

I Wish You Hadn't Said That

Guidelines for Speaking Correctly in Small Groups

I know you've been there. It's prayer request time in your small group meeting and someone says something that makes you squirm.

- "I think we should all be praying for Jane. She's been on my heart lately. She told me confidentially . . ."
- "We should be praying for our leadership. I still can't believe they decided to . . ."
- "My husband wouldn't tell anyone this, but he . . ."

Despite our best intentions, prayer request time and open discussion in a small group setting can be like an obstacle course. We want everyone to grow close and to talk freely about genuine issues in their lives, but while doing so, the group has to conquer hurdles of gossip, criticism and indiscreet speech. How can we both encourage honest communication and guard against unprofitable conversation? The following guidelines may help.



Don't tell the group anything about another church member that you don't have permission to tell. Some people in crisis would love to have your small group praying for them, but others choose to ask for prayers from only a few close friends. Be sure to ask before you mention their situation to your group.

Don't tell the group anything so personal about your spouse or child that it would break their confidence. It's important to remember that people feel differently about what's appropriate to share with the group. A good rule of thumb is, "What would happen if one of the group decided to discuss this situation with my family member?" If your spouse or child would be uncomfortable in such a situation, you should probably keep quiet. Also, be careful to avoid criticizing your family members in speaking to others. If you need counsel or support in a difficult family situation, choose one trustworthy person to talk to, not the whole group.

Don't repeat what you hear in the group without permission of the one who shares the information. If the individual experiencing a trial wants the whole church to know, he or she will tell them or give you permission to do so. Keeping confidences will build trust among the members of your small group.

Don't use the meeting to air your complaints against the church. Negative speech against the church or its leaders is always inappropriate in this forum. The Bible forbids both complaining (Philippians 2:14) and listening to idle complaints against elders (1 Timothy 5:19). Exploring grievances in a small group forum is divisive because it breeds discontent and distrust (Proverbs 6:16-19; Titus 3:10-11). Talking directly to the leadership is the appropriate, biblical way to deal with genuine concerns (Matthew 18:15-17).

Remember that confidentiality within the group does not override God's instruction concerning church discipline. Don't expect the group to keep it a secret from the church leadership if you are continually and *unrepentantly* sinning in some area. If you are having an affair, harboring a grudge, etc., and make it clear you plan to continue in this sin, the group is obligated to act according to biblical guidelines (Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20; 1 Corinthians 5).

Everyone in the group is responsible for the conversation and its content. If the group strays into unprofitable speech, you need to correct them. If you are uncomfortable with the way the conversation is leaning, take responsibility to gently redirect it. Stopping a friend in mid-sentence with "Maybe we shouldn't be talking about this . . . By the way, how did your prayer request from last week turn out?" is much kinder than allowing them to continue in speech they'll regret later. Silently enduring a session of gossip or criticism profits no one.

How to use these guidelines:

If you are starting a small group in the near future, consider presenting these ideas at the first meeting, and reviewing them periodically with the group. Existing groups can also adopt these guidelines. If your group doesn't, you can at least use them to monitor your own speech.

*Let no corrupt speech proceed out of your mouth,
but such as is good for edifying as the need may be,
that it may give grace to them that hear.*
Ephesians 4:29

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