



Low Anthropology Lent Small Group Guide

We're encouraging small groups to meet (at least four times if possible) during Lent to read and discuss *Low Anthropology* by David Zahl. Our suggestion for a meeting schedule is below. Of course, this is only a suggestion. Feel free to meet as normally scheduled.

Meeting One: Introduction to Low Anthropology (pp. 11-40)

If your group is new, use part of this first meeting to get to know each other. If your group is familiar with one another, use it to catch up with one another or share any hopes or plans for the season of Lent.

Feel free to let conversation and discussion flow naturally. We hope the book will be a jumping off point to talk about your actual life (not just the content of the book!). The questions we provide here are simply to provoke reflection and conversation.

Dave assumes that each of us has some version of imposter syndrome, some nagging feeling that we're the only one making it up as we go. Can you relate to this feeling? Where does it show up for you?

Dave writes, "Seeing people as they truly are, as opposed to how we would have them be, is a crucial ingredient in generating authentic compassion and lasting love." (p. 14) Do you agree? If so, how have you seen this in your life?

Dave quotes Ada Calhoun to illustrate high anthropology: "In the past the question was, how nice is your home? Or how good are you at your job? Now it's like, it's all of the things. So it's - are you a good parent? Are you good at work? Is your house nice? Are you in shape? Are you recycling? Like, it's every single factor in life you have to excel at." (p. 26) Does this resonate with you?

Dave claims that any discussion about who or what God is must begin with an accurate appreciation of who we are - in other words, an accurate anthropology. John Calvin once wrote similarly that without knowledge of ourselves there is no knowledge of God. Do you agree? How might knowledge of ourselves lead us to a deeper knowledge of God?

Meeting Two: The Shape of Low Anthropology (pp. 43-109)

Dave says the three pillars of *Low Anthropology* are Limitation, Doubtfulness, and Self-Centeredness. Spend some time reviewing these pillars and discuss how you may have seen them they play out in your life or in culture.

"A high anthropology sees people as infinitely improvable." (p. 47) Dave identifies the

dominant message from our culture is to always-be-optimizing. Do you agree with this assessment? How do you see the desire for optimization play out in your life?

Dave suggests that people change only when their desires do, not when they develop enough willpower. If our desires drive our behavior, how are our desires formed?

Dave describes sin as a predisposition or bias against flourishing. He describes it more as a condition than an action or a set of actions. What do you think about this description of sin? Discuss the difference between a high and low anthropology's treatment of sin.

Meeting Three: The Mechanics of Low Anthropology (pp. 113-152)

Dave suggests that we tend to implement certain strategies to avoid low (i.e., uncomfortable truths or painful parts of our lives). How do each of these strategies resonate with you?

If Only: if only I had "x," then my circumstances would change

Projection: ascribing certain attributes to ourselves so we don't have to reveal truths

Faith: in Christian circles, we want to tell upbeat stories about our lives

So-Called Normal: an inflated concept of normal tells us we're never good enough

Nostalgia: looking to the past or future to avoid the present

When we actually settle for the reality of who we are instead of trying to avoid it, how is God's love made *more* beautiful, despite our inadequacies?

Dave exerts that a high anthropology entertains the possibility of mastery and comprehensive understanding, while a low anthropology fosters curiosity. (p. 134) How can curiosity help us better understand that we alone do not possess everything that we need, but that we need others for their help and expertise?

Dave suggests the following qualities as "fruits of low anthropology." (p. 135) Discuss how each flow from a posture of grace and curiosity:

Humility: the first fruit of low anthropology; engenders curiosity and cooperation

Unity: though different factors can separate us, we're bonded in our limitations

Community: encompasses not only love and friendship, but allows for the whole truth

Courtesy: awareness of human frailty calls for systematic gentleness

Humor: binds us together in unexpected and healing ways

Compassion: instead of putting people in categories, put ourselves in others' place

Dave states that "Indeed, the painful experience of our limitations, doubleness, and self-centeredness opens a gate through which we discover so much goodness and light, connection and compassion and hope. It is no mistake that this experience mirrors so directly the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ." (p. 152) How have you found this to be true in your life?

Meeting Four: The Life of Low Anthropology (pp. 155-203)

Dave claims that our culture's obsession with authenticity might be driven by high anthropology. A low anthropology holds out the possibility that our authentic self, to the extent it exists in any given moment, may not be our best self. Is authenticity something we should pursue, or should we, as Dave suggests, practice *healthy self-suspicion*? (p. 159)

Low anthropology allows for grace to flourish in relationships. What does it take to practice a relational low anthropology?

Dave is hopeful that low anthropology can be a bridge over the polarization divide, suggesting that much of the outrage, self-righteousness, and blame on both sides of the political aisle is stoked by a high anthropology. Do you agree?

"A high anthropology approach to religion devastates...A high anthropology slowly transmutes Christianity into its opposite: a treadmill of moral striving." Should the church be a hospital for sinners or a bootcamp for saints?

Dave writes, "Sanctification tends to feel more like losing than accruing, of getting smaller than larger." Do you agree? Has this been your experience?

Dave ends the book with an inspiring charge for the church that is worth some reflection: "A church with a low anthropology is a place to bring your failures and your shame. It is a place to lay those things down, to hear about second chances and third chances and fourth chances. It is a place to go and not be turned away no matter how overwhelming your limitations are, by what forms your self-centeredness has expressed itself, or how much damage your doubleness has done. Even more than a place to come together, it is a place to fall apart. And there is always room for a few more faces." How might Covenant practice being a low anthropology church?

Other ideas for your group during Lent:

Attend an Ash Wednesday service and share a meal together at Covenant.

Attend the Foundation Lectures together. Dave Zahl will be speaking. Friday includes dinner.

Attend a Maundy Thursday gathering on April 6th as a group. Celebrate the Lord's Supper along with other Covenant members.