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Curtis Boozer

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Contents

Introduction	1
The Five Phases of Small Groups	1
History of Pre-Reformation Groups - Buchanan.....	4
Most Important/Healthy Small Group Time Period in History	7
Important Aspects of Small Group History That Could be Implemented.....	7
Conclusion	8
Bibliography	9

Introduction

A student of small group development is greatly aided by studying how the people of God have utilized small groups since Jesus' ascension. As time has passed, small groups have changed as they have been influenced by the church leaders and the cultures where they have existed. As a student studies about small groups, it is helpful to have an ideal model in mind as the plumb-line that a practice of small groups can be compared against. This paper will review writings from Rod Buchanan and Joel Comiskey as they review how small groups operated since the time of Christ through the days after the Reformation.

This paper will discuss the five phases of that small groups have progressed through, as described by author Joel Comiskey and review Pre-Reformation groups, as discussed by author Rod Buchanan. This writer will continue by describing which group practices seem most impactful and how those practices could be implemented at The Crossing Church.

The Five Phases of Small Groups

Joe Comiskey prepared a paper which describes how small groups developed in five different time periods: the Old Testament time period, the New Testament time period, the Early Church time period, the Pre-Reformation time period, and the Post Reformation time period.

Old Testament Time Period

Comiskey noted that the Old Testament does not speak to many small group issues, but many scholars have pointed out that the advice that Jethro gave to his son-in-law Moses is a key consideration for small group leaders (Ex. 18:14-23).¹ Jethro noted that Moses was being run ragged as he tried to lead the Israelites who had left slavery in Egypt. It is estimated that there

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

were between one million and two million individuals that he was attempting to serve. Jethro recommended that he delegate leadership downward to others, using a base 10 model. At the lowest level, a leader would be assigned to be responsible for ten men and their families. Others were assigned to be responsible for ten of these leaders of ten. Still, others would be responsible for ten of the leaders of hundreds.² This model continued united all of the people were connected a meaningful relationship to a leader. This concept allows large groups to act in a unified way, while still maintaining relationships.

New Testament Time Period

Jesus demonstrated how non-blood individuals could become part of the family of God as He selected the disciples. He taught them how to apply the Word of God to their daily lives and how to devote themselves to God's service. Jesus routinely would go to people's homes and share how God's Word applied to their lives as well as doing direct ministry to them. He focused on being relational with them rather than emphasizing His importance in the social structure. He actually sought to de-emphasize who He was and would tell people to keep it to themselves when He performed miracles for them. Paul's missionary travels were almost entirely supported by staying with local families and established home churches as he moved about the Roman Empire. He developed leaders everywhere He went and continued to minister to them through the letters he wrote to them. He gave evidence that He accepted the responsibility to provide leadership to the home churches and worked hard to support them from a distance.

Early Church Time Period

The Early Church time period saw the home-based churches move from being persecuted to becoming the approved State religion. The Church grew in political influence and gained

² Joel Comiskey, "History of Small Groups", Liberty University Online, DSMN 830, Week3: Reading and Study Materials, 2020.

great wealth. This wealth resulted in beautiful buildings being built and the clergy gathering power and influence. As the years progressed, the wealth allowed the Church to create seminaries and universities that educated the clergy. In many regions, the clergy were the highest educated individuals present. These changes led to a separation between the clergy and the laity. During this period of time, the focus upon small groups diminished. There was also an increase in the idea of monasticism. This concept of separation from the world to improve holiness also increased a separation between the clergy and the laity.

Reformation Time Period

The time period of the Reformation was an amazing time when individuals began to question the traditions of the Church, and what they had been taught for generations. Martin Luther proposed many changes, but most significantly discussed how man was justified by Jesus' work and the power of grace that applied to all men. In the same season, the Anabaptists rose up to confront the iconology of the Church and the concept that men needed to decide to accept Christ as Lord rather than being baptized into the Kingdom of God as children. These individuals believed in meeting together in homes regularly and sought to support each other as they sought to live holy lives. Unfortunately, the established Church was not open to such change, and thousands of the Anabaptists were martyred. Their efforts and others like the Mennonites and the Brethren helped to move the laity towards seeking God themselves and to secure the changes that were brought forward in the Reformation.³

Post Reformation Time Period

Jacob Spener became frustrated with the limitations that he felt existed to help people grow in faith. He suggested reforms that would encourage the empowerment of the laity and

³ Joel Comiskey, "History of Small Groups", Liberty University Online.

encouraged church members to meet in homes during the week. His reforms spread beyond his region and were adopted by Nicholas von Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian Church. This Church was one of the key innovators of small group methods that many others, such as John Wesley, modeled their ministries upon. Comiskey noted, "The micro communities of Herrnhut combined the aspects of fellowship and sharing, mutual correction and confession, prayer and an urgent sense of mission to send the gospel to the world and bring renewal to Christians."⁴

History of Pre-Reformation Groups - Buchanan

Rod Buchanan studied and presented a "History of Pre-Reformation Small Groups" that helps a reader understand how believers behaved in the past and what place small groups had in their lives. Small groups were part of their lives and usually were based in homes rather than religious buildings. These early age believers sought to support each other and to understand how to apply God's Word to their lives. These small groups were critical in the believers development, and God used them to rapidly spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Buchanan pointed out, "Community became very important in the early Church. The Church was trying to win the world, but it was not accommodating to the world in the process."⁵ These believers were able to withstand the pull of their society to conform to worldly ways by ministering to each other and focusing on how God wanted them to live. Their mutual support enabled them to remain a holy people that God could use to impart the world around them. Buchanan suggested, "Solitude had its place in this setting but, as Basil states in eloquent terms,

⁴ Joel Comiskey, "History of Small Groups", Liberty University Online.

⁵ Rod Buchanan, "History of Pre-Reformation Groups", Liberty University Online, DMSN 830, Week3: Reading and Study Materials, 2020.

community provides accountability and opportunity for spiritual growth that the solitary life knows not of."⁶

These small groups gave these believers a base to minister within their community. Some individuals decided it was important to separate from others and live a monastic life in order to live a "holy" life. These small groups demonstrated how community matters rather than separation and isolation. Buchanan said, "Evangelism and redemptive social activity marked the early Church. None of the earliest Christians seems to have lived an ascetic lifestyle . . ."⁷ The believers' involvement in their communities opened doors through their relationships with others.

The Irish Christians promoted the practice of having people in a person's life that could be relied upon to interact closely with in daily life. Buchanan described their practice as "Mutual confession and encouragement were shared in the intimate context of those who had found a soul friend. A need for community was filled in this context."⁸ This concept is meaningful to believers because God created us to be social creatures, not to stand alone. A person's spiritual development is profoundly accelerated when a person engages with another.

As time progressed from 313 AD toward 1600 AD, the Church encouraged people to gather in religious buildings and participate in corporate worship. "The mindset of the people was predisposed toward the larger community gathered for public worship."⁹ Small groups became less prioritized as the clergy brought the people to themselves for instruction. The clergy disempowered the laity so that they could be the distributors of spirituality. Thankfully, the

⁶ Rod Buchanan, "History of Pre-Reformation Groups", Liberty University Online.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Reformers began a process that began to empower the laity again. Buchanan said, "The move away from justification and spirituality as a commodity dispensed by the church toward a model of spiritual seeking and growth by the believer in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit is one which must be rediscovered in every period of the life of the church."¹⁰

Jacob Spener was a Lutheran pastor who worked to raise awareness in the Church of the need for the laity to be encouraged to gather and study God's Word together, even as they interacted with each other outside the walls of the Church buildings. Spener started such groups and wrote to convince other church leaders to allow such freedoms within the Church. Buchanan highlighted that, "It is obvious that the concept of meeting together for mutual correction and benefit gets its momentum from the reformed doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Spener's genius was seeing that the Reformation was incomplete without an inner reformation of character and that this kind of radical discipleship was only possible when Christians took responsibility for each other."¹¹

A group of people who were breaking away from the Church of England recognized the power of community. The Puritans were persecuted by the established Church as they sought freedom to worship in a different manner. Buchanan described that "These covenants among the Puritans fostered the idea of being in community with each other. The Puritans were separatists, but they did not separate from each other. They realized the importance of a supportive community which held them accountable for integrity, spiritual growth, and being God's servant in the world through acts of mercy."¹²

¹⁰ Rod Buchanan, "History of Pre-Reformation Groups", Liberty University Online.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Most Important/Healthy Small Group Time Period in History

As this writer considers small groups since the time of Christ, it seems that that the small groups of the Early Church are the best model to follow. These small groups ministered well to their members, and the community around them recognized that something was different about these believers. The small groups spread at a rapid rate as families shared their faith with other families, and God's Word became the basis for the new believers' lives. Their practices and faithfulness have allowed the Church to continue to expand up to the current day. Unfortunately, some of what they knew has been forgotten or ignored. The good news is that current-day believers can study their behaviors and choose to practice their faith in a similar way.

Important Aspects of Small Group History That Could be Implemented

As one reflects upon the development of small groups over time, a few key aspects rise to prominence. The Early Church inherently based their groups upon a familial unity, which gave the groups a tremendous amount of resilience and allowed for natural growth among the members as well as accountability. Their common love for each other provided needed support as well as community that worked well together as they sought to reach others with the gospel. The Pre-Reformation Church grew with the support of the State and gained educated leaders who had the capacity to explain God's Word to others in very meaningful ways. The unfortunate elevation of clergy led to the laity being unsupported and unchallenged, and this should be recognized and resisted in modern small groups. The small group members are part of the priesthood of believers, and church clergy would do well to remember the importance of serving the people as opposed to "lording" over them. The Pietists raised the importance of seeking holiness as individuals and being open to correction and support from their small group communities. This openness is an important attribute for small groups to develop.

Conclusion

As the Church has progressed through the ages, small groups have been part of the successful ministries. The strategies of the evil one seek to separate and isolate people, which should be a clear indication that the children of God are meant to be a relational and social people. There have been many small group methods, but the key to them is the idea that believers are meant to support each other and demonstrate the love of God for others by the way that they love each other. A modern small group ministry leader is wise when they study the history of small groups.

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