



The definition of a band

A band is a group of 3-5 men or women who meet weekly to engage in transformational questions and to pray for one another.

We have good news: there is absolutely no need for any musical talent to be in this kind of band! A band by definition is simply a strip of material put around objects to hold them together - think *rubber band* or *wedding band*. A band in this context is asking a few people to come around your life to help support you, and maybe even occasionally to help hold you together. We are convinced every person needs these kinds of people in their life. Think *band of brothers* or *sisters*. Think *band together*.

This booklet is a practical field guide to help you understand what a band is, why every follower of Jesus needs one, how to get started, and what you do during the band meetings. We have tried to keep this introduction as simple and practical as possible.



Why every follower of Jesus needs a band.

"They'll know we are
Christians by our love."

- Peter Scholtes

During the days of the public ministry of Jesus, the gospel writings give us a glimpse into how Jesus related with various groups - the crowds; the twelve disciples; his more personal interactions with Peter, James, and John; and an even deeper relationship he had with John, sometimes called the beloved disciple. What you are not going to find in Scripture is God giving us the magic formula on how to sustain growth through community as Christians. However, the Scriptures do make it clear that being a disciple of Jesus is not something you can accomplish alone. It is all about relationship -relationship with God, with oneself, and with others. While unfortunately it is often through relationships or the lack thereof where people become most broken, it is through healthy relationships where people can become most whole.

While we do not claim Jesus had a band, we do believe he modeled the kinds of relationships that are vital to become deep and whole persons. Of foundational importance, we know Jesus had a deep and intimate relationship with God the Father as seen in his frequent retreat to lonely places to pray and talk to God (Luke 5:16). The same is true for each of us! Every human being needs to come to know the love of God the Father revealed intimately and personally through the saving grace of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. We might call this a primary and vertical relationship we all need with God. We all need to

know God personally and deeply through both the words of Scripture and the Spirit of God himself! Knowing God is where we find our identity as dearly loved sons and daughters.

From there, Jesus seemed to have four types of horizontal relationships with others. First, he had a deep friendship with John (see John 13:23). We might consider this a need we all have for an intimate connection or two where we are deeply known and loved. We see this often in the pursuit of a marriage partner, a best friend, or a close mentor.

Second, we often overlook that Jesus seemed to have a much more personal connection from among the twelve disciples with the trio Peter, James, and John. This can be seen in the inclusion of these three at both the transfiguration (Matthew 17) and the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22). These moments were profoundly personal, and it was clear Jesus chose these trusted three for a reason.

Third, Jesus had a strong connection with the twelve disciples with whom he travelled and trained for about three years prior to his death on the cross. While he certainly went deeper with some of these twelve, he had a strong friendship with the others. We all have need for a larger group of strong social connections.

Last, Jesus spent lots of time interacting with various groups - there were larger groups of disciples; crowds with whom he interacted; religious groups; and, of course, daily interactions with people in a public way. We all have need for this manner of more public connection.

The challenge in today's context, particularly within local church communities, is that there are very few places where people are able to find this vital space of more personal connection - the place where we are known and loved by the few. We are convinced that every follower of Jesus desiring to grow needs a group like this.

In today's world, while we are ever more connected to devices, screens, and social media, we find ourselves increasingly lonely and disconnected. At our core, we all long to be known - to be known and loved by God, and to be known and loved by others.

In order to really be known, most people need a context that feels safe, where they can be seen, and where they feel understood. We believe a smaller, more structured environment like a band provides a context for just that.

While we need our corporate gatherings of worship and teaching, people do not really become known in crowds. While small groups of eight to twelve are often important spaces to make social connections and study the Word, the context is still too large to really feel comfortable going deeper. We do not fault small groups for this, nor do we think they are obsolete in any way. What we have concluded is that the

church and disciples of Jesus are desperate for a smaller, deeper, more honest context where they can experience transformation. Enter the band for what we call transformational micro-community.

This isn't just a theory for us. We have studied both the Scriptures and church history from the book of Acts in the first century, to the "Soul Friends" of the Celtic Christians in the fifth century, to the band meetings of John Wesley in the eighteenth century. Wherever Christian faith has found its most authentic expression it has been marked by deep love among believers, deep transformation of life and heart, and bold mission to a world in need. What every follower of Jesus needs is a context where they can be honest and real, a place where we can share where we really are, how we are really doing, what our struggles are, what our burdens are, and a place where we can be loved and prayed for. That is what a band can offer, and it has been a context where thousands like us have found transformation. We hope you will consider starting a band for yourself.



What happens in a band meeting?

The weekly band meeting is simple in structure and format. It is critical that it remain so. Budget for twenty minutes per person in the band. Some small talk and group banter is fine, but the band must reckon with and respect the time allotment.

After everyone has gathered and is ready to begin, the meeting should be formally opened with this paraphrase from Ephesians 5:14 with one person saying: "Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead," with the others responding: "And Christ will shine on you." We begin in this way so that there is a natural calling of the group to attention.

These words are a significant invitation to wake up and allow Christ to shine on us. Our souls can get sleepy, and we have found this opening to be a significant and rhythmic way to begin each meeting.

Opening

ONE PERSON

"Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead."

ALL OTHERS

"And Christ will shine on you."

Following the opening, one person in the group can volunteer to say the prayer. This powerful prayer is adapted from Ephesians 3:16-21, and is a great visionary text of discipleship and the ultimate aim for why we band – to be established in love and to be filled with the fullness of God.

PRAYER

(one person volunteers to pray)

Heavenly Father, we pray that out of your glorious riches you would strengthen us with power through your Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And we pray that we, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Band Questions

1. How is it with your soul?
2. What are your successes and struggles?
3. How might the Word and Spirit be speaking in your life?

When you are ready to go deeper . . .

4. Do you have any sin to confess?
5. Is there anything you desire to keep secret?

At the conclusion of each person's time of sharing, someone from the band will offer a prayer for the one who shared. This is also an opportunity to seek clarification, offer encouragement, and speak into one another's lives. When sin is confessed, we urge someone in the band to speak words of pardon (i.e. "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven" [see 1 John 1:9]).

It may be advisable for a new band, particularly with people unfamiliar with one another, to start the first three to six months by just using the first three core questions, and then add questions four and five as the band is ready to move deeper. Go at your own pace and pay attention to relational dynamics. Focus on building trust and always maintain confidentiality.

Closing

PRAYER

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

(Eph. 3:20-21, NIV)



What a band *is* and *isn't*.

A band is not traditional small group. It is not another Bible study group. It is not a community service group. A band is a group of three to five men or women who meet weekly to engage in transformational questions and to pray for one another. A band is intentionally small and same-gender.

Why so small?

It's not that meeting for honest sharing and praying for one another can't happen in a larger group. It can and does. The point of a band is the depth and quality of discipleship possible in a micro-community model. In truth, there are only so many people one can connect with on this level of intentionality. When it comes time to meet together, it is most effective to allot at least twenty minutes for each person to share and be prayed for. In our experience, three-member bands require about an hour meeting time, and four-member bands require about ninety minutes. While we have seen some bands have five members, it is more in the category of permissible but not advisable; two-hour meetings become too difficult to manage as time goes on.

Why same gender?

Can we be honest? This is not the grade five version of girls in one group and boys in another. It's far more sophisticated. Remember in the Garden of Eden the way Adam and Eve responded after their disobedience? They first covered themselves, hiding from one another, and after that they hid from God. Sin leads to shame and shame leads to hiding.

While sin is common to the human race, at times it takes on a different character and qualities when it comes to different genders. At the risk of oversimplifying, we sin differently. Because of the way shame accompanies sin it can give rise to complicated dynamics between women and men. On the one hand, mixed-gender groups can hinder vulnerability because of the presence of shame. On the other hand,

vulnerable sharing can create inappropriate bonding. A band must be an ever-growing place of safety, where shame can be shed and truth can be told. Anything that tends to hinder this should be avoided. In our considered judgment, and based on the fruit seen in past practice of bands, mixed-gender bands are not advisable.

In short, same-gender bands allow for deeper sharing and avoid the risk of over-bonding across the lines of gender.

What does a band do?

In a previous section called "What Happens in a Band Meeting?" we unpacked in exact detail what a band does when you meet together. However, it is helpful to understand that at the core a band is about two things: honest sharing and praying for one another.

Honest sharing: We have learned over time that creating a context to share honestly requires some consistent questions whereby people can go deeper over time. The questions are simple and each person spends about fifteen minutes answering them out loud during each weekly meeting. Questions one through three are the core questions and should be answered by all. Questions four and five require some trust to be built and some vulnerability; therefore, it is acceptable to not answer or to say, "I'm not ready to answer four or five this week." New bands may opt to leave questions four and five out until they have met together for three to six months. Each band can decide that for itself. It is also okay for some in the band to choose to answer those questions while others do not. Share at the level with which you are comfortable and go at the pace that seems best for your band.

As a refresher, the questions are listed here again and beginning on page 16, where the questions are more thoroughly explained.

1. How is it with your *soul*?
2. What are your *successes* and *struggles*?
3. How might the *Word* and *Spirit* be speaking in your life?
4. Do you have any *sin* to confess?
5. Is there anything you desire to keep *secret*?

Praying for one another: The goal is that while someone is sharing, the other members in the group will be listening intently. After a person has shared their responses to these three to five questions, someone else in the group will offer a prayer for this person. The prayer is an opportunity to invite God

to meet the person where they are, to thank him for successes, and to ask for his help in their struggles. There is no formula for how to pray - simply invite the Spirit to assist your praying and to pray whatever comes to your heart and mind for that person. The idea is to bring that person before the throne of grace and allow God to do what he wants to do. Remember, God desires that we "have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10, NIV).

God desires our healing and wholeness more than we do. When we pray for one another in this kind of way, we are asking and agreeing with God for things he is willing and able to do. We encourage you to keep your prayers simple and conversational. We also encourage you to pray to God and not allow your prayers to become attempts to give advice or fix another person. We do the praying, and we trust God do the work.

Why so simple?

At the outset, you might look at this bands model and wonder if it seems too simple and repetitive. It is simple and repetitive by design. There is not a curriculum to follow. There is not a book to read. The content of a band meeting is your very own life. The aim is to have a context where you can be honest and reflective about what is actually going on in your life. The aim is to watch over one another in love.

Traditional small groups often become many things to many people. They satisfy many needs across the span of one's life. Often a group begins with one purpose and slowly adds layers of other commitments and activities over time, causing the original purpose to be obscured in the process. Bands provide a focused context for in-depth discipleship over a significant span of time. They aren't intended to be mission- or service-oriented. They aim to prepare people for mission by causing the mission of the gospel to become more deeply realized in one's own life. The aim for you personally is to be transformed into who God has intended you to become, and collectively that we all become conformed to be more like Jesus (Rom. 8:29).

Why so difficult?

Practically speaking, the two most difficult barriers to people starting a band are: (1) simply finding bandmates, and (2) finding a consistent time each week to meet. Once you have people to band with and a time to meet, the next most difficult piece is showing up each week and being willing to be honest with your bandmates. The aim is not to come and unload every part of your life and soul in the first few weeks; rather, it is to creep deep over time.

Many of us feel arrested in our discipleship development. We often get stuck repeating the same patterns of sin. Easily distracted and discouraged, we tend to wander from one program or study to the next. Our knowledge increases while at the same time our spiritual life can feel plateaued or declining.

Despite our best intentions, the reason many of us get stuck is that we do not have the kinds of relationships it takes to catalyze and sustain the kind of work the Holy Spirit wills to do in our lives. If we do have the relationships, we have not leveraged them effectively for this kind of soul work. It requires an ever-growing honesty with oneself; the kind of honesty that is next to impossible apart from having a few other people alongside us.

The key to a successful band is to actually give it some time. Give yourself at least six months to get acclimated to the model and to get to know your bandmates. Just keep showing up, being honest, and getting prayed for. Over time, these relationships can become a deep source of growth and discipleship.

Who can be in a band?

Anyone desiring to grow in their faith and walk with Jesus is welcome to be in a band, whether that person has followed Jesus for one day or fifty years. The bare-minimum point of entry is a relationship with Jesus and a desire to grow. That being said, the band is not the be-all and end-all of a person's spiritual formation needs. Encourage your bandmates to participate in weekly worship in a local church and to pursue growth daily through spiritual practices such as prayer and Scripture-reading in addition to the weekly band meeting.

Why a weekly band meeting.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:23-25 (NIV)

A band has not banded together until it is regularly meeting. In this distracted and over busy age, finding a time when everyone can consistently meet together can be challenging. In our experience, a set time each week works best. Block that time on your calendar and guard it from other things taking priority. From time to time something will come up and one of the band members will be unable to

attend. As a rule, if half or more of the band cannot make a meeting, the meeting should be cancelled. Do not worry about rescheduling. Meet again at the set time the following week.

Life happens. Aim for three meetings a month. Settle for a minimum of two meetings per month. If it slips to one, the meeting time should be reconsidered. This highlights the problem with setting a meeting frequency. Meetings inevitably get cancelled, and when this happens it hurts the efficacy of the band.

Meeting together can take on a variety of formats. Face-to-face is obviously the best option. A video conferencing service like Zoom will work well. A voice-only conference call also works fine. The point is to do whatever works and be open to varying the format as the need of the week demands. If only two people from the band can meet in the same place, allow the other members to video or call in. In our experience, a number of bands find themselves all living in different places, making a face-to-face meeting impossible. They successfully meet by conference call or video chat and work toward an annual in-person retreat together.

The point is to do what works and whatever it takes. The band meeting is the make-or-break point of the whole thing.

*"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for,
it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matt. 18:19-20, NIV)*



7 Commitments

The Seven Commitments are the foundational rules of engagement for how band members should respect and honour each other. Many Celebrate Recovery communities kick off their small groups by reading the five guidelines, and Alcoholics Anonymous similarly reads the Twelve Traditions at the start of their meetings. In each model, there's a framework to help set the tone and focus of their time together. They create a safe culture from which to share. While we are not suggesting that a band is a recovery group, we have learned much from these contexts about the true nature of discipleship; namely, that in highly relational environments, honesty is key and the culture must be safe and affirming.

We suggest reading the Seven Commitments at the start of each meeting for the first four weeks, and then revisiting them at least monthly from then on.

1. Respect the clock

You have fifteen to twenty minutes to share. Please do your best to stick to that time frame.

2. Challenge by choice

You have permission to skip a question at anytime if you do not feel ready or able to respond.

3. Limit cross-talk

When someone is sharing, listen intently and avoid interruption. Offer advice only when a bandmate invites it.

4. One Counselor (come, Holy Spirit)

When someone is sharing, pay attention to how the Holy Spirit might prompt you to pray.

5. Comfort with empathy

Hold space for others with open hearts. Rather than offering pity or sympathy, show up and tune in - bless, encourage, and build up.

6. Community of grace

When someone confesses sin, affirm their forgiveness through Jesus by saying, "In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven." If someone shares a secret, thank them for their courage.

7. Strictly confidential

Never share another person's story, struggles, successes, sins, or secrets outside the group.

Band Questions

1. How is it with your soul?
2. What are your successes and struggles?
3. How might the Word and Spirit be speaking in your life?
4. Do you have any sin to confess?
5. Is there anything you desire to keep secret?

Time + Trust = Transformation



Understanding the Questions

1. How is it with your soul?

Christians have found this question helpful for hundreds of years. John Wesley originally used a form of this question as the primary question asked in a class meeting. It finds its source in the text from 3 John 2: "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with You, even as your soul is getting along well."

WHAT IS A SOUL?

The first appearance of this word in Scripture is where it says: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7, KJV). Notice how this verse depicts that God first formed man by creating his frame, but until God breathed into him, he had not become a living being or soul. Until Adam received the breath of God, he was a lifeless form.

Consider that it is possible for a person to appear to have everything going okay on the outside, but yet be unwell on the inside. Jesus himself said, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Mark 8:36, NIV). In other words, we can have success on the outside by all earthly standards, but forfeit or lose at the level of our souls.

This question is asking us to take a moment to reflect on how we are doing on the inside. Give me an honest read of your internal state.

Are you:

- peaceful or anxious?
- content or restless?
- hopeful or discouraged?
- pacing yourself or overwhelmed?
- connected or lonely?

tuned into God or feeling far from God?
loving others well or frustrated with others?
gracious or impatient?
steady or frantic?

One of the challenging aspects of the word *soul* (which is translated from *nephesh* in the Hebrew Old Testament and *psyche* in the Greek New Testament), is that it can be used across the Bible in at least two distinct ways:

1. In the emotional sense, like when Jesus said, "My soul [psyche] is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:34a, NIV).
2. In the spiritual sense, like in James 1:21 (NIV) where we are told, "the word planted in you . . . can save you [psyche]."

At the most basic level, your soul is your inmost being or inner being. What we are aiming to answer in the band meeting when we ask "How is it with your soul?" is: How are you doing at the level of both emotional and spiritual connectedness (emotional state and spiritual temperature)?

This question may have the shortest response time of all the questions. It can be answered with something as short and simple as: "My soul is fair. I am pretty peaceful, I feel pretty connected to God this week." There is no wrong answer here. Just take a breath, turn your attention inward, and ask how it's going in there. You might be surprised at how this little check-in brings you and others needed awareness about what is going on in you.

2. What are your successes and struggles?

Let's begin by considering how to share our struggles. In the opening lines of Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled*, he says, "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it."

In other words, life is filled with struggle. We can avoid that reality or we can embrace it. Living with a mindset that life should not be difficult often causes us to think we are the unique victim of a struggle that we should not have. In a band, we name and acknowledge our struggles, but we do so with self-compassion. Some struggles we have control over, others we do not. It might be helpful to think of struggles in three basic areas:

Family or Relationships: This could be marriage, parenting, family, or important friendships. Sometimes we hesitate to be honest about these areas because we do not want to speak badly of others. Your band, though, is a safe space and an opportunity to be honest about your experience in these relationships. The intent is never to harm others with our words or lay blame upon them.

Vocation, Calling, and Purpose: These are challenges we face at work. Sometimes we find ourselves struggling with our worth, our identity, or our performance in certain areas. Sometimes our struggle is wrestling with a future opportunity.

Ourselves: The internal struggles we wrestle with are seemingly endless. Sometimes our greatest points of struggle come when we are hungry, angry, lonely, tired, bored, or stressed. Our responses to others, our feelings about ourselves, and our thought life can all be deeply impacted by our self-care or lack thereof.

When you share your struggles, you are naming the challenges you are facing right now - in your family, in your relationships, in your work, and within yourself. There is no right way to answer this question, just share what is true. We often think that by hiding or not naming our struggles, they will go away. But the practice is the opposite of denial because it is in our awareness of a struggle that we begin to address it. It is in awareness that we bring it to others and bring it before God in prayer.

Now let's consider successes.

Did you know that there is a deep connection between struggles and successes? We often think of success as recognition, fame, or prosperity, but we are not using this word in that manner. In the band context, success is the ability to accomplish an aim or a purpose. It is setting your sights on something and getting there, even if slowly. Often our successes are in overcoming an area of struggle. We need not be worried that we lack humility when we name our successes. It is simply an opportunity to celebrate what is good. It may be helpful to consider the same three categories when naming successes:

Family and Relationships: Share when things are going well in marriage, with children, with friendships, or when you want to celebrate new connections.

Vocation, Calling, and Purpose: Share victories in work, when you accomplished something or finished a project you have been working on, or when you receive insight into something you love to do. Share when you feel affirmed in who you are or what you are doing.

Ourselves: Share where you are doing well with caring for yourself, such as getting good sleep, eating well, getting exercise, or establishing consistency with spiritual practices. These are all successes to share.

Consistency or growth in any area of our lives can be great places to name success. Naming successes on a regular basis actually helps to cultivate gratitude. We often find that this question is where band members spend the bulk of their time - usually between five and ten minutes. This question is often where we really get to know one another in the week in, week out trenches of life.

3. How might the Word and Spirit be speaking in your life?

One of the major aims of a band is to learn to pay attention to the way the Spirit of God and the Word of God (Scriptures) are speaking in our lives. We will break down this question into two parts:

HOW MIGHT THE SPIRIT BE SPEAKING?

When we are inviting the Spirit to speak to us, we must tune in to his promptings. First, simply invite the Holy Spirit to speak in your life. Ask him to help you learn his voice, his promptings. God speaks to us in a variety of ways - through thoughts, impressions, feelings, images, or our inner voice (but with a sense that it's more than our voice, but God speaking within). In some rare cases, people hear the audible voice of God. This takes attention and practice, which is why it's such a central part of the band meeting. The Spirit is always connecting us to the Father and the Son. He delights to have us experience the Father's love and affection for us as dearly loved sons and daughters. He delights to have Jesus heal us, restore us, forgive us, and make us new. We believe God delights when we cultivate a personal relationship with him. Hearing from the Spirit can be thought of as taking prayer from a one-way monologue where we talk at God into a two-way dialogue of loving relationship. Hearing from God involves a very important practice - we must listen. Part of cultivating an awareness of how the Spirit might be speaking is to sit before God, open your heart to him, and simply say, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Then just wait upon the Lord for several minutes.

HOW MIGHT THE WORD BE SPEAKING?

In order to have the Word of God speak in our lives, we have to engage with Scripture and invite God to speak to us personally as we do. The aim is not to digest as much Scripture as possible, but rather to let the Scriptures speak and inform our understanding of God and obedience to him. Consider reading Scripture as meeting with God, rather than simply a practice or task to accomplish.

When we are reading Scripture, it is helpful to consider . . .

- o What is it calling us to do? How is it drawing us to obedience?
- o What action or desire does it stir in us?
- o What does it teach us about God? What does it teach us about people?

When reflecting on Scripture in the band meeting, remember this is not so much a time to have conversation about the deeper meaning of a passage, but a time to share how a particular passage or text is speaking into your life personally. It can be as simple as, "In reading John 15 this week, I realized I have been running so fast that I am not abiding in Jesus."

When answering the question, "How might the Spirit and Scriptures be speaking in your life?" take a moment and consider if there are promptings that the Holy Spirit gave you throughout the week.

Perhaps there was a particular passage of Scripture that spoke to you. If you can't recall a specific instance, pause in that moment and consider the things you've recently shared about the state of your soul, your struggles, or your successes. Do you sense what God is saying or might say? Is there a possibility of something you want the Spirit to work on in your life or a specific prayer request? Again, no need to overthink this, just share what comes to mind.

4. Do you have any sin to confess?

The Bible teaches that all human beings are sinners. This fact should neither surprise nor scare us. We all sin and "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23, NIV). First John 3:4 (NIV) says, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." The confession from the *Book of Common Prayer* states: "We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves." Fundamentally, sin is a failure to love. It is a failure to love God, others, and even ourselves the way God desires us to.

The good news of the gospel is that, through Jesus, God has provided a comprehensive solution to all that is broken inside each one of us and the world. Not only do we believe that forgiveness of sin is always available to us, we also believe that God can break the power that sin has in our lives, freeing us and changing us toward deep wholeness in Christ.

The problem remains that most Christians practically do not know what to do with the problem of sin in our lives, particularly ongoing patterns that we have tried to change but feel stuck or powerless to overcome. The Bible teaches there are two forms of confession that help us overcome sin. The first is more commonly known, but the second is often overlooked.

CONFESSION TO GOD

We call this vertical confession. This is 1 John 1:9 (KJV) confession directly to God: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This is very good news. Every single time you fall short, every time you fail in any way big or small, any time you make a poor choice or act in ways you should not, all you have to do in the quietness of your own heart is say, "God, I have sinned in this way [name it]. Forgive me and cleanse me." The promise of Scripture and the good news of the gospel is that the instant we confess, we are forgiven and cleansed because of Jesus' redemptive work on the cross. We do not earn or deserve this kind of grace, but it is always available to us. So confess any and all sin to God directly and often. The purpose of confession to God is forgiveness and cleansing.

CONFESSION TO ANOTHER PERSON

We call this horizontal confession. This is a James 5:16 (NIV) confession to another person: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." We have often been confused by this type of confession. Why do it? Is it required? For what sins is it necessary? Should it be with a pastor or a

priest? First, the purpose of this type of confession is different than confessing to God. Confessing to God is about forgiveness, whereas *confessing to others is for the purpose of healing and being prayed for*. Second, this manner of confessing can be with anyone who is a believer. There is absolutely no biblical mandate that this be done with a professional member of clergy. Through the priesthood of all believers we share in Christ's priestly anointing (see 1 Peter 2:4-5,9; Revelation 5:10). We all have the ability to hear a confession of another person. We are not the ones who offer forgiveness and pardon; God does that work. However, we are able to confirm the truth of the gospel by saying back to that individual, "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." There is healing power in this.

The healing comes in many forms, but a few things happen as we confess to another: (1) We are bringing what we often keep hidden into the light of a trusted few - this in and of itself can help break the hold that these sin patterns can have in our lives; (2) hearing the confirmation that we are forgiven and cleansed by Jesus takes root in a deeper way when we hear it embodied through another person; and (3) as the writer of James indicates, the purpose is so that we can pray for the person who has just confessed. The healing comes both through being known and through the power of God to heal that which is broken in us.

When answering this question we attempt to confess and name those sins that we are consciously aware of since our last band meeting. As has been stated earlier, if you do not yet feel ready to answer this question in the band you can simply say so. Practically speaking, this question usually can be answered in a just a few minutes. There is no need to rationalize why it happened or make excuses; simply name it honestly. Your bandmates are there to hear your confession, to confirm you are forgiven in Christ, and to pray for you. We know this level of honesty takes courage, but in our experience the freedom and healing far outweigh the challenge.

5. Is there anything you desire to keep secret?

A secret is simply the intention to conceal information from one or more individuals. We all have things we desire to keep secret, and not all secrets are necessarily negative or burdensome. For example, a couple may choose to keep a pregnancy secret for a time, or a person may choose to keep it secret that they have applied for a new job. The question is not whether or not you have secrets, it is more about something you "desire to keep secret." In other words, these are things that we are using a conscious effort to conceal but may occupy our thoughts or feel burdensome to carry. The more frequently these secrets come to mind, the weightier they can feel to carry alone. It is these burdensome secrets that you are being given opportunity to share with your band.

In recovery communities there is a common saying that we are only as sick as our secrets. It is often in the hidden places of our lives that many of our deeper hurts, habits, or even addictions reside. We often keep secrets because they evoke regret, shame, or negative feelings in us or about ourselves.

People often ask the difference between a sin and a secret. While a secret may well involve sin, a secret is not always a sin. Sometimes we keep secrets about things that have been done to us, difficult feelings we experience, or challenging circumstances. Other times secrets can be an attempt to hide a deeper sin pattern

that we are struggling with and have not let anyone know about. These are often places we can feel very stuck and isolated. They are the places where we convince ourselves that if people really knew this or that thing about us, they would surely like us less. But we have found the opposite to be true - real brothers and sisters in Christ will love you more when you can be this real about your life.

We suggest you take your time with this. Build trust. Do not feel like you need to come and dump all of your stuff in one meeting. Creep deep over time. Deal first with things that you feel are having the most impact on your life. Always know that you have the option to share a secret with a therapist or more trusted source if you choose. The band is there to support you, not to cause you guilt or place a heavy burden on you. The goal is experiencing freedom in Christ. Remember this: If someone shares a secret, thank them for their courage. Pray for them. Declare freedom and forgiveness. Express love toward them.

After years of being in bands, the majority of the time the response to this question will simply be: "I don't have any secrets to share." You can also simply respond with yes or no, meaning, "Yes, I have something I desire to keep secret and I am not ready to share it yet," or "No, there is nothing I am desiring to keep secret from you." While secrets shared in the band meeting might be infrequent, it has often been the case that the most freedom and transformation seems to come when secrets can be shared and held in safe community. Deep wholeness in Christ is possible, and having a few trusted people in your life with whom you have no secrets is a powerful pathway to freedom.



Who do I band with?

The righteous choose their friends carefully.

- Proverbs 12:26a (NIV)

As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.

- Proverbs 27:17 (NLT)

You might have heard the quote often attributed to motivational speaker Jim Rohn: "You're the average of the five people you spend the most time with." In other words, the people we spend the most time with have a huge influence on who we are becoming. Numerous studies confirm this very basic but powerful idea: it's not the quantity of our friends that makes the difference, it is the quality of a few friends that can have the deepest impact on our lives.

Choosing who to be in a band with is a very important part of getting started. In fact, it's one of the most common barriers to moving from appreciating banding as a concept to investing in banding as a practice. First and foremost, pray about this and consider what you most need in this season of your life. There are three general types of people you should consider:

Peers: These are generally people who are a similar age and in a similar stage of life as you.

Spiritual Mentors: Spiritual maturity is very subjective. Neither age nor the length of time someone has followed Jesus necessarily indicates spiritual maturity. Rather, these are people who have a depth of maturity and love for God that you feel drawn to learn from or be supported by.

Spiritual Mentees: Jesus called his followers to make disciples. He modeled this for us relationally with a few people at a time. These bandmates would be people you are drawn to support in their spiritual growth, recognizing first and foremost that we never place ourselves above or ahead of anyone.

Your band may include people you have known for years or people you have only known for a short time. Both types of groups can be successful because they each require establishing a new type of relationship. We have also found that many bands have started with people who didn't know each other at all. The most important factor is that each person in the band is hungry to grow, willing to be honest, and will create safe space for others in the band.

There are some relatively consistent interpersonal qualities present in successful bands. These can serve as a bit of a framework as you consider whether or not a friend or acquaintance is right for this kind of unique relationship:

- You feel like you can be your true self around this person.
- You feel encouraged after spending time together.
- You get the sense that this person cares about your well-being.
- You feel like you can share things about yourself without feeling judged or critiqued.
- This person listens well, but also seems willing to share about themselves.
- This person has qualities about their life that you genuinely admire.
- This person has a desire to grow as a disciple of Jesus.
- You do not know this person very well, but someone else you know and trust feels this person would be a good fit.

When you start out, consider determining an amount of time as a trial period. We suggest you give it a minimum of three months and then reassess. After three months of meeting, decide if some adjustments need to be made to the time, structure, or process before diving into the next three months. Also, give people an out. Be honest with one another about whether this kind of unique relationship is helpful and something to be continued. Give grace to one another. Let your band know you are truly okay if they want to step out (and truly be okay with it).

Remember that connection frequently has a spontaneous component. We often cannot predict with whom we will click. It is possible to love and support one another in a group like this even if you do not become the closest of friends outside of the group. Let the relationships develop naturally. Just because you are in a band together doesn't mean you will now take family vacations together. Some people journey together for six months, learn how to relate in a group like this, and go on to form other bands. This can have a powerful multiplying effect. Other groups form deep friendships and stay together for decades while encouraging others to start bands. There's no pressure. Let it be what it naturally becomes.



How to Get Started

Invite

Asking someone to be in a band with you can be intimidating. One of the challenges is that most people are unfamiliar with the general concept, so not only are you inviting them into an important relational experience with you, you may also need to explain exactly what it is. Don't put too much pressure on yourself at this stage. When inviting someone, you do not have to give them every detail; rather, just the basics. We have drafted a sample invitation that you can use via text or email. Feel free to adapt to make it your own:

I hope you are doing well. I wanted to invite you to consider being in a discipleship band with me [if there are others in the band, include them here]. A band is a group of three to five men or women who meet weekly to engage in transformational questions and to pray for one another. We would have the flexibility to meet over the phone or video chat if we can't meet in person.

There's a really simple weekly format based around a set of questions we ask each other when we meet. The questions we will start with are: (1) How is it with your soul? (2) What are your successes and struggles? (3) How might the Word and Spirit be speaking in your life? [Add questions 4 and 5 if you intend to start using all five.]

After a few months of meeting, we will decide if this is something we want to continue doing together. Let me know if you have any questions or want more information.

I completely understand if this is not something you want to try at this time, but I would love to have you join me if you can.

Decide when and where you will meet.

In today's busy world it can be challenging to find a consistent time each week to meet. Early mornings or lunch hours can work well. Some bands choose to meet by phone or over video chat even if they live close to one another. (If this is the case, still try to get together in person at least once a month.) If your band will meet in person, a quiet place like someone's home, can allow everyone to feel safer when sharing, but plenty of bands prefer to meet at a coffee shop or restaurant. If your band has three people, plan for an hour. For each additional band member, add twenty minutes to your meeting allotment.

Have the first meeting.

Since banding is likely new to everybody and some bandmates may be new to one another, we recommend that in lieu of the standard five questions you take a different approach to your first band meeting. Start with the opening prayer. Then each take fifteen to twenty minutes sharing about the following:

1. Your key relationships (i.e., kids, spouse, family, friends)
2. Your key relationships growing up (i.e., three or four people you were close to)
3. Your story of faith and the role church did or didn't play in it
4. What you hope to get out of being in the discipleship band

From here, we recommend meeting weekly using the band meeting format for at least three months before assessing whether you want to continue.

Frequently Asked Questions

WHERE DID THIS PRACTICE OF BANDING COME FROM?

John Wesley was originally introduced to a form of band meetings by the Moravians in 1738. His meetings gathered a small number of people together and divided them by marital status and gender. Our desire is not to replicate his band meeting model exactly, but rather to find a new model to live out what was at the heart of the band meeting; namely, deeper discipleship in the context of strong relationships.

Wesley has an oft-quoted, but frequently misunderstood, statement: "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness." In other words, a holy life cannot be lived out alone, but only can be lived out in relationship with other Christians.

Wesley encouraged members to use the band meeting as a place to pour out their hearts without reserve, especially "the sin that so easily entangles" (Heb. 12:1, NIV). While he maintained that one could not be sanctified (or live a holy life) apart from faith through grace, he also knew that this didn't mean a believer should simply sit passively and wait for this gift. Instead, he believed firmly that there were many practices God made available for his people to pursue holiness, whereby they could encounter the Holy Spirit. We are convinced we have the best chance at holiness within the context of a supportive community of believers.

The band meetings had a very simple format back then: meet once a week, begin with song or prayer, then each take turns sharing "freely and plainly the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting." Following this, they would end in prayer, praying specifically for the state or situation of each person who shared.

For Wesley, the purpose of the band meeting was summarized in James 5:16a (NIV): "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

WHO IS A DISCIPLESHIP BAND FOR?

A band is for anyone who desires to grow in love for God and neighbour. It is for those desiring to share life on a deeper level with a few others. It is for those who wish to share joys and burdens and pray and be prayed for. Most important, these groups are for ordinary, everyday people who face real life and want to journey with real people.

WHAT IF I'M NOT COMFORTABLE GOING THIS DEEP?

We recommend that you view the questions as an aid to your sharing time. It is not required that each person answer all the questions each time that you meet. In the first few months of meeting, the group should just focus on questions one through three. We find it usually requires someone in the group being willing to go first in being more vulnerable which will open up permission for others to go there as well.

DO DISCIPLESHIP BANDS REQUIRE A LEADER?

Bands do not necessarily require a leader, but they do require that someone familiar with the process help facilitate the group and get it off to a good start. We also believe that it takes a disciple to make a disciple. A group will be stronger if it is being facilitated by someone who is well on their way to exemplifying characteristics of a disciple of Christ; namely, a growing love for God, obedience to his Word, and love for people. Part of the appeal of being in a band is that it has a very simple format. Typically, there will be someone who helps initiate the group and gently facilitates the meetings, but these groups are ultimately centered on each person having the opportunity to share with the others in the group; therefore, they do not really require an official leader.

The simple answer is that these groups require a bit of planning and facilitation, but do not need an official leader. We are finding that offering training to a group of people wanting to start bands can be very beneficial. Use this guide in your training, model for them how a band meeting works, and answer any questions they have. As bands begin in your community, have a point person who can answer questions that may arise from those facilitating.

WHO SHOULD I ASK TO BE IN A DISCIPLESHIP BAND WITH ME?

We consider this a matter that you should enter with some level of prayer and discernment. There may be people in your life who you already feel a sense of spiritual connection with. There may be friends who you have known for some time who also have a desire to grow deeper in their faith. There also might be people who you already have been encouraging toward deeper discipleship who come to mind. There might be someone whom a pastor or leader in your church would recommend to join you in this.

WHAT IF I AM ALREADY IN ANOTHER TYPE OF STUDY OR SMALL GROUP?

Our hope is that your band is complementary to other groups you are involved with. Likely, this group will be smaller than those other groups and with a different focal point. By the nature of being small, it gives greater opportunity for you to share about your life more personally. Discipleship bands are not intended to be a replacement for other types of groups. Some who are already in a larger group may choose to form bands from within that larger group. For example, we have heard of existing small groups which break off into men's bands and women's bands from within the group to have meetings.

This can be an effective way to go deeper as a group and try out banding from within a small group structure.

HOW FREQUENTLY SHOULD A DISCIPLESHIP BAND MEET TOGETHER?

We recommend finding a set time to meet weekly. If more than half the group can't make it, just cancel for that week. We have found that, on average, if you plan to meet weekly you will end up getting at least three meetings per month.

ONCE FORMED, HOW LONG IS THE COMMITMENT OF BEING IN A DISCIPLESHIP BAND?

People tend to be hesitant when we invite them into a commitment that seemingly has no ending or exit point. We recommend setting an initial trial period of at least three months. If after this time the group wishes to continue they can re-up and commit to meeting together in their band for at least three more months. This should be enough time to establish some rhythms and get a sense for whether the group is a good fit. At the three-month mark, we encourage an open and honest conversation about how it's going. Some may wish to start another band with other persons after this experience. Others may decide this is not working for them at this time. Groups with the most success will adjust as necessary and find patterns that work for the group, and with this our hope is that people will discover groups they can meet with for years and years to come.

ARE BANDS SUPPOSED TO BE SAME GENDER?

We recommend bands be single gender in order to increase the possibility of sharing with openness and honesty. While we strongly support the practice of mixed-gender mentoring relationships, this is not the vision of banding. In our experience, mixed-gender bands can lead to under-sharing on the one hand, and over-bonding on the other - both of which can distract from the essential purpose of banding.

WHAT IF I AM NOT COMFORTABLE SHARING PERSONALLY IN FRONT OF OTHERS?

For some, the invitation to take fifteen minutes and share about yourself with others sounds like your worst nightmare. You may choose to share less on any given week and this will be fine. Perhaps, if you feel you have nothing to share, you may simply take a pass or just ask to have people pray for you. This is okay as well.

MUST A DISCIPLESHIP BAND MEETING BE FACE-TO-FACE?

The key is not so much face-to-face as it is person-to-person. Face-to-face is ideal when possible. However, we know of many bands who meet by phone or video conference each week with great success. With the complexity of scheduling in our current society, we also see bands taking hybrid approaches. They may determine from week to week what can work: in-person, video conference, or phone call. Still other bands who meet by phone each week have developed rhythms of an annual or

biannual in-person retreat together. Be flexible and innovative while staying true to the spirit and purpose of banding.

IS THERE A SUGGESTED WAY FOR A BAND TO HAVE A MEETING?

Yes, see the detailed instructions on page 5 in the earlier section entitled, "What Happens in a Band Meeting?"

HOW LONG SHOULD A BAND MEETING LAST?

The length of the meeting will depend on how many people are in your band. We suggest a minimum of twenty minutes for each person in the group. For example, a group with three participants would meet for about one hour.