

## Icebreaker: Nativity Characters

Use a nativity scene to help spark group discussion around the holidays.

Tami Rudkin | posted 10/12/1999

Bring the characters of a nativity set to your meeting. Make sure to have Mary, Joseph, an angel, a shepherd, and a wise man. Let the group describe what each of the characters must have felt that first Christmas. After your discussion, put the figures in a basket. Pass the basket to the person on your left and have him pick the character that best describes him at this point in the Christmas season. Have him replace the figure and pass the basket to the next person.

## Article: The Presence and the Presents

Enjoying God's presence and the presents of the Holy Spirit go together.

Scott Boren | posted 3/22/2010

*"Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed .... There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work" (1 Corinthians 12:1,4-6).*

When the apostle Paul wrote about the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit, he never lacked for words. He wanted people to be informed about how God worked in and through his people. He showed no reticence in addressing this topic, and it seems that he experienced the presence of God's Spirit in ways we might label as unusual today. It is remarkable to me how comfortable we have become with "doing church" without expecting God to show up. Of course, we know he is present and we do encounter him from time to time, but do we expect God to interrupt our carefully designed orders of service? Have we learned to do church as if God does not exist?

I've been wondering the same thing about small groups. Have we learned to do small groups as if God is not with us? When we talk about spiritual gifts, we must first talk about the presence of the Spirit. If we jump straight to conversations about gifts, it would be like going to a Christmas party where there were only presents but no presence of the actual people offering the gifts.

### It's Not About Being Charismatic

The question I raise about whether we do small groups as if God does not exist is just as import to ask in charismatic or Pentecostal churches as any other. All churches develop traditions, forms for doing church, which create a set pattern of how their gatherings work. These traditions are not necessarily evil—we need them to help shape and define us as a people whose rhythms of life fit God's rhythms.

However, the tradition that shaped the people of God more than any other in the Bible was the experience of the presence of God. During the times when God's people did not encounter God's presence, they were the least able to live according to God's rhythm of love. When I read the story of the Church, my imagination is filled with the exhilarating ups and downs of encounters with God and others—not with church meetings and set agendas.

God wants a relationship with His people, not meetings. The Church is the people of God, not a people who happen to meet for gatherings to talk about God stuff. I think sometimes we go through the motions of church and forget the point of it all. It's as if we are going to school for the purpose of getting good grades and not to learn. In many cases we have grown so

accustomed with the way we do church that if God did show up, we wouldn't know what was happening.

Of course, very few people actually say this out loud. As I write this, I do not like the ways that God is forcing me to look honestly at what is going on in the small groups in my church. As you read this, your first reaction might be something like, "We know how to create a meeting where people meet with God." That is great, but I encourage you to look again. Often we make this conclusion because we sing cutting edge worship songs or have a band—neither of which are crucial to being God's distinct people that are marked by his presence. Meeting together as the Church before our God is not about finding a form that will usher in his presence. God cannot be manipulated like that. That is not how relationships work.

The expectations we have about God's presence in our whole church gatherings impact our expectations about God's presence in our small groups. Recently, I've been reading a stack of books on small groups that have been released over the last two or three years. It has saddened me how little most of these books have to say about God. They address key sociological principles about how to lead small groups. They explain how to set up small-group structures and get people connected in community. They even teach people how to lead Bible discussions. However, regarding how the Spirit of God might work through a small group of people, it looks to me like we are "uninformed." (There is the possibility that all of these authors are part of churches that experience God's presence so clearly and regularly that they do not need to talk about it. If that is the case, then I wish they would speak to that because it would make for much more exciting reading.)

### **The Spirit's Gifts**

Sometimes I reflect on the New Testament and imagine what Paul might say to the church today. It might be something like: "If you want to be used of God through spiritual gifts, then start experiencing God's Spirit together. The gifts are gifts of God's Spirit. They are not yours for the using as you will." Of course, our next question to Paul would be, "How do you do this?" Then in my imagination I hear him responding: "What exactly do you mean? How else would you relate to God? You relate."

Even as I imagine this, I get frustrated with the vagueness in my own imagination. I want a how-to manual for encountering God's presence in a group. But that is not how relationships work. We cannot put a formula to relationships. As soon as we make a relationship about principles or steps, we've turned it into something that is not an encounter with the other person. God cannot be objectified this way. Relationships are about taking risks, about give-and-take, and about the discovery of the other person as we make mistakes along the way.

We learn to relate on the road of relating, not in classroom. The same is true in our relationship with God. We just have to start relating to him together in our small groups, and from this, gifts of the Spirit will arise.

This may require a few changes in the way we typically do groups in American churches:

1. **Change the expectations.** If people expect to gather around a Bible study or a DVD curriculum, or even around social interaction, the presence of the Spirit will be minimal. If people expect to meet with God and trust Jesus' words: "Where two or three gather in my name, there I am also," then people will seek something different in the group's life—even if they don't know how.

2. **Shorten the Bible study** to make room to wait on God together.
3. Take the risk of **allowing silence** during the meeting.
4. **Vary the agenda** from week to week.
5. **Eat together.** You may be surprised by this one but I've found food to be essential in connecting with one another and in inviting God's presence into our midst.

Encountering God's presence and experiencing the presents of the Holy Spirit go together. We know how to fill a meeting with answers to Bible study questions, singing songs, and even prayer requests, but these things we know how to do can stand in the way of relating to the God who speaks in a "still small voice." Unless we hear this voice and make room in our groups to encounter God, we will miss out on the power of spiritual gifts. God is big enough that He can still use us and move through us, but he has so much more for us.

## Outreach: Growing The Grinch's Heart

Look for a Grinch you can love this Christmas.

Sue Skalicky | posted 12/01/2004

Outreach opportunities abound at Christmastime. Realistically, the opportunities are always there, but there is something about the Season that makes it easier to outwardly express our gratitude for God's gift to us — His one and only Son, Jesus. It is during this season that we often decide to provide Christmas gifts and/or food for a single mom and her children, or deliver presents to children who have a parent in prison, or serve dinner to the homeless at a local rescue mission. But what about the Grinch? What about the person who doesn't need money, food, or presents? What about the person who seems to have it all—except God's gift? Unfortunately, there are many people who for a myriad of reasons don't believe in the spirit of Christmas. For some it could be an abusive past, a broken relationship, or an overabundance of material possessions that have pushed God to the outer limits of their reality. They may celebrate the commercialism of Christmas, but they do it with an unrecognized emptiness in their hearts.

In the Dr. Seuss movie, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, Taylor Momsen as little Cindy Lou Who, reaches out to the Grinch in her search for the true meaning of Christmas. Because of her acceptance of the Grinch's quirky nature and her boldness in including him in her life, his heart finally grows big enough to believe in love.

This month, formulate a plan with your small group to get involved in the life of a Grinch. Once you have decided who this person is (a neighbor, co-worker, family member, etc.), consider individually and collectively following in the little footsteps of Cindy Lou Who:

1. Smile at the Grinch in an engaging and genuine way.
2. Visit the Grinch's home. Bring homemade Christmas cookies or hot chocolate.
3. Invite the Grinch to a Christmas party (invite other people the Grinch may know).
4. Invite the Grinch to your small group.

Think about scheduling this outreach so the individual acts of kindness precede the group Christmas party. After the season's festivities die down, invite the Grinch to your small group.