grace drives us to find alternatives. If we're not special and favorite simply because we exist, what will make us feel as if we are? What can we do? To whom can we connect for a sense of worth? How do we get others to treat us as special and favorite?

In the hot pursuit of grace substitutes, we may pursue four primary sources of artificial grace. The sense of special and favorite they leave us with is temporary, at best. We call these the 4 Deadly Ps, and they include:

* Pleasing Others
* Performing for Others
* Pain (avoiding things that hurt)
* Pleasure (pursuing things that feel good)

Without grace, a fear-driven pursuit of the 4 Ps motivates our human interactions and behaviors. These motivations impact the ways we connect — or don't connect — with God. They also strongly influence how we see and interact with others. These lurk in the background, often deep below our level of consciousness, but tend to govern life stealthfully.

Lacking grace, we cannot see people through God's heart. We only see them as people who can either help meet my 4 P needs — or not. For instance, we may ask questions like,

* Will this person's approval matter enough to me, and is performing for them worth it?
* How hard should I try? What will they think of me?
* Are they a person who will induce pain in me – or help alleviate it?
* What kinds of things should I do and say? How do I behave when I'm with them?
* What happens if I disappoint this person – and what will I feel?

To meet our 4 P need, we create an "avatar" to represent us. My avatar is a picture of how I *want* others to see me. It isn't real — it is a false identity. This image I project is often built around my strengths to hide weaknesses and the parts of me that others might find less acceptable. My avatar is produced in response to fear — seeking to maximize the possibility of meeting my needs for the 4 Ps. My heart — the one Jesus wants to know — is buried deep inside.

**Therapy-based flaws of *talking our way to "peace"***

The way we design small groups must consider our struggles with fear, the 4 Ps, and avatars. We must guard against tendencies to settle for false, fear-based motivations and behaviors. This tendency multiplies when we borrow concepts from secular group therapy.

"*Talking it through*" is an almost universally accepted solution (in Western culture) for the things that upset us about others. Typically, there are a couple of objectives behind the practice:

1. to help participants express intense emotions for which they are affirmed or rewarded by the therapist and group members
2. to "get honest" about deep levels of pain and shame

To get the big picture, let's explore the causes and shortcomings of some specific approaches and whether they are effective for finding peace and building a spiritual small group community.

**Fear-based Gatherings**

In the world of avatars, we tend to judge others by appearances. We are not used to seeing others through the eyes of grace as God does. The obvious externals make it easy for us to judge each other. Characterizing one another according to problems, pain, malfunctions, and things that annoy us the most, we become blind to grace and guided by a fear-based identity. When we look in the mirror or at others' reflections therein, you and I miss God's heart.

What lies behind the fears and avatars driving our behavior? Approval, performance, minimizing pain, or maximizing pleasure. Others who function primarily in fear will pursue the same false prize. We may even have responded to an altar call and have a "salvation experience." But our pursuit of what is fake continues until God displaces the fear in our lives through shared, grace-filled experiences with Him and others.

Christian small groups that insist upon talking through pain, problems, distress, and upsetting moments to find "peace" create playgrounds for avatars and fear-based individuals to seek their fortune together. The common pursuit of the 4 Ps drive conversation, interactions, and behaviors. Instead of sharing grace and growing into His image, we create the conditions to perfect and reinforce our avatars. It does not reflect well on anyone.

Likely, this reflects the subtle influence secular group therapy has had on Western Culture — including the Church. Unfortunately, in heaven's eyes, this is flawed.

# Why do we lack peace when hurt or upset?

When what people say about us — or how we are treated — does not fit who we believe we are, we feel hurt and upset. It feels as if our motives, behavior, intentions, capacities, status, or image are somehow misrepresented. In short, *talking it through* is our attempt to restore our image to how we want our identity seen through the eyes of others — even though most of us know that how we want to be seen is not perfectly accurate. We want to make ourselves understood on our own terms.

For spiritually alive people, as would be the case with Christians, there is an additional level of distortion to overcome. Sometimes we see things through the eyes of earth and sometimes through the eyes of heaven. We have an old self that is dying and a new self that is sort of not yet visible. Still, the Bible tells us that we should no longer identify one another according to the flesh but according to the spirit. "*Therefore, from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer"* (2 Cor 5:16 NASB).

Clearly, our flesh is the part of us that is upset and insists *on talking it through*. It always sees through the eyes of earth and demands to be understood by others. To the flesh, “understanding” means that others feel just as distressed as we are about people and upsetting situations. It demands that others agree with our eyes of earth perspectives and grows trust with those whose fleshly perspective reinforces our own. In this way, sharing compatible flesh and seeing life through the eyes of earth together become the basis for our relationships. Our flesh will view others who do not share our perspectives with great distrust. It rejects those who see us through the eyes of heaven as new creations in Christ because these dynamics don’t share the narrative of our flesh. Can two people –united by the flesh, the eyes of earth, and the rejection of the eyes of heaven – live in the Spirit?

We are directly told in Hebrews 12:2 not to look at people or our pain through the eyes of the earth (the natural way). We "*look away from the natural realm and focus our attention and expectation onto Jesus who birthed faith within us and who leads us forward into faith's perfection. His example is this: Because his heart was focused on the joy of knowing that you would be his, he endured the agony of the cross and conquered its humiliation, and now sits exalted at the right hand of the throne of God!*" (TPT). In this text, we see that the upset caused by pain is made peaceful by looking away from the natural realm rather than fully exploring it and *talking it through*.

An accurate understanding of who we are through the earth’s eyes will still not see the truth about who we are eternally. Second Corinthians 5:17 explains: "*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come*" (NASB).

Just as the misrepresentation of our identity causes us to lose our peace, exploring who we are according to the flesh blocks peace. Should we fully explore all the distortions that steal our peace before looking for the Truth? If who we are as spiritual people is revealed by the Spirit of peace — our referee — shouldn’t we find peace first (not as the world gives) and then speak to one another?

If our brains cannot quiet themselves — to return to joy from the six unpleasant emotions and stay quiet in the presence of others — we will need practice. Training happens when people who can keep their peace come to our rescue while our brains are agitated. Speaking while we are still agitated to a stronger, peaceful brain teaches us to find peace. These training sessions are like having a tow truck pull our car out of a ditch. But if, after ten years, we hire a tow truck to haul our car everywhere we want to go, we are not learning to drive.

In the same way, if we continue speaking without peace and without finding peace from the Spirit *first*, we are violating what God tells us. Our words should reflect the wisdom from above that we read in James 3:17-18 ESV is peaceable. "*But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace*.” Peaceful wisdom flows from spiritual vision and seeing one another with the eyes of heaven.

To get the big picture, let's explore the cause and shortcomings of some of the specific therapeutic approaches and whether they are effective for finding God's peace and building a spiritual, small group community.

# Shortcomings of getting our peace from others

At the core of *talking it through* is the goal of reaching peace by having someone understand why we are upset. We want to keep talking to get our version of reality validated or justified. This often takes the form of getting my peace from the person who upset me. When *talking it through* does not lead to peace and feelings of being understood by the person we feel upset us, we turn to our allies to find our peace. Reaching peace through my group of allies requires discussing the details of who upset me and why.

We will talk without peace regardless of who we are telling about our upset. Our pain spreads to a new person — the listener. We keep talking until the listener shares our upset and brings us peace. Those are somewhat opposite expectations. Peace is often poorly reached. Frequently, others do not see things the way the hurt or upset person does. Even when *talking it through* succeeds, the peace we receive doesn't last long or withstand the next occurrence of the same problem.

God flat-out tells his people not to get their peace from others and not to speak while they lack peace. Talking without peace is a violation of Colossians 3:15 AMPC, which tells us that peace should be the referee (βραβεύω) that stops our interactions when peace is missing. We talk when we have peace. We stop talking when we don't have peace. *Talking it through* is all about talking while we lack peace. Only when we are first validated and comforted by the peace of God's perspective are we ready to talk through hard things.

# Shortcomings of seeking agitation as a good thing

When God's will is not done on earth, we hurt, creation groans, and pain is felt in heaven. Although the popular theologian Eric Clapton proclaims there are no tears in heaven, this is not the case. St. John tells us of his visit to heaven. "*Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne*. *Then I began to weep greatly* *and one of the elders said to me, 'Stop weeping; behold* …'" (Rev 5:4-5).

Although in heaven, John saw painful things through the eyes of earth. An elder needed to help him see things through the eyes of heaven. While John saw things through the earth’s eyes, he was distressed and agitated. When he saw the same painful truth through heaven’s eyes, he had shalom with his pain. Seen through the eyes of earth, pain becomes agitating. Seen through heaven’s eyes, pain becomes shalom, and the agitation disappears. Peace does not mean it hurts any less or that we become indifferent.

The brain’s amygdala is very prominent when we are using the eyes of earth. People who have been ignored by family, friends, and communities with weak attachments — oblivious to the importance of connecting with others — or experienced predatory behavior from family and neighbors have seen calmly cold eyes. Some of these cold people are sociopaths while others are simply having sociopathic moments as they seek to win control over children, family, and friends. They are really calm perpetrators who are operating in intelligent enemy mode. If we could scan these calm predators to measure their level of physiological arousal, their nervous system would appear to be calm and undisturbed. The amygdala of their target, however, is anything but calm. The target correctly perceives the predator’s calm reactions to their terror and suffering as uncaring with evil intent. So, when someone later approaches with genuine peace, the eyes of earth amygdala mistakenly calculates that "evil is headed my way.” Our amygdala and the eyes of earth cannot tell the difference between this cold and indifferent response to their pain and the peacefulness of shalom.[[1]](#footnote-1)

From the eyes of the earth perspective, if people do not get upset, they do not care. Their amygdala cannot tell the difference between someone who is peacefully caring and the seeming emotional indifference of (simple or intelligent) [enemy mode states](https://lifemodelworks.org/escaping-enemy-mode/). Even God seems unloving because God does not get agitated and immediately stop the world to do something about things that hurt us. For many people looking through the eyes of earth, God's peace (seeing through the eyes of heaven) appears cold and indifferent to their pain. They conclude God does not care.

Through earth’s eyes, the amygdala considers it a good sign when people get upset. Upset people must care. This reaction brings to light a third form of enemy mode, "stupid enemy mode." People in stupid enemy mode become very upset, often about something small. Then, they find allies in others who become upset about the same kinds of things. Agitated people tolerate stupid enemy mode. Sharing painful stories and watching who gets upset tests for "safer" people who share our agitation. The solution is to increase the intensity and try to get others upset. The eyes of earth now seek to "share" pain with the people they can upset. They *talk it through* together, sharing that upset as a way to attach to what the amygdala views as “good people.”

But the agitation test has a huge downside to finding good people. *Talking it through* means, we must spread our lack of peace — eyes of earth perspective — to others and require them to use their eyes of earth perspective in return. A shared lack of peace becomes how we feel loved and understood. However, after a while, the amygdala of our listeners will begin to see us as "bad" and feel targeted by our desire to see them upset. People do not like feeling upset. They do not appreciate their care and comfort being tested by intentional efforts to bring them distress. People develop defenses and an aversion to those who keep bringing upset their way. Instead of creating a secure attachment and a peaceful identity, this produces disorganized attachment.

The eyes of earth contaminate attachment to good people by spreading agitation, distress, and upset from one good person to another. Talking things through, they upset each other, so the person looking to be understood brings agitation instead of life. This lowers joy.

Through the eyes of heaven, still waters run deep. Because He deeply cares and understands, God shares shalom with the pain. To others, it may appear as cool indifference, but God builds community by passing His shalom — passing the peace. Attachment arises by caring so deeply that we will never leave, regardless of how bad things feel.

# Shortcomings of developing intimacy and attachment by sharing wounds and pain

Getting to know each other by *talking things through* is often used in Christian circles to form spiritual community. We get to know each other by discussing as many details as possible about who we are in the natural world. This works to some extent.

It is not uncommon for people to share what is commonly called their "triggers" after sermons and interactions. People often find others they trust and share what upset them about events, services, and interpersonal exchanges — including their fears about how they might have been perceived. Doing so collects old injuries and wounds — saving them for later conversations. Imagined and potential hurts add to the list. Later, these upsetting thoughts are *talked through* by friends. This sharing establishes the wounds we carry in the flesh as the path to closer relationships in a spiritual community.

However, in many situations, sharing our painful stories obscures who we are to the fellowship cloud of witnesses around us. This cloud of spiritual witnesses sees us clearly and understands our true identities. True identity is not found in who we have been until now or in what things have hurt us. "Would you be the same if I saw you in heaven?" asks the theologian Clapton. *Talking through* the past damage done to our identities is not the path to life in the Spirit.

In Hebrews 12:1-2a we are given specific instructions to throw off — cast aside — anything that hinders and entangles us. It warns against gathering our painful memories to share. As noted in The Passion Translation, *"get rid of every arrow tip in us. . . The implication is carrying an arrow tip inside, a wound that weighs us down and keeps us from running the race with freedom."*

Instead of casting them aside, we pile up our collection of wounds. Yet, the passage reads so clearly: "As for us, we have all of these great witnesses who encircle us like clouds. So we must let go of every wound that has pierced us and the sin that so easily trips us up. Then we can run life's marathon with passion and determination, for the path is marked out before us. We look away from the natural realm and focus our attention and expectation on Jesus who birthed faith within us and leads us forward into faith's perfection" (Heb 12:1-2a TPT).

The picture here is that Jesus "*endured the agony of the cross and conquered its humiliation.*" The cloud of witnesses has also lived through life's pain and has a new perspective. They did so by looking away from the natural realm and casting away every wound that pierced them. Those old, embedded arrowheads leave festering wounds along with sin that easily entangles us, weighs us down, and drains our capacity for life and joy. Looking away is not denial of the pain or injury as we will examine later.

How, then, can we build spiritual community — and the capacity to stay connected to God and others — by collecting and sharing every wound that irritates our daily lives? Painful relationships form around the wrong identities for everyone when we try *talking it through* without peace instead of using our spiritual eyes to see God and the great cloud of witnesses.

Nowhere is that mistaken approach more painfully obvious than when we need to feel special. Being seen as special is what biblical language means by receiving "grace." We can seek to be special through the eyes of earth or the eyes of heaven. Depending on what we seek, we will look quite different.

A growing trend in Christian youth is to fully identify with their wounds and see their pain as their true selves. When that happens, their bleeding identity feels invalidated by the possibility of peace. With the eyes of earth, they grip their image even tighter. Wounded, they are searching for compassion in an enemy mode world. Tragically, the communities they form are as fragile as their wounded identities. Sharing distress is the best they know without the eyes of heaven.

# Shortcomings of enveloping our identities in sticky sin to build spiritual community

Our perception of reality is skewed by all the wounds and hurts we experience — whether they result from our sin or someone else's. Throughout every life, Satan is behind some things that hurt us. What are those sins that so easily pierce us — keeping us from freedom and resilience? Instead of focusing on what is wrong and talking about what has been done to us, we must look to Jesus to find peace. Through heavenly eyes, Jesus and his cloud of witnesses can clearly see these areas of sin grow.

Looking at wounds with the eyes of earth as the basis for our relationships helps keep us stuck in sin and its pain. With earthly eyes, we spread the infection of the enemy's work to our whole group. The wounds become "infected," reducing our community's peace, joy, and attachment love. Let's consider some of these sins.

* **Valuing low joy instead of despising shame**: Jesus focused on the value of the relationships and the joy set before him during his suffering. When we set our attention on every earthly perception that lowers our joy, we give great value to our agitation. When we only see through the eyes of earth, we become agitated. Yes, it is very painful. No one ever claimed that Jesus' betrayal and death didn't hurt. But was he agitated or peaceful? By allowing peace to be our referee and seeing with heaven’s eyes, we share peace instead of spreading agitated pain that lowers joy.
* **Unforgiveness**: Earth's eyes fail to forgive because they insist that the offender (as we see them) is responsible for our pain. The eyes of heaven see that those who hurt us are not their true selves. Jesus points out that if we judge others by earth's eyes, God will judge us the same way. Matthew7:2 NIV tells us, "*For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you*." God will do the same for us if we hold people's flesh against them (Matt 6:15).
* **Bitterness**: Seeing others through earth’s eyes prevents forgiveness and builds bitterness when similar injuries come our way. Does that bitterness easily stick to us? Peter says in Acts 8:23 NASB, "*For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity*." Iniquity refers to the deformities caused by all those arrowheads we allow to remain embedded in our flesh. How does bitterness cause us to speak? Paul says in Romans 3:14 KJV, "*whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness*." Paul does not tell the church to *talk it through* but instead tells the Ephesians, "*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice*" (Eph 4:31 ESV). These wounds and subsequent sins perpetuate within those who do not use the eyes of heaven. This kind of sin not only continues to injure us, but it also injures others when we talk without peace. Hebrews 12:15 AMP instructs, "See *to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled*."
* **Lowering status (wasting grace)**: Defiling ourselves and others is the opposite of grace. Instead of feeling special, we feel less than we were. *Talking through* all the ways we feel we have had our status lowered by people or talking through all the ways we see others' faults lowers the status of everyone and obscures our true selves. In our agitation and lack of peace, who others are in the eyes of heaven — and who we are as well — becomes unimportant. Spiritual community cannot be built by *talking things through* when the status of our selves or others is undermined.
* **Enemy mode thinking**: Enemy mode thinking always derives from seeing through earth-only eyes and is highly contagious. A mind in enemy mode cannot see others and their motives correctly. Such thinking creates "sides" while pressuring others to take our side. Enemy mode thinking always wants to be right and either attacks or avoids others. It never comes from shalom/peace but mimics peace through indifference and coldness. *Talking through* our enemy mode thoughts is not how to build spiritual community.
* **Self-justification**: The flesh — including its earth eyes — seeks to justify itself. The eyes of heaven see no form of human self-justification as true. *Talking through* our self-justifications cannot build spiritual community.
* **In Titus 2:3 KJV, Paul says we must learn to avoid becoming accusers. The word used for "accusers" translates as devils. We become devils (διάβολος diabolos)**: When we speak without peace, we share the perception of our earth eyes and call it *talking through* a problem. Earth eyes are the product of the devil's work and shape our perceptions through all the attacks we suffer and the wounds he inflicts. When we hold onto these without finding peace, we give Satan hidden access to our minds and perceptions — talking *through* our upset feelings while we are agitated invites Satan's kingdom to create our reality. Lacking the eyes of heaven, we tear down any hope of building spiritual community.
* **One spirit or the other — Satan and earth’s eyes or the Holy Spirit and the eyes of heaven — will interpret our pain.** Scripture strictly commands one and forbids the other. The difference between the two is plain to see. Letting an injury-based identity take over produces sins that continue inviting Satan's kingdom to bring us understanding, truth and peace. Our culture encourages talking while agitated, expecting those who care to be upset along with us, and understanding each other's perspective and feelings is the way to form attachments, friendships, community, and spiritual fellowship. Shall we keep doing our sharing and bonding that way?

# Denying wounds to fake peace

It is blatant stupidity to deny or try to toss away wounds by claiming they didn't happen, weren't so bad, didn't hurt, or any other method of denying the natural world. Denial exposes an "it was only a flesh wound" attitude. What happened in the natural world happened and hurt. Sometimes the pain is increased by our own misperceptions. Peace about pain and wounds comes as we lucidly look into the spiritual world. The perspective of the spiritual world cannot be imagined or invented by *talking through* what hurts.

A word for Voluntarists: much Evangelical teaching has been shaped by the idea that the human will is the center of all spiritual activities and changes. Thus "better choices" become the solution that Evangelicals are willing to hear most often for anything upsetting. However, trying to appropriate peace, grace, truth, and grow spiritual community by making better choices alone makes little progress when our souls are aching. A better choice is to seek the eyes of heaven.

# Seeing others according to the flesh builds spiritual community

“Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world. So consider carefully how Jesus faced such intense opposition from sinners who opposed their own souls, so that you won't become worn down and cave in under life's pressures” (Rom 12:2-3 TPT).

Sharing our painful history as seen by our natural eyes and reactions reveals the weaknesses of our flesh. Therapy groups share in these wounds and weaknesses to help people develop self-awareness, compassion, empathy, and provide minor upgrades in our natural identities. Therapy is not without value. Yet, we are left to ask why Scripture essentially forbids this approach as the way to build the fellowship of our eternal identities. Christians continue using the patterns of our culture to build spiritual communities. Perhaps we have not seen a more excellent way that *actually* works.

Can we really look into the spiritual realm and see anything that brings peace? Can we honestly exchange our distress about our wounds for peace? Can we authentically envision the new person God is creating in another and attach to them? Or will our attachments be rooted in what our earth eyes see in ourselves and others? And what happens to the physical self and brain when we look to live in the spirit?

The answer lies in the word shalom itself. Shalom peace is the harmony of all things. Paul describes shalom in the spirit this way:

*Until we're all moving rhythmically and easily
with each other,
efficient and graceful
in response to God's Son,
fully mature adults,
fully developed within and without,
fully alive like Christ*
(Ephesians 4:11-13, MSG).

Our natural brain, body, and identity were designed for shalom under the power and life in the spirit. This is something that the natural mind must learn. The patterns of this world are what is unnatural. We should not allow its distortions to define who we are or dictate the form of our interactions with others. If only we applied the viewpoint of heaven to how we approach *talking it through*. Then, who we really are and how we really see would become the most blessed part of our lives.

**Breaking through the fog**

Most small groups operating by any of these misdirected methods are a little foggy about grace. They assume the methods they've been using are actually biblical. It's easy to find Bible verses to justify this approach. Examples include:

* "Comfort one another" (1 Thess 4:18)
* "Weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15)
* "Comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all." (1 Thess 5:14)

Paul recognized these dynamics as essential for Christians as they interacted. On the surface, there is absolutely nothing wrong with them. The problem is not with these verses but with two false assumptions that underlie their use in small groups. There are two main problems to consider:

First, a careful reading indicates that Paul's letters typically begin with statements affirming the reality of God's work in our lives and the new identity we have In Christ. The verses cited above follow Paul's reassurance to Christians that they are indeed new people in Christ, redeemed and connected by God. In other words, instructions are directed to people who recognize their *true* identity in Christ — not those who look at one another through distorted, earthly eyes.

Paul's writing establishes a clear, ordered pattern: connection with God, His work in our lives, and identity provide a proper foundation for instructions on how to relate when together. Groups that attempt to "talk things through" to "find peace" are applying Paul's commands out of order! These approaches use Paul's words without acknowledging God's work and identity.

Second, "talking things through" fails to recognize our God-given identity. Both approaches assume that the most important things about us are pain, problems, difficulties in life, and the need to find peace through others. Here we go again. It is as if we are looking at — and relating to — distortions of ourselves and others as accurate representations of our identity. The result, the way we see our needs — and the needs of others — is warped.

**A foundation of Grace[[2]](#footnote-2)**

The word gracehad been around for hundreds of years before Paul used it in his epistles. Grace is a relational term that implies an ongoing, mutual connection between people. Historically, when a person of higher stature sent a gift to another, it signified the beginning of a relationship. The gift was called a "grace" and was a sign of great favor. The person receiving the gift understood the relational intent behind the "grace." Accepting the grace meant the recipient agreed to an ongoing relationship with the giver. The grace giver considered the recipient to be someone special. Today, grace continues to mean that we are Someone's favorite and very special to them.

Many Christians rightly connect grace with salvation because God's free gift of grace redeems us (Rom 3:34). However, grace is about much more than salvation. Paul prays that grace would multiply to us and explains how grace worked powerfully in his ministry. Peter encourages us to grow in grace.

Grace is much more than a theory or doorway to salvation.

Through heaven's eyes, God views us as His favorite and unique daughter or son, making grace a living reality. Living in grace means we can respond to His invitation to moment-by-moment interactions with Him. We consistently see our eternal value and worth reflected through God's eyes, voice, and understanding. He sees us very differently than we see ourselves. That grace-filled attachment changes how we see God, ourselves, and others. Our identity — the person we understand ourselves to be — changes in response. You and I grow into an identity rooted in grace as we become the person God created and intended us to be.

**Grace-filled Gatherings**

The joy and wonder of being God's favorite son or daughter transform what we value. We see others differently from an overflow of grace than we can with earth's eyes. Our interactions with them allow us to love and see them as God does. Instead of reacting to the flaws, imperfections, and behaviors that annoy us, we have the chance to discover the heart of a person who is God's favorite. The most important thing about them is not their pain, distress, indifference, or narcissism. It's their heart — learning to see and relate to them as God does. We share the treasure of God's grace with them — allowing it to change how we see, hear, speak and act.

Groups rooted in grace don't waste time trying to find peace by *talking through* problems. They see little treasure in endless pain, hurt, misunderstanding, and problem-solving discussions. Grace-filled gatherings focus on experiencing, receiving, sharing and reflecting God's grace together. Being together is an opportunity to join God as He reveals Himself to the group. Gathering affords time for us — individually and corporately — to become God's eyes, ears, and hands to "constantly and progressively build (ourselves) up on the foundation of your most holy faith" (Jude 1:20 TPT). Being together means connecting with God’s presence and grace, so we are increasingly transformed into His image (Rom 8:29).

This is an authentic process, and not a matter of “faking it” until we stumble upon transformation. Telling ourselves how we “should” see others so that we can be “good Christians” is frustrating and unfruitful. It’s equally unhelpful when others try to tell us what God’s heavenly viewpoint should be. Authentic transformation is possible when we encounter God and share an “eyes of heaven” moment together. Sharing these moments multiples grace and shalom.

Collectively, we are exploring what matters most — experiencing God’s presence and grace so that we may reflect it to one another and share it with the world. To find the treasure of small group community that we are looking for, some crucial questions to discern in our small group setting include:

* Are we seeking to be known so that we spiritually mature in the Lord, or are we sharing our pain and upsetting moments to gain the sympathy and approval of others?
* Is our vulnerability an expression of humility in the quest to dive further into grace, or is it a way to perform for the group and reinforce our avatar?
* Are we seeking God’s peace or simply trying to minimize pain?
* Do we genuinely care for each other, or are we engaged in codependent rescues of desperate avatars?
* Is the purpose of the group to feel better about ourselves or to discover the increasing depths of God’s presence and grace?
* Is the treasure we seek eternally real, or is it the worthless pursuit of the 4 Ps and a working avatar?

**Implications for Transformational Small Group Design**

These challenging questions cut to the heart of our interactions with others. Fear, the 4 Ps, and avatars are all components of our “flesh” and disastrous elements of the human condition. They are part of our struggle until we see Jesus face-to-face, our identity is fully revealed, and we are “like Him” (I Jn 3:2). Until then, fear and its consequences are a part of life.

Our gatherings can be transformative when we facilitate the dynamics that

* enable personal encounters with God’s grace when we are together
* allow His grace to change how we see Him and ourselves
* help us see others through God’s eyes of grace and interact with them as He does

*Identity and Transformation*

Followers of Jesus are in the process of being transformed into the image of Jesus. We are born into an entirely new identity from the moment we receive Him. He knows our old identity is hopelessly marred by the 4Ps and our self-created avatars. Instead of trying to fix that false identity, God gives us an entirely new identity rooted in His life and image. Moreover, God is faithful to help us grow into the image of Jesus, which is far greater than we can think, see, or imagine. He promises to work everything together to the end described in Romans 8:28-29: “*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren*” (NKJV).

God is just not working all things together so that we’ll have desirable outcomes. His purpose is much more transcendent than that. He promises to work all things together *to transform us into living images of Jesus*! Consider the implications: God uses the problems, pain, suffering, and difficulties we face to grow us more fully into our God-given identity. Those very issues are what He is using to help grow us up into the image of His Son! Is finding relief from these problems our most significant need? According to these verses, “No!” Our greatest need is to discover God — and who we are amidst those trials.

Finding our true identity in Christ is a mysterious process. As John writes, “*Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is”* (1 Jn 3:2 NKJV).Who we are becoming is not yet clear – and the fullness of our identity won't be until we see Jesus. In the same way, who others are becoming is also not yet clear. We are a mystery directed by God's Spirit, as He conforms us to the image of Jesus. “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit*." (Jn 3:8 NKJV).

When we begin to see through God's eyes and recognize the importance of identity transformation, the nature of the interactions we have with others shifts. We're sympathetic to pain and suffering but see those in the context of a much bigger picture: the process of being transformed into the image of God's Son. Comfort in this context is not about pain relief. Instead, it's helping people learn to see their situations, selves, and others from God's perspective amid difficulty. With an understanding of identity firmly in mind, we practice Biblical instructions such as "comfort one another" or "uphold the weak" from a solid foundation. On a practical level, how do we move forward into transformation together?

**Seek Things Above**

Colossians 3:1-2 urges, "*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*" (NIV)

No matter how a Christ-centered group is structured and regardless of its purpose, its foundation and activities should be consistent with Paul's commands. When he tells us to "set our hearts on things above," the word "heart" translates as “*affections” in* the King James Version. As we set our affections on "things above," Paul instructs us: "*Yes, feast on all the treasures of the heavenly realm and fill your thoughts with heavenly realities, and not with the distractions of the natural realm.*" (Col 3:2 TPT).

Continuing in The Passion Translation, Paul explains his reasoning in verses 3:3-4: "*Your crucifixion with Christ has severed the tie to this life, and now your true life is hidden away in God in Christ. And as Christ himself is seen for who he really is, who you really are will also be revealed, for you are now one with him in his glory!*" Healthy groups of Christ-followers recognize that they are indeed new creations in Christ. As we focus on growing deeper connections with Him, we also discover the unique person He designed and created us to be.

**Additional Considerations**

Admittedly, not all small groups are the same. Some are designed for participants who have not learned to manage emotions in healthy, relational ways. Others may just be starting a journey into recovery from significant life trauma or addictions. Still more may be in an acute crisis. While it can be important for participants in such groups to talk about problems, we must structure and lead them with a focus on solutions – and not the endless recitation of crises and painful emotions.

It is also quite helpful to offer classes teaching Immanuel Prayer. In these classes, students learn to talk with God about the issues of everyday life. As they practice, their connection with Jesus grows stronger. Students then learn to interact with Him about increasingly difficult areas of life. They discover how to share intense pain and emotions with Him – and find peace in Him.

And there are still more means available to help design and sustain healthy small groups.

**Resources for Creating Transformational Small Groups**

Having explained the practices, pitfalls, and perils of *talking things through to find "peace,"* let's turn our attention to resources that can help. These materials encourage the development of healthy grace-filled, joyful, and loving attachments in small group settings. Within such spiritual communities, healthy identities are formed, and sustainable transformation is experienced. Together, followers of Jesus can practice and share God's presence, grace, love, and peace.

[***Becoming a Face of Grace: Navigating Lasting Relationships with God and Others***](https://www.amazon.com/Becoming-Face-Grace-Navigating-Relationship/dp/1947360906/ref%3Dtmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1674577848&sr=8-1)*(Print and Kindle versions,* [*and related podcasts*](https://www.equippinghearts.com/resources)*.)*

This book introduces individuals and small groups to the realities of a grace-driven, Presence-filled life. It establishes the connection between grace, healthy attachments with God and others, and the development of a grace-filled individual and group identity. Each chapter of the book contains small group activities to help groups experience and share grace. This is an excellent resource for groups who are just starting to meet and is available in both print and Kindle versions.

[***Beyond Becoming: A Field Guide to Sustainable, Transformational, Communities***](https://www.amazon.com/Beyond-Becoming-Sustainable-Transformational-Communities/dp/1955043310/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ascsubtag=1ba00-01000-org00-win10-other-smile-us000-gatwy-feature-SEARC&keywords=beyond+becoming&qid=1674578522&sr=8-1)*(Print and Kindle versions, and* [*Beyond Becoming Worksheets*](https://www.equippinghearts.com/resources)*.)*

Beyond Becoming contains a working blueprint for small groups intentional about transformation. The book explains the biblical concepts and recommended structures for developing small groups. It also lists activities to help participants experience and share God's presence and grace. This book is available in both print and Kindle and provides a foundation for developing groups to serve those who complete a "Becoming a Face of Grace" study.

[***The Weight of Leadership: How Codependency and Misplaced Mercy Undermine Life and Ministry.***](https://www.amazon.com/Weight-Leadership-Ed-Khouri/dp/1955043701/ref%3Dsr_1_1?keywords=the+weight+of+leadership&qid=1674578624&sr=8-1)*(Print and Kindle versions,* [*and related podcasts*](https://www.reimaginecast.com/podcast/episode/7c60049f/episode-114-the-weight-of-leadership-with-ed-khouri)*.)*

This book provides an excellent grace-based foundation for leaders of all kinds — including those who facilitate small groups. *The Weight of Leadership* can help small group leaders avoid codependent behaviors and misguided rescue missions that destroy small groups. It also helps leaders learn to lead from a place of grace, peace, and rest. It is available in print and Kindle.

[***The Pandora Problem***](https://shop.lifemodelworks.org/collections/new-releases/products/the-pandora-problem-facing-narcissism-in-leaders-and-ourselves)(and [Companion Guide for group study](https://shop.lifemodelworks.org/collections/top-sellers/products/the-pandora-problem-companion-cuide))

Forming a Christian group identity that does not justify itself or live from appearances is explained from a spiritual viewpoint along with brain development and function. The Companion Guide provides weeks of study for the concepts and sets of exercises for small groups to practice and learn who God created us to be.

[***Escaping Enemy Mode***](https://shop.lifemodelworks.org/collections/new-releases/products/escaping-enemy-mode-how-our-brains-unite-or-divide-us)(and [free study guide PDF and podcasts](https://escapingenemymode.com/#exclusivepromo))

This book, downloadable free study guide, and podcasts (Moody Press) address how we develop "as-if" kinds of avatar selves to look better, get results, and increase our status in our own eyes. We pretend to be bigger and better than we are when we feel threatened by people who might not be on our side. How to help ourselves and others escape this enemy mode of thinking and become our best selves is carefully laid out, along with ways to learn and practice.

[**The Other Half of Church**](https://shop.lifemodelworks.org/collections/new-releases/products/the-other-half-of-the-church) (and [podcasts](https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/the-other-half-of-church-podcast-moody-8zEByO1a4DZ/))

This book and supporting podcasts offered by Moody Press have become the most downloaded podcast the publisher offers. This book outlines the five relational nutrients every church needs to transform character in participants.

[**The Life Model: Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You**](https://shop.lifemodelworks.org/collections/top-sellers/products/living-from-the-heart-jesus-gave-you)

This book includes a discussion guide to the five things needed to thrive along with weekly exercises to help us escape fear motivations through love and following God's mind instead of trying to calculate the best thing for us to do.

1. For more information, see [*Escaping Enemy Mode: How Our Brains Unite or Divide Us*](https://www.amazon.com/Escaping-Enemy-Mode-Brains-Divide/dp/0802425038/ref%3Dsr_1_1?crid=2FLRSQE083BVB&keywords=escaping+enemy+mode&qid=1674338023&sprefix=escaping%2Caps%2C216&sr=8-1)by Dr. Jim Wilder and Ray Woolridge. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Discover more about grace in* **Becoming a Face of grace: Navigating Lasting Relationships with God and Others** *or in John Barclay's book,* **Paul and the Gift***.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)