

Getting *Personal* About Small Groups: Why Should *You* Be Involved in a Small Group?



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Introduction

It is one thing to say that the church needs Small Groups. It is quite another to say that *you* need Small Groups. Tonight, that is exactly the case I want to make. You need to be involved in Small Groups for three reasons:

- I. Because your involvement in body life relationships is neither easy nor *automatic* (Ephesians 4:3; 16; 17; 22-24; 25, 29-30, 31-32).
 - Ephesians 4:3—Takes much effort.
 - 16—The whole body is dependent on each part.
 - 17; 22-24; 25, 29-30, 31-32— Requires deliberate evaluation of what we are thinking and doing and what we need to change.
 - And this is all done not just individually—but *together*.
- II. Because you live in a *culture* that is bankrupt when it comes to meaningful relationships (Romans 12:1-2).
 - A. By the way it defines its most widely shared and cherished values.

What is the most widely shared and cherished value in our American society? **Freedom**. Yet how have we come to define it? Not the freedom to do what we believe to be *true* and *right*. But the freedom to do as we *choose!*

Consequently we have evolved into a nation of *individuals*. The French statesmen, Sir Alexis de Tocqueville saw this over 160 years ago when he visited the United States in the 1830's. During that visit, he observed that Americans "*owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man,*

they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny lies in their hands.... [This attitude] throws [the American] back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.” (From Democracy in America, vol. 2, p. 106).

Sadly, de Tocqueville’s words are even more applicable to today’s generation. “Liberty and justice for all” has practically come to mean: “I did it my way.”

Another cherished value that is related to freedom is **mobility**—which is *the ability we have to freely move from place to place*. There certainly has been an upside to mobility. For example, mobility has provided opportunities that have helped us raise our standard of living. Mobility makes it possible for more of us to have access to higher education. It likewise has opened the door to many more career opportunities. But there has been a downside as well. Vance Packard wrote a book titled: Nation of Strangers in which he shows how social structures have broken down in our country due to the side effects of all this increased mobility. For example, it used to be a given that families had extended family members who lived nearby and who would support them as they raised the next generation. Kids not only had parents to answer to when they faced the myriad challenges of the teen years, but they had aunts and uncles and grandparents and even neighbors who were vitally involved in the formation of their character and the development of their decision-making proficiency. But that is no longer the case. And being the self-reliant Americans that we are, we have learned to go at it ***alone—to our own demise!*** The evidence of this can be found at your local Barnes and Noble bookstore where the largest selection of book titles is in the “self-help” section.

- B. By the self-serving way it uses and promotes new technology.

Just listen to this line out of the movie, About A Boy (2002).

*In my opinion, all men are islands. And what’s more, now’s the time to be one. This is an island age. 100 years ago, for instance, you had to depend upon other people. No one had T.V. or CD’s or DVD’s or videos or home espresso makers. As a matter of fact, they didn’t have anything cool. Whereas now, you see, you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies and more importantly, the right attitude, you can be sun drenched, tropical, a magnet for young Swedish tourists ... The sad fact is, like any island dweller, from time to time, ***I had to visit the mainland.****

Hugh Grant as the rich, self-absorbed character, Will, in the movie, About A Boy.

Did you catch what he said? *Now is the time to be an island.* Who needs the mainland of relationships when all you need to do is *pop in* a DVD or turn on your IPOD. The dream of many people is to have the equivalent of their own IMAX theatre in their den or basement. No lines to wait in. No people in the seat in front of you to block the screen. No one to agitate you with their annoying habits or bore you with their problems. Just you and your big screen with remote!

By the way, what is interesting about this movie is where it ends up. This character, *Will*, is able to live however he wants. His inherited wealth allows him to plan his day in increments of 30 minutes, with no 30 minute period spent doing anything more exhausting than paying an exorbitant amount just to get his hair professionally washed and blown dry or changing channels on the remote. He is an island unto himself and *he loves it that way*. He doesn't work and he has no desire to be in a relationship with anyone.

That is until circumstances bring a boy into his life named Marcus. It is when he begins to reach out to this troubled boy that he begins to see the emptiness of his own life and the meaning life gives *when you live for someone other than yourself*.

Now you might be wondering, What does all this have to do with *me*? My point is simply this: If you are not vigilant about these formative cultural influences, they will subtly squeeze you into their mold. Just listen to what Tod Bolsinger says in his book, It Takes A Church To Raise A Christian:

“More than any before us, an American today believes “I must write the script of my own life.” The thought that such a script must be subordinated to the grand narrative of the Bible is a foreign one. Still more alarming is the idea that this surrender of our personal story to God’s story must be mediated by a community of fallen people we frankly don’t want getting in our way and meddling with our own hopes and dreams.”

There are three significant gaps in American Christianity:

1. Knowledge gap: Between *knowing* and *doing*.
2. Ethics gap: Between *belief* and *practice*.
3. Commitment gap: “*Believers*” vs. “*belongs*.”

There is an increased interest in spiritual things while at the same time there is a decrease in commitment to a community of people where those beliefs are actually worked out in relationships.

In short, the church in America is perceived less and less as a family with relational concerns and responsibilities and more and more as a

consumer-driven, full service institution that merely exists as a *resource for me or my family*. Brothers and sisters, I am glad we can have programs to minister to different needs and various age groups that exist in our body. But if we think of ministry as an ecclesiastical version of *a one-stop shopping experience*, we have lost sight of our identity and mission. We are a family. A family of redeemed sinners who have been reconciled to God and each other and who are on a mission to live and proclaim that reconciliation before a watching world. And there is no better way to be reminded of this along with a fresh encouragement to live it out than the Small Group experience.

Why should you be involved in a Small Group? I. Because your involvement in body life relationships is neither easy nor *automatic*. II. Because you live in a *culture* that is bankrupt when it comes to meaningful relationships...and

- III. Because *you need* biblically-directed, Gospel-centered relationships with your church family.

The most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order. --Leslie Newbigin, *Tell the Truth*

The common life is a means of Christian formation and discipleship for faithful expression of the church's participation in God's story of the renewal of all things in Christ. It is this common life—how people for one another, generate new patterns of relationship, and take seriously the call to serve their neighbors—that sets the church apart, even more than its buildings, its programs, its pastor, or its preaching. The significance of the common life (i.e. biblical fellowship or relationships) is often neglected in traditional and even contemporary discussions of the church—to its great detriment. When people know they are deeply loved, cared for, accepted, and wanted by a community, they are transformed by the experience. And the preaching that flows out of community life and serves its formation, rather than being the artificial focus of the church, is similarly transformational.

■ *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*, Mark R. Gornik

Transition: So what will *need* biblically-directed, Gospel-centered relationships with your church family do to bring about this new social order? Why do you and I need to be moving more intentionally toward these kinds of relationships?

- A. Biblically-directed, Gospel-centered relationships *impact* your *growth* in grace (Ephesians 4:1-3).

American culture may idolize the Lone Ranger, Clint Eastwood, and Superman as heroes who fight injustice and ride out of town alone, but that

solitary approach is totally foreign to the Bible. When you were accepted by God through faith in Christ Jesus, you were also adopted into God's family and made members of His body.

Think about this. Of all the ways God could have chosen to accomplish His transforming work in your life—is this really the *simplest* way? Bringing other sinful brothers and sisters into your life with all their baggage...no wonder people struggle with doing church. It can get so messy. You say such-and-such to so-and-so and you don't mean to cause a problem—and you find they have taken offense. Worse yet, they talk to the wrong people instead of talking to you—and before you know it, you have a major problem on your hands. It's almost like some ecological disaster that has to be cleaned up. The cost of cleaning all that up and restoring order can be many hours—of your time, church leaders, and anyone else that has been affected. So it can seem not only messy—but time-consuming, and emotionally exhausting, and just downright *inefficient*! And this is just one situation. Multiply this by hundreds of other brothers and sister and you begin to realize just how many opportunity there are for relationships to go wrong.

But embedded in these situations are the very reasons why relationships are so critical to God's plan to transform His people into the image of Christ. You see—it is in our *failure* in relationships that God reveals our spiritual shallowness. It is in conflict where he brings idolatrous agendas to the surface where we can repent of our idols and believe the Gospel more deeply than we have before. Biblically-directed, Gospel-centered relationships *impact* your *growth* in grace (**Peacemaker example**).

Look with me at Ephesians 4:1-3 and you can begin to see the necessary character qualities that God is working on in our lives as we pursue relationships with each other in His body. These qualities are the foundation of all the relationships that Paul will describe in the remainder of this epistle. Church relationships *and* family relationships. That means that marriages do not go wrong at Ephesians 5:22 where it talks about wives submitting and husbands loving. They go wrong *right here* in chapter 4:1-3:

¹*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.* ²*Be completely **humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*** ³*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*

- **Humility**—How do you grow in humility? You focus first on *your* sin (Matthew 7:1-5; Psalm 139:23-24). If you try to talk to others *first*, you will get nowhere. But when you are willing to address your own sin first, this is a miraculous work of God's Spirit!

- **Gentleness**—This word is not to be confused with weakness. To the contrary it involves “strength under control.” (See Galatians 6:1 which talks about seeking to restore a falling brother or sister—not in a spirit of judgment or retaliation, but in a spirit of *gentleness*. I.e. by treating them exactly the way you would be to be treated if you were caught in a particular sin trap).
- **Patience**—Humble and gentle for a very long time.
- **Forbearance**— Bob alluded to this character trait in Jesus in the morning message. Remember what Jesus did when the crowds jeered and mocked Him? He used all His might and strength to go all the way to the Cross so you wouldn’t have to pay the penalty of your sin! That took far more power than retaliating against the mob. It took *miraculous* power! That is the same power that His Spirit is seeking to develop in us. How? *In and through* relationships with each other.

Three questions:

1. **Where can you do this?** In a worship service? No way? In your ABF? Still a relatively artificial setting. Best place? In a Small Group where you are learning to grow and actually do life together in an increasingly lifestyle context.
2. **With whom?** Existing relationships? Maybe. But what about those who do not already have such a relationship? They need that opportunity too. And it is the church’s responsibility, under the leadership of the elders to provide such opportunity for every member of this local body.
3. **How do we learn to do this?** How do we learn this? How will new converts learn to live this way? Will they hear one sermon and suddenly do it? How will our neighbors see this? Go back to Eph. 4:31-32. For several paragraphs, Paul has been mapping out here a way for believers to follow. This isn’t just a break the glass and hit the fire alarm passage. This is describing corporate life together!! And the best way for the body to learn this by seeing it is in the context of Small Groups led by leaders who have a passion for this and who have received “hands on” training for these kinds of situations.

Biblically-directed, Gospel-centered relationships not only *impact* your *growth* in grace, they also...

- B. **Protect** you from the internal and external *currents* that can cause you to drift from your faith in Christ and His Gospel (Hebrews 2:1; 3:12-14).

Illustration: My own thinking is challenged in the context of privately ministering the Word to another brother.

- C. Biblically-directed, Gospel-centered relationships will *nourish* your *faith* in times of suffering (2 Corinthians 1:3-5; 9-11).

Conclusion

I have heard people say things like: *The church would be a wonderful place if it weren't for people!* Frankly, there is some truth to that. We all have had some uncomfortable situations with other believers where we might have rather been at the dentist getting a root canal than being that particular situation at that moment. Keep in mind the other side is true too. But either way, keep in mind who is with you in either situation: Jesus! (Matthew 28:20; 18:20). But if you want comfort at all costs, if you want to be free from vulnerability, then consider what C. S. Lewis once wrote:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.