

Getting *Practical* About Small Groups: What Do Small Groups *Do*?



October 1, 2006

Review/Introduction

For the first couple of weeks, we have focused more on *what* Small Groups are and about *why* they are supposed to exist. So far, I have tried to make the case for Small Groups not based on pragmatic trends that are currently going on in Evangelical churches in our country—but rather based on our God-given identity and purpose as revealed to us in God’s Word.

I do not need to go back and review all of what I have said thus far. If you missed either or both of the first two messages, you can actually go online and listen to it, download it, and even print the notes. Our website is: [Slide1] www.cbcroseville.org. What I need to do before we move any further is to try and illustrate the gist of what I have said thus far. I want to do this by using two key words that describe the church: [Slide 2] The church as an **organism** and the church as an **organization**.

Although it could appear that I am pitting these two words against each other, I really am not. Because the truth is—both can really *work together*. In fact, they both need *each other*. But if you focus on one to the exclusion of the other, you wind up with problems. If you primarily focus on the church as an “organization,” over time you tend to lose sight of its identity and purpose. And then what happens? Eventually the goal becomes maintaining the organizational structure. “We have a need, you have a pulse—so we have a match!” Result: **Burnout**. (Read 23rd Psalm parody, Donahue, p. 63). We can never lose sight of the church as an organism. We are *family*. Not just another organization with meetings to attend. We are a *living, breathing body*—not just a well-oiled machine that cranks out programs and ministries and organizes events. That understanding is so important in that it helps us to remember *who* we are and *why* we come together.

Nevertheless, if we fail to *discipline* ourselves to intentionally **organize** this body to share in the awesome responsibilities that God has given to us to care for each other, *what happens?* The health and growth of the **organism** suffers. *So what* if we celebrate our beliefs—yet fail to fully carry them out!! *So what* if we love to hear good teaching—but fail to pursue the implications of that teaching as a *way of life during the week?*

So what can we do? Or better yet, what *must* we do? We must commit ourselves to **organizing** (i.e. providing structure for) **the organism** (i.e. the members of this body) to consistently behave according to their *true identity and purpose!* That is what I want us to look at tonight. We will do this in two ways. First by considering the **body as an organism**—as the living, breathing body of Christ functioning in vital relationship to her head. Then, we will look at how this organism must **organize** itself to effectively carry this out in Small Groups.

Transition: First, let's look at... [Slide 3]

- I. The church as **organism**. This is where we *have to* start. Understanding **who we are** must precede and guide **how we function**.

I get really excited about this. Do you want to know *why*? Because I believe it is in the area of authentic relationships that Bible-believing Christianity is facing one of its greatest challenges. For years, Bible believing Christians had to defend our faith from the attacks and criticisms of modernists who treated the historic events of Christ's virgin birth, miracles, and bodily resurrection as if they were simply myths and legends. But today we have a new challenge! As the optimism of modernism (which is nothing more than faith in man's reason and innate goodness) has faded, it has been replaced by postmodernism which says that debate over what is true or not true no longer even matters. In fact, if pressed, some of them would say objective truth *doesn't even exist!* So how do you carry on an intelligent conversation with someone that doesn't even believe in ultimate right or wrong? Do you debate them? The only answer you will get is: "**Whatever!**" By the way, how many of you start to feel a bit confused with all this talk about modernism and post-modernism? I have an illustration that will help you to understand what these terms actually mean and why they are significant for you to understand.

Walter Truett Anderson uses a parable to illustrate how contemporary thinking about truth has shifted over the last century. It goes like this: [Slide 4]

*You have three umpires and they are sitting together discussing what they do. The first one is a **pre-modernist**. He is a realist. He understands truth to be objective and absolute. The second one is a **modernist**. He is a perspectivalist. That is, he sees everything as simply being a matter of judging from various, equally valid perspectives. And then there is the third umpire. He is a **post-modernist**. He is a relativist—a **non-realist**. Truth is up for grabs. And it is up to each person to define truth for himself. So these three umpires are talking about how they perform their craft. Specifically, they are talking about the process by which they call a pitch either a "strike" or a "ball". [Slide 5] The first umpire, the realist says: "I call them as they are." It's very simple. You have a batter's box there. And the pitcher throws the ball over the top of that box with reference to the home plate. A strike is a strike. And a ball is a ball. End of discussion. The modernist umpire says: That is so naïve. Everything is a matter of perspective. That box isn't really there. It's not even a physical reality. It is simply a category of thought. So from various perspectives it can be seen in a variety of ways. **You** call them as they are. [Slide 6] But **I** call them as **I** see 'em.'" The post-modern umpire looks at both of them and says: "Talk about naïve! [Slide 7] It ain't nothin' till **I** call it!" That is precisely what the post-modern culture in which you and I live has done to absolute truth!*

So how do you explain and defend the truth with people who don't even believe truth exists outside of their own fertile imaginations? Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Maybe we need to ask a *different* question: Should this present challenge that postmodernism presents to the Church of Jesus Christ be viewed *only* as an assault on our beliefs (which of course it is it is) or should it not *also* be understood as an instrument in our Sovereign Lord's hands to cause us to take a closer look at *how our beliefs are supposed to affect the way we live?*" Or to bring it back to the point of our discussion: What should a body *look like* and *act like* that really understands its identity and purpose? How do its members view themselves and each other? What are the *shared objectives* to which they give themselves and which cause them to flourish and grow and attract the attention of a watching world? You get a taste of this in Acts 2:42-47 as God's Spirit births the church into existence. As we look at this passage, notice what the focus and passion of these new believers: [Slide 8]

⁴² *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* ⁴³ *Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.* ⁴⁴ *All the believers were together and had everything in common.* ⁴⁵ *Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.* ⁴⁶ *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,* ⁴⁷ *praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Notice in verse 42 where it says that they "*devoted themselves.*" "Devoted" refers to single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action. What was that? If you read the rest of the verse, it might appear that there were four things. Based on the grammar of this verse, I think that there are just two. The first is clear. "To the apostle's teaching." So is the second: It says "to the fellowship." But aren't there two more? If you look a little closer, what appears to be *numbers three and four* are actually more specific examples of number two, "the fellowship." For those of you who actually like grammar, these other two phrases, "*to the breaking of bread and to prayer*" are properly referred to as *appositives*. They rename or more specifically describe the noun that precedes them. You could translate this: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, namely, the breaking of bread and prayer.* So there are two things that this brand new body of believers did that nourished them and helped them to grow and become healthy. Let's look at them more closely. First of all, they were....[Slide 9]

- A. **Word-centered**— (42) This may not be what you think it is. When I say Word-centered, right away you think of Bible studies and learning principles of the Christian life. And that would be partly true. But that does not describe the whole meaning of "the Apostle's teaching." In fact, I believe that the religious leaders of Jesus' day would have gladly identified with that description. Yet they completely missed the point of the Word. That is, they missed the One to whom the Word pointed. In their study of the *written* word, they completely missed the *Living* Word.

The “Apostle’s teaching” consisted of the teachings *of* Christ (such as you see in the Gospels) and the teaching *about* Christ that you see throughout all of the Scriptures (John 5:39: “...These are the Scriptures that testify about me.”) When Luke talks about how the early church gave themselves to the Apostle’s teaching—all you have to do is read some of the Apostle’s sermons in Acts to see what that teaching was about. ***It was always about Jesus.*** And the Apostles labored to show how Jesus was the fulfillment of all that the Law and the Prophets had been pointing to. So to be ***Word-centered*** is to be centered on Christ, our Head from whom we derive our life, our direction, and our co-ordination with each other. Whatever ministry we do here, it must be vitally connected to Jesus Christ. If we allow the ministry to in any way to become disconnected from Christ and the Gospel, we will begin to become malnourished and unhealthy—*no matter how much Bible truth we consume.*

Illustration: There is a difference between “Word-centered” and “words-centered” in a Small Groups study on marriage. “Words-centered” would focus on the passages that deal with marriage and what we are supposed to do. That is good as far it goes. But what do most people do when their partner is not *in sync*. They focus on the ***words*** that their spouse seems to be ignoring or disobeying—and they chafe at the ***words*** that command them and even rebuke them for their own failure. But they fail to center on ***the Word*** and His unfailing promises and purposes which ultimately have nothing to do with your spouses performance. They are “words”-centered—but they are missing Jesus Christ, ***the Word!*** They are missing the implications of the Gospel that permeates that text. They are struggling to live by the principles in the text without learning how to *believe more deeply in the Gospel* that is embedded in the text! (Luke 9:23: I die to *my* way so I can live to *His* way). [Slide 10]

B. **Community**-driven (vs. consumer driven). Note: “**The** fellowship.”

1. Sharing of *identity* in Christ (42b; c.f. I Corinthians 10:16)
2. Sharing in *Christ-centered* praying (42c) (c.f. Acts 4; 12) **Illustration.**
3. Sharing experience of God’s *conviction/power* (43) (Testimonies)
4. Sharing *resources* with fellow members in need (44-45)
5. Sharing in *hospitality* with each other (46) **Result:**
6. Sharing a witness that impacts outsiders. (47)

What happened? As they gave themselves to the Living Word, they began to experience His life being lived out in and through their fellowship with each other. Or to put it another way, they began to *incarnate* their Savior before a watching world. Eventually, this was so recognizable in one of their church plants, the church in Antioch, that they were actually called “*Christians*” or “*Christ Ones*.” (Acts 11:26).

So before you can consider the church as an organization with structure that may include leaders and committees and programs with specific objectives that function at specific times, you have to first step back and see it as God sees it. As an organism. A living, breathing body with Christ as its Head. No religion has this. No other entity on earth has this. This is God’s special work, what He is doing to remake His Creation into all He designs it to be for His Eternal Glory!! This is what His Story is all about! Every promise and prophecy points to this. And you and I get to be a part of it. And yet, God gives us the responsibility to manage the fleshing out of His body in terms of our particular situation with the gifts He has given to this body and the opportunities in this particular part of the world.

Transition: So what would all of this look like in *our* local body—in *our* mutual relationships? And how can we best carry this out—not just on Sunday, but during the week? How do we begin to *organize* this *organism* we call the body of Christ so that we increasingly become a ministry where *each member* does his or her part as the Lord Jesus calls us to do according to Ephesians 4:16? That brings us to...[Slide 11]

II. The church intentionally *organized* as *Small Groups*.

- A. **Internally:** Once we begin meeting with our small groups, what should be the main focus or ingredient of these meetings? Some will tend to want to emphasize teaching. Others will more naturally migrate to sharing what has been going on in their lives. So what should it be? Teaching *or* fellowship?

The answer is “yes!” Go back to Acts 2:42: *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship. It is not either/or. Both are necessary if we are to accomplish what God’s goal for pursuing Small Groups which according to Ephesians 4:11-16 is to help one-another to grow in becoming like Christ.*

So how do we facilitate this and cause it to flourish? Let’s look again at a passage we considered two weeks ago. Hebrews 10:24-25:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

To stir one-another to love and good works can include many things. For example, I can encourage you to be more patient with your spouse or

perhaps your children...or maybe challenge you to be more intentional about how you seek to deal with a sinful practice in your life. In either case I have stirred or incited you to *love and good works* (i.e. works that proceed out of righteous motives toward righteous objectives). James tells us that faith without works is dead (Jas.2:26), therefore it is our mutual responsibility to make sure that all of us have a living – not dead – faith. Thus, we must consider (or study) how we can bring the loving, good works out of one-another...and we must do so more and more as the 2nd coming of Christ approaches.

This kind of help does not happen while talking about weather...the Lions...or our busy daily routines. We have to intentionally **organize** the **organism** to move toward the very goal that our Head, the Lord Jesus Christ is directing us—namely people who are behaving more and more like Jesus toward each other. What might that look like in a Small Group meeting? There are basically three levels of communication that will take place during your meetings. They are as follows:]

Level one: Fellowship and Small Talk

This is the kind of conversation that goes on during refreshments. It acts as an icebreaker, a time to catch up with each other, and can set the stage for the next level.

Level two: Bible/Book Study Discussion

This is where we *discuss* what we were to have read in preparation for the meeting. The discussion does not get bogged down in what the text means—but how it can be applied.

Level three: Share and Prayer

This is where we share areas of growth/need in relation to the lesson...and then pray for one-another. This is where the body really has a chance to be the body in considering, assisting, and finally praying for each other in a Christ-centered manner. [Slide 12]

A *suggested* format for meetings will be:

7:00-7:20 – Fellowship and Small talk (refreshments at this time)

7:20-7:30 – Worship (various forms)

7:30-8:00 – Bible/Book Study Discussion

8:00-8:25 – Share and Prayer

8:25-8:30 – Closing Remarks/end of meeting

Things may go slow and people may be hesitant to open up at first, but if the following ingredients are present in your group, you will be well on your way to seeing each other grow in Christ!

Affirmation

Promote an atmosphere where group members affirm, identify with, and encourage one another. “Come just as you are”

Accountability

This is voluntary submission to another or other group members for support, encouragement, and help in a particular area of your life, giving them some responsibility for assisting you in that area.

Care

Genuine care must be obvious for group members to feel safe enough to share openly.

Honesty

We must determine to be honest regarding ourselves, and speaking the truth in love regarding others.

Availability

Group members and their resources are available to each other in order to meet needs and serve one another.

Safety

Members must feel safe in sharing...that they will not be ridiculed or laughed at. They must feel that “you’re among friends here”.

Confidentiality

Group members must know that what they share will go no further than the group, unless biblically required.

Sensitivity

Group members must be sensitive to (tuned in to) the needs of others.

Openness

We must be willing to be open and transparent with one another. Openness will promote honesty and ease in sharing

[Slide 13]

B. Externally: Relations increasingly growing outside the Group meeting. An illustration of what that can look like.

A Small Group Testimonial

From Robb Gibbs, Berean Baptist of Livonia

I was raised within the Local Baptist Church of my home town in England. The church was a mix of three older Local churches, all within a mile square of each other in the town center area of Luton. All three churches were steeped in history and had been grounded for many years with the town basically growing up around them. The town was known for its automotive industry, airport, and it's proximity

to the heart of the Capital (London). With the boom of the automotive industry and ancillary companies that accompany such a growth, the town was booming. Many people lived near to the factories and close to the town center. All three churches were serving the communities needs and were large enough to cope with the demand. The future looked bright. *However, big changes were on the horizon.*

Over the last forty or so years, industry has been on the decline and the shopping centers and office blocks took over whole areas of housing. People moved away from the city and into the surrounding developed countryside to new housing estates with new schools and new churches or existing village churches that needed to be re-developed to handle the new influx of people. This left the three Baptist churches in the center of the town with dwindling congregations and large buildings to maintain and ministers to support.

A union of the three churches was performed in the late seventies, bringing together a whole mix of Christians that, although they were close in proximity to each other as far as the buildings were located, were "poles" apart in their worship practices, day to day running of the church, and even some of their doctrines. Services were shared between all three churches throughout the month and before long it was realized, through much prayer, concern, and God's guidance, that two of the buildings must be closed and sold. The other would be demolished and a new building erected on the largest of the three sites to serve the community of the town center area.

During this time of change and restructure the "Small group ministries" philosophy was adopted from the New Testament early church. We called them "House Groups". Their function was to unite and intertwine the hearts of the people from all of the three churches. The homes of many families were opened up as meeting sites on a Wednesday evening or mid-afternoon for those older folk who didn't like to travel in the dark. Church members and friends who live near by would join to worship in song and prayer. A Leader would have a lesson prepared & normally all groups would follow a set pattern of study interlinked with the sermon subject for the month or a certain book of the bible would be expounded and dissected. The groups were used for encouragement of the members, prayer and praise issues were brought before the group and given attention, notification of up coming events, and a chance for discussion time was given regarding the study topic or a world event.

There was also a youth "House Group" set out at various leaders homes rotationally. There they would follow the same study material as the adult groups but on a more age directed level. The evening would be interspersed with games and refreshments. This was a great time of bonding among the youth and eagerly anticipated each week.

The adult groups soon bonded and true Christian fellowship was being experienced, a much more united front was apparent within the church and doctrines were aligned to enable the edification of His saints to go ahead

unhindered. These "House Groups" spawned many other activities and service projects among the congregation, brother serving brother, as we are commanded to do from the scriptures. Jesus Christ came to serve - not to be served. We must make it our goal to be more like Him and to have a servant's heart; doing the smallest thing for someone with a servant's heart will reap you glorious rewards in Heaven.

A "Prayer chain" was established among the wives of the fellowship to help pass the word of those who needed prayer for a situation or circumstance during the week between house group meetings. This was a great way to keep everyone connected and supported in time of need and trial.

The groups would once a quarter get together and have a combined house group at the church, this was a good opportunity for those friends of members who came to the smaller house groups in the home to attend the church and be apart of corporate fellowship. This then spawned many to attend Sunday services, bring them under the fellowship of a local church, the spirit moved many to repentance and baptism/membership.

One last thing that was an offshoot of the house groups was a church wide "Vacation". We would go away to country estates - boarding schools that were closed for the summer or purposely set up vacation sites for large groups, farms, hotels etc. These were a marvelous way of bringing the church family even closer together, young and old would mix and fellowship. We would all help on rotation with the cooking and preparation for the days activities and meals. The group would travel in convoy to the chosen activity, the Zoo, beach or a site of interest, spawning questions from passersby - giving us a chance to do a little on site witnessing to a lost world. In the evening we would have a family planned activity for everyone to participate in, a time of relaxation, and then a devotional time of worship and praise led by a different family each night...brother serving brother!

In closing, these "House Groups" and "Church Holidays" have played a major role in the unification of three very different church bodies now all worshipping and witnessing as one, to the Glory of God. There is a real spirit of unity and a desire to serve one-another; people's hearts and lives are intertwined through their fellowship one with another. Glorifying God is so sweet.

This oneness and unity is truly from Him and for Him! I urge you to be apart of these "House (small) Groups" that are being formed,. Get involved, fellowship and serve your brothers and sisters ...and become a little more like Jesus who was the ultimate servant.

That is what organization can look like when it is structured around the goal of nurturing the organism of people called the body of Christ. *That* is what Small Groups are—and *that* is what they do!