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Introduction

Small groups ministry has been the topic of many discussions in American churches. Some churches feel that the small groups ministry is a terrific supplement to the weekend services of the church. Others consider the small group to be the total embodiment of what a church should be. In this spectrum of understanding, church leaders also seek to define what it means for a small group to be healthy. This paper will specifically consider biblical foundations for small groups, how Jesus modeled healthy small groups, how The Crossing Church currently experiences small groups, and priorities that need to be pursued with establishing and nurturing small groups.

Three Biblical Reasons to Start Healthy Small Groups

When a person considers the "meta-narrative" of the Bible, one can easily see that God has done incredible work to create each person and desires to have a personal relationship with all of those He has created. People are the focus of His amazing actions and should be the focus of a believer's ministry. God also created mankind to be communal. People need people to prosper. As infants, humans require other humans to nurture and care for them as they grow toward adulthood. No person can make that journey without other humans to aid them. Similarly, new believers require the nurture and support of mature believers to aid them in their development and spiritual growth.

Unity

Because of believers' need for each other, students of Scripture should consider what the Bible has to say about gathering together and serving each other. The divine fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit provides the example of biblical fellowship. Even as each person of the Trinity exists as an individual, they operate in a state of unity. This unity is so

profound that the Godhead describes themselves as one in Scripture (Deut. 6:4).¹ As such, God has presented the example of fellowship and directs His people to seek such fellowship with each other. Comiskey points out that, "The church is a place where the being and nature of God should be demonstrated through loving relationships (Colossians 1:18-19; Ephesians 1:22-23). As the church understands and grows in love with the triune God, it must reflect that same unity in the family of God."²

Family

The Bible presents the concept to believers that they are adopted into the family of God (Gal 4:4-7). This familial construct is shown throughout the New Testament and was based upon the extended family experience called the "*oikos*" in Greek. Comiskey described how the word *oikos* was utilized thirty-four times in Luke and twenty-five times in Acts.³ The word conveys the idea of a large, extended family who lives together. This family would have multiple generations represented and would have followed the leadership of the family leaders (which could have been a father or a mother). In addition, servants, clients, and guests might be part of the family experience at any given time. The fundamental understanding of the members of the family is that they would be loyal to each other and seek out whatever benefited the family group, rather than focusing solely upon their own interests. The family accepted the responsibility to care for its members, to discipline the young, and to teach them what they needed to know to be successful adults. In a similar way, healthy small groups empower

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

² Joel Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, (CCS Publishing, Kindle Edition, 2012), Kindle Locations 566-568.

³ Ibid., Kindle Location 1317.

"family" members and seek to nurture them as they pursue the directive to make disciples that are included in the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).

Effective Ministry

Another attribute of a biblical community is the ability to provide effective ministry for the members. The family of God is comprised of many individuals who have diverse skillsets. Each person is unique and can contribute to the overall well-being of the family (1Cor 14:12). A healthy small group provides a supportive environment in which each member can pursue the Great Commission mandate to share the gospel and to make disciples. The unity that the group displays becomes an attractive force in the communities where the small groups operate. By combining their skillsets, they expand their capacity to serve beyond the family group. In the early church, pagans wrote about the attractiveness of the biblical community. Hellerman describes that "People did not convert to Christianity solely because of what the early Christians believed. They converted because of the way in which the early Christians behaved."⁴ These believers treated others with compassion and shared the love of God with those around them. Their work to live out the commands of Jesus resulted in an incredible spread of the gospel throughout their civilization. Similarly, healthy small groups have the capacity to spend part of their time focusing outward from the group to include others, minister to them, and share their faith in meaningful ways. There are many modes of ministry that the members can conduct as they work from a mutually supportive base of relationship. Comiskey felt that small groups meeting in homes were a key part of the spread of the gospel in the early church. He shared

God crafted a reproducible strategy that depended on the believer's home property for the early meetings. Only those transformed by the gospel's message would risk opening their homes. Yet, all those who opened their homes exemplified God's love and power for their neighbors and friends to see and experience. In the process,

⁴ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, (B&H Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2009), 105.

many more were converted, and the early church continued to spread from house-to-house.⁵

This method of ministering to a lost world and developing healthy mature believers can be accomplished in the contemporary church. The key to effective ministry will lie in developing a close, nurturing relationship based upon familial loyalty and Godly unity.

How Following Jesus' Example Leads to Healthy Small Groups

Jesus chose men that many would not have even considered gathering together. Uneducated fishermen, a tax collector, and religious zealots followed in His footsteps after receiving personal invitations from the Lord. These men were not a team of superstars with readily apparent talents that were superior to all other men. Jesus invested His time in them and coached them to become a group that acted as a biblical community. This idea of community did not come easily to these men. Comiskey stated, "These twelve men discovered that community can be a difficult place to mask limitations, egotism, ignorance, and jealousies. Try as hard as they could, they were unable to conceal their selfishness. Slowly they recognized they had to abandon their competitive lifestyles."⁶

Small groups today have the same challenge. The leaders of these groups have to follow Jesus' example to be inclusive of new members while maintaining a focus to lead those members in devotion to Godly living. Jesus did not compromise with these men. He spoke directly to their character issues and reminded them of who they were as members of the family of God.

Jesus spoke principles to the disciples and then asked them to put the principles into practice. Comiskey noted that "The disciples learned while doing, but they were also guided to

⁵ Joel Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, Kindle Locations 1311-1314.

⁶ Ibid., Kindle Locations 985-987.

carefully reflect on what they did."⁷ Jesus would teach them concepts, and then He would set them to practice what He described. After their effort to put the principles into practice, Jesus would spend time to explain the greater meaning of the work that they did for the Kingdom. His investment in these men allowed them to reflect upon His words when Jesus had ascended back to heaven. They became more than simple men and gave evidence through their actions that they were wholly devoted to Jesus' lordship by the way they lived their lives.

Jesus' focus to build upon the idea of biblical family was key to the success of the early church. The support that was given by the home church leaders assisted the new believers to internalize and actualize their faith within their circles of influence. Comiskey highlights that "The disciples in Acts followed Christ's strategy by reaching the family household structure (oikos) with the gospel message and then the entire city. One of the major reasons the early church was so effective was because they infiltrated the basic fabric of society—families living in homes."⁸

Evaluation of The Crossing Church's Small Groups

The small groups at The Crossing Church are essentially at the beginning of development. The church has had small groups as part of its ministry strategy for many years. Unfortunately, the small group ministry leadership did not provide much direction to the small group leaders, which led to the groups to become master teacher-led and disconnected from the leadership of the church. Several of these groups eventually broke away from the community of the church since their leaders felt they should operate independently. In every case, these groups eventually disbanded. Instead of the Kingdom expanding, people were scattered.

⁷ Joel Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, Kindle Locations 1013-1014.

⁸ Ibid., Kindle Locations 1091-1094.

The leadership team of The Crossing Church has raised the value of small groups as a priority ministry. Each week, the teaching team points out that believers need to be part of the biblical community and encourages people toward connecting with the small groups ministry. The small groups ministry continues to spend time developing small group leaders so that they can create a healthy small group. The restart of the small groups ministry started with 24 groups. It has since expanded to 103 groups. The small groups' team has set up a set of metrics to monitor the health of the groups. Groups are categorized as developing, stable, or prospering.

More work needs to be done to educate the small group leaders and the church members about what biblical community means. Leaders need to continue teaching them to embrace unity and self-sacrifice for others as a life-giving way of life.

Three Priorities for Developing Small Groups

In week two of the content provided in the Liberty University course on Environmental Discipleship Models, a document was provided which describes ten potential priorities for developing relational small groups. Three of these priorities have been selected for specific attention in this discussion.

The first priority is that a group leader should focus on developing a biblical community.⁹ This focus should help the members to confront the individualistic priorities that the American culture has been taught as a way of life and lead the people of God to embrace the unity that God expects between His people.

The second priority is to help the members to expect that the group gatherings will be a place where believers can learn to commune with God and to support each other by sharing the

⁹ "TOP 10 REASONS for Developing Relational Discipleship Groups," Liberty University Online, DSMN 830, Week 2: Reading and Study Materials, 2020.

Word of God with each other.¹⁰ The people of God should always prioritize spending time with God and aiding each other in growing in their relationship with God. Their unity should develop naturally as they grow deeper in love with God.

The third priority is that relational small groups should operate as an environment that can exponentially reproduce new groups that in turn reproduce more new groups.¹¹ Each healthy group should naturally become expansive as people outside the group see the love between the members, and as they express their love to those outside the group.

Conclusion

Small groups are foundational for effective ministry in churches. Models that seek to merely attract members to provide opportunities for salvation responses but don't provide for the proper nurturing of new believers, nor highly focus on building unity among the believers that enable them to prosper in the increasingly hostile faith environment of America will be likely to experience significant decline. Believers who unite in love for God and love for each other, and who seek to express their love outside the church will be able to renew the spread of the gospel and fulfill the directives given by Jesus in the Great Commission.

¹⁰ “TOP 10 REASONS for Developing Relational Discipleship Groups,” Liberty University Online, DSMN 830, Week 2: Reading and Study Materials, 2020.

¹¹ Ibid.

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