

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Biblical Principles of Small Group Ministry

A Thesis Project Submitted to
The Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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May, 2016

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Liberty University School of Divinity

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ABSTRACT

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

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Liberty University School of Divinity, 2016

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Small group ministry models abound today, and so do the materials that provide the methodology for these models. However, there seems to be a dearth of resources that connect the methods with a theological foundation. This project will demonstrate the need for examining small groups from a theological aspect, and then examine the principles of biblical community as found in Scripture. These principles will then be measured through surveys of at least fifty participants in small group settings from several churches, including the churches where the author was the small group pastor for the last seven years and where he is currently the Senior Pastor. The results will be used to demonstrate the application of biblical principles in small groups. These insights can be utilized to develop a healthy small group ministry that can be applied across a variety of ministry settings.

Thesis Project Topic Abstract length: 142 words.

Acknowledgements

To my wife, Débora, and son, Jared, who lovingly and willingly gave of their time so I could work on this project. Without their support, I could not have completed this task.

To Randall Neighbour, who selflessly gave of his time to a volunteer with small groups. God used Randall to show me how small groups are to be Christ-centered. Without his contribution, I could not have written this paper.

To Dr. Ben Geho, Doug Schmitz, Robert Ehlers and Wes Muller for the contributions they made by giving of their time to proofread and improve this manuscript.

To Dr. Dan Burrell and Dr. Rod Dempsey, who oversaw this dissertation. Thank you for your encouragement and guidance throughout this project.

To my church families at Calvary Chapel Melbourne and Noelridge Park Church, who allowed me to move beyond theory and put into practice the principles discussed in this paper.

Thank you!!!

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Abbreviations

AGR	Annual Growth Rate
BDAG	Bauer, Arndt, Danker, Gingrich
LXX	Septuagint
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In 1991, Carl George, in his book, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, said, “I believe that the smaller group within the whole – called by dozens of terms, including the small group or the cell group – is a crucial but underdeveloped resource in most churches.”¹ He goes on to write, “The model for a healthy and thriving church, as outlined in future chapters, highlights the lay-led small group as the essential growth center. It’s so important that everything else is to be considered secondary to its promotion and preservation.”²

It is clear that the majority of churches today place great value on the importance of small groups. The information and material that is available is ubiquitous. All one has to do is google “small groups” and the results are churches, ministries and companies that provide a myriad of tools, books and conferences all designed to help a church have a successful small group ministry. If one wishes for more formal training and education in small groups, there are entire courses in seminaries devoted to small group ministry, and others still that offer specializations in this area. There is no shortage of resources available for the church that desires to begin or remake their small group ministry.

Church leaders readily acknowledge the importance of small groups. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church and author of *The Purpose Driven Life* states, “Small groups are the center of our discipleship, the structure of our ministry, the launch pad of our evangelism, the

¹ Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Tarrytown, NY: F.H. Revell, 1991), 41.

² Ibid.

enrichment of our worship, and the network of our fellowship.”³ Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, writes, “. . . virtually every significant decision and step of growth I’ve made in the last decade of ministry have come in the context of community. . . . That’s why we want Willow Creek not to be a church that offers small groups but to become a church of small groups (1995:178).⁴ Andy Stanley describes the priority of small groups at North Point Community Church this way, “The small-group program is not an appendage; it is not a program we tacked onto an existing structure. The small group is part of our lifestyle.”⁵

But why is so much attention given to small groups? For some, it is the best way to grow a church. In Joel Comiskey’s book, *Home Cell Group Explosion*, C. Peter Wagner writes, “The majority of churches . . . which have broken growth barrier after growth barrier are churches which have stressed home cell groups.”⁶ Rick Warren states, “Let me take you through the Book of Acts to show you the extraordinary growth of the church and then show you where they put all those people and how they cared for them and how if you will do that same strategy today, you will see exponential growth in your church.”⁷ Bill Hybels has said about small groups and church growth:

Talk about a rapidly growing church – Acts 2 describes how three thousand people gave their lives to Christ on Pentecost. The verses that follow outline the characteristics of this first-century megachurch, saying the Christians “broke bread in their homes and ate

³ Rick Warren, “Foreword,” in *Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 7.

⁴ Lynne Hybels and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 178.

⁵ Andy Stanley and Bill Willits, *Creating Community* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), p. 13.

⁶ C. Peter Wagner, foreword to *Home Cell Group Explosion: How Your Small Group Can Grow and Multiply*, by Joel Comiskey (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 2002), 8.

⁷ Rick Warren, “Biblical Basis for Small Groups,” (video), 0:01, accessed December 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lFbIPzklOyw>.

together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:46). In other words, they gathered in small groups. In fact, home-based get-togethers were an integral part of the early church.⁸

Carl George writes in *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, “A central premise of this book is that a pastor should elevate to first priority the promotion and multiplication of certain smaller groups; they are the essential centers of growth.”⁹

For others, small groups are a way to “close the back door” to the church so people will continue attending the church. Larry Stockstill experienced this when he implemented small groups at Bethany Church, “The cell group had helped to close Bethany’s ‘back door.’”¹⁰ Larry Osborne, Senior Pastor at North Coast Church and author of *Sticky Church*, writes, “By far the most powerful tool for keeping our back door shut and making the church sticky has been our commitment to sermon-based small groups.”¹¹ Nelson Searcy, lead pastor of The Journey Church, writes in his book *Activate*, “Small groups close the back door for those people who like the breeze a little too much. If you learn to target your Big Number as you build and implement small groups, you can consistently have more than 100 percent of your average Sunday attendance in groups.”¹²

Michael Mack provides some insight into how small groups came to be thought of in this way. He writes,

The small group movement was birthed in several para-church organizations in the 70s (Alcoholics Anonymous and college campus ministries) and a handful of daring

⁸ Hybels and Hybels, *Rediscovering Church*, 191.

⁹ George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, 27.

¹⁰ Larry Stockstill, *The Cell Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1998), 22.

¹¹ Larry W. Osborne, *Sticky Church*, The Leadership Network Innovation Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 21.

¹² Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas, *Activate: An Entirely New Approach to Small Groups* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008), 8-9.

congregations led by visionary lead pastors. These ministries had a built-in relationality that allowed small group life to flourish. When the program of small groups was moved into traditional church structures, the heart of strongly bonded relational ties was missing. Small group ministry was adopted and used by church growth gurus during the 80's and 90's as a way of closing the back door of the church.¹³

These quotes from pastors and leaders of some of the largest churches in the United States are just a few of the many written about the importance of small groups. This representative sample is a summary of what much of the small group material available today states: that any church can experience growth and success at closing the back door through the use of small groups.

Statement of the Problem

There are materials and conferences that leaders of churches can utilize to help their churches grow through small groups and/or keep from losing their people by closing the back door. There are testimonies of the pastors from the leading churches in the United States that share with others their success in these areas through the use of small groups. It is only reasonable that one could expect to find evidence, on a larger scale, of the church making inroads in America, represented by a growing number of Americans attending a church on any given Sunday, or at least a growing number of Americans who describe themselves as Christian. On a smaller scale, there should be a multitude of growing churches within the United States, with "exponential growth" and "breaking growth barrier after growth barrier." At the least, there should be signs of success of the church successfully closing the back door. Does the data confirm this? How well are small groups doing at growing churches and closing the back door in American churches? How healthy are small groups and their corresponding churches?

¹³ Michael C. Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs: Seven Indicators of Health That Make Groups Flourish* (Houston, TX: TOUCH Publications, 2012), 21.

Surprisingly, there is data available to answer the above question, but it is not always easy to read or understand. The challenge is, in part, with the data itself. David Olson comments about this data by saying that “. . . scrutiny is necessary, because little academic research has examined the attendance trajectory of the church in America. No single source paints an entirely clear picture.”¹⁴

It’s not that there is a lack of data or sources. *Outreach Magazine* has for years published a special issue that is dedicated to the one hundred largest and fastest growing churches in the United States. Before that, Dr. Elmer Towns had written multiple articles on the subject of the largest and fastest growing Sunday Schools, such as 100 Largest Sunday Schools published in 1974¹⁵ and the fastest growing Sunday Schools in 1977.¹⁶ He has also written books on the subject, such as *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow* in 1969 and *America’s Fastest Growing Churches* in 1972. Further, there are organizations such as Barna Research Group that have studied church attendance patterns in the United States for years. And, Gallup has kept data on Americans and church attendance since 1939.

So, what does the data reveal? Let’s look first to *Outreach Magazine*. The list of the largest churches in America was reviewed from 2008-2015. While the numbers provided to *Outreach Magazine* are self-reported and some may question the accuracy of the numbers,¹⁷ for the sake of this paper the numbers will be taken to represent an accurate count of church attendance in the churches that make the list. Several of the pastors that are cited in this

¹⁴ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based On a National Database of Over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), under “Part 1: Observation,” Logos Bible Software.

¹⁵ Elmer Towns, “100 Largest Sunday Schools,” *Christian Life*, October 1974, 18-19, 88-93.

¹⁶ Elmer Towns, “Sunday Schools 1977,” *Christian Life*, November 1977, 30-31, 42-45.

¹⁷ Warren Bird, “What Is Your Church Learning about Outreach?,” Leadership Network, November 5, 2009, accessed February 15, 2015, http://leadnet.org/what_is_your_church_learning_about_outreach/.

introduction have churches that are in *Outreach Magazine*'s top 100, so this is a good place to start. How are these, the largest churches in the United States, doing in terms of growth? There are more than 100 churches that have made the list between 2008 through 2015, so in terms of the churches that were considered for this paper, only churches that had at least five *consecutive* years of data reported anytime within 2008 to 2015 were used. There were seventy-nine churches that fit this criterion. An examination of the change in the average weekly worship attendance from year to year as reported was considered, and a determination was made whether it was a year of growth, decline, or plateau from year to year for each church. For example, if Anytown Church was on the list, and it had reported data from 2009 to 2013, then attendance for each year would be noted and then compared year to year. Did Anytown Church experience growth, decline or a plateau in attendance from 2009 to 2010? An annual growth rate would be determined for that year. Then, the next year to year would be analyzed in the same manner, up until the last available year of data. Growth, decline and plateaus were determined this way for each church. The terms "growth," "decline" and "plateau" were defined in this way: "In church growth terms, a church is not growing unless it increases by five percent a year. On the other side, a church is not in a decline unless it is losing five percent a year. Everything in that ten percent window (five percent plus—and five percent minus) is considered a plateau."¹⁸ There were 79 churches and the number of years reported combined by these 79 churches added up to 541 years of data.

From the data reported to *Outreach Magazine*, how many years were these largest churches growing, declining or plateauing? The answer may be surprising. The 79 churches that provided at least 5 consecutive years of data produced 541 years of data, which, in turn,

¹⁸ Rick Robinson, "The AGR of Your Church," MyChurchGrowth.com, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.mychurchgrowth.com/church%20growth/agr.php>.

produced 462 year-to-year annual growth rate results. These 79 churches had combined 196 years of “growth” in attendance, 208 years of “plateaued” attendance, and 58 years of “declining” attendance.

Table 1.1. AGR of 100 Largest Churches

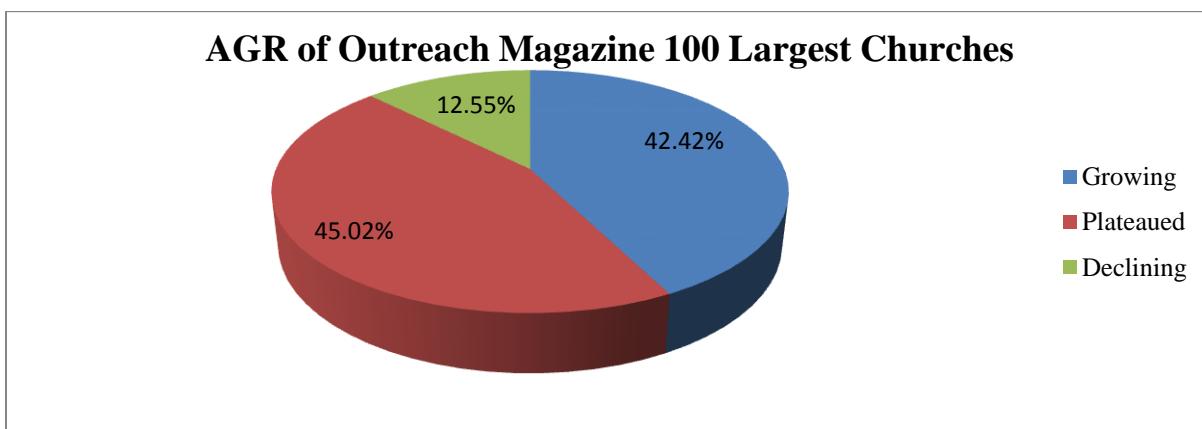
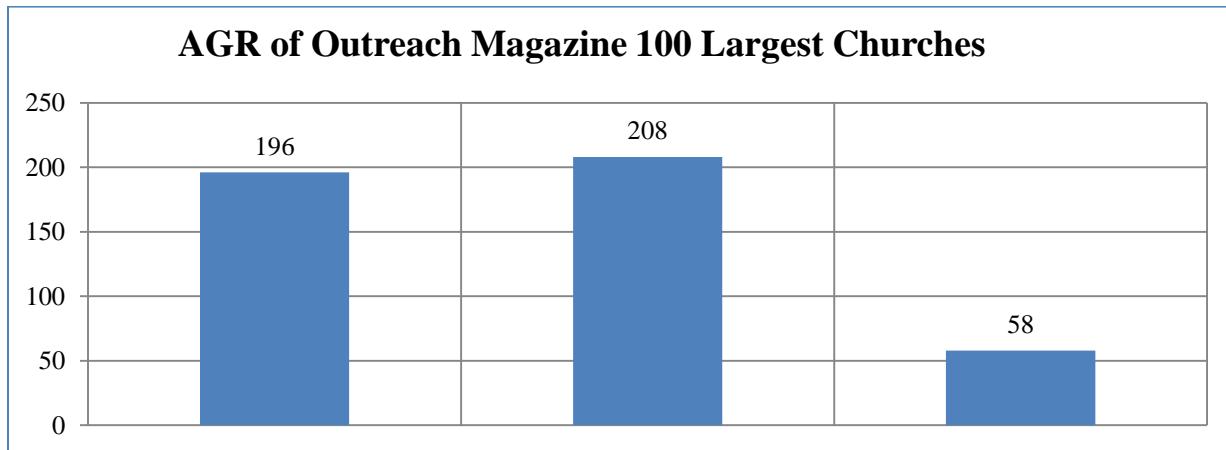


Figure 1.1. AGR of 100 Largest Churches

In the largest churches in the United States, only 42 percent of the years were growth years and the other 57 percent were plateauing or declining years of church attendance.

While this provides some information about the largest churches, how about American churches in general, and not just the one hundred largest? Just how effective have churches,

whether large or small or somewhere in between, been in reaching the lost and making disciples? There is information available where one can get an idea of whether the typical American church is growing, declining or plateauing.

How Many Christians Are There in the United States?

The first step is to get a panoramic view of what is happening in the United States. There is a recent study that Pew Research Center conducted called the Religious Landscape Study in 2014. This study provides the big picture of the religious setting in the United States.

Table 1.2. Christians Decline as Share of U.S. Population¹⁹

Religion	2007	2014	Change
Christian	78.4%	70.6%	-7.8%
Protestant	51.3%	46.5%	-4.8%
<i>Evangelical</i>	26.3%	25.4%	-0.9%
<i>Mainline</i>	18.1%	14.7%	-3.4%
<i>Historically Black</i>	6.9%	6.5%	-0.4%
Catholic	23.9%	20.8%	-3.1%
Orthodox Christian	0.6%	0.5%	-0.1%
Mormon	1.7%	1.6%	-0.1%
Jehovah's Witness	0.7%	0.8%	+0.1%
Other Christian	0.3%	0.4%	+0.1%
Non-Christian Faiths	4.7%	5.9%	+1.2%
Jewish	1.7%	1.9%	+0.2%
Muslim	0.4%	0.9%	+0.5%
Buddhist	0.7%	0.7%	---
Hindu	0.4%	0.7%	+0.3%
Other World Religions	0.3%	0.3%	---
Other Faiths	1.2%	1.5%	+0.3%
Unaffiliated	16.1%	22.8%	+6.7%
Atheist	1.6%	3.1%	+1.5%
Agnostic	2.4%	4.0%	+1.6%
Nothing in Particular	12.1%	15.8%	+3.7%
Don't Know/Refused	0.8%	0.6%	-0.2%
	100.0%	100.0%	

¹⁹ "Christians Decline as Share of U.S. Population; Other Faiths and the Unaffiliated Are Growing," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, accessed September 26, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr_15-05-12_rls-00/.

Pew Research surveyed over 35,000 Americans and asked about how people identified themselves regarding religious affiliation. This is any religious affiliation, not just those who identify as Christian. Further, this was not a survey to determine the frequency of church or religious attendance, rather; its purpose was simply to determine which religion and/or denomination those surveyed identified with, if any. Pew Research compared the results with a similar study in 2007, and published the findings in 2015.

The chart on the previous page reveals the results, which shows that there has been an almost 8% decline nationwide in the number of Americans that identify themselves with the Christian faith. The greatest increase is among those who do not identify with any kind of religion or faith. Based on this information, it does not appear that the church is gaining ground.

While this data provides a panoramic view, the next section will look at the church in particular to see if there is evidence of church attendance growing, declining, or plateauing. There is the church and there is the steeple

The next step is to determine just how many houses of worship there are in the United States. The author attended seminary when Dr. Elmer Towns said the number of churches in the United States was approximately 350,000.²⁰ C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler studied this question. They found, through many sources, that, “. . . estimates suggest that around 350,000 houses of worship may exist in the United States . . .”²¹ However, there were some questions as to how that number was determined. They note, “. . . we will use a measurement strategy that is less biased than earlier efforts, which were based primarily on church list

²⁰ Elmer Towns, “Evan 710 Evangelism and Church Growth Class Notes” (lecture, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, Spring 1989).

²¹ C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, “How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week? An Alternative Approach to Measurement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 3 (September 2005): 309.

compilations and phone and business directories.”²² They looked through the available data and came to this conclusion: “Combining the two known congregational totals . . . and the two proportions . . . results in an estimate of 330,765 - which we have rounded up to 331,000.”²³ Concerning the margin of error, they stated, “The 95 percent confidence interval for the proportion Catholic/Orthodox/mainline Protestant is 2.27 percentage points-resulting in a high estimate of 356,461 congregations and a low estimate of 308,525 congregations.”²⁴ This number would include Christian and non-Christian houses of worship in the United States. The number of non-Christian congregations is estimated at 11,720, or 3.54% of the congregations accounted for in the United States.²⁵ Subtracting that from the estimated total number of churches (330,765 – 11,720) would result in approximately 319,045 Christian churches in the United States.

Look Inside

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the U. S. resident population was estimated at 130,879,718 on July 1, 1939.²⁶ The United States crossed the 200 million mark in 1968²⁷, and on January 18, 2007, the United States surpassed 300 million residents.²⁸

²² Hadaway and Marler, “How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week,” 309.

²³ Ibid., 310.

²⁴ Ibid., 311.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Resident Population--Estimates by Age, Sex, and Race: July 1, 1930,” United States Census Bureau, accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/popest/data/national/asrh/pre-1980/tables/PE-11-1930s.xls>.

²⁷ “Resident Population--estimates from 1900-2009,” United States Census Bureau, accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0002.xls>.

²⁸ “U.S. and World Population Clock,” United States Census Bureau, accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/popclock/>.

Survey says

Gallup, Inc., the research company founded by George Gallup in 1935, has surveyed Americans about church attendance since 1939. Gallup, through its survey, has tried to get a clear picture of what percentage of Americans are in church on any given Sunday. David Olson makes this observation:

Since 1939 Gallup pollsters have asked Americans if they went to church in the last week. In February 1939 Gallup asked, “Did you happen to go to church last Sunday?” and 41 percent of people said yes. And every year since, while the question has changed to “Did you yourself happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?” the answer has remained the same. Around 40 percent of people say yes, they went to church this week.²⁹

Stanley Presser and Linda Stinson did a study published in 1998 about surveys and church attendance. They looked at dates and studies going back to the early 1950’s that showed, “Direct religious attendance items in the National Election Study also shows no change from 1952 to 1994, except for a small decline of 5 percentage points between 1964 and 1968.”³⁰ They also looked at the results from Gallup and determined that it, “. . . shows there has been little change over the past 30 years in reports to the Gallup.”³¹ Ultimately, they found that, “. . . no matter how one asks direct questions about religious attendance, approximately 40 percent of respondents claim to attend during any given week.”³²

Even more recently, the percentages have held the same. Olson reports that, “From 2002 to 2005, the yes answer to Gallup polls ranged from 40 to 44 percent. During that same period,

²⁹ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “What Percentage Attend,” Logos Bible Software.

³⁰ Stanley Presser and Linda Stinson, “Data Collection Mode and Social Desirability Bias in Self-Reported Religious Attendance,” *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 1 (February 1998): 142.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 139-140.

the Barna Research Group reported similar findings: 43 to 47 percent of American adults surveyed said that they attended church on the past weekend.^{”³³}

Rebecca Barnes summarizes it this way, “...Gallup polls and other statisticians have turned in the same percentage – about 40% of the population – of average weekend church attendees for the past 70 years...”³⁴ But the question, as Olson notes, is, “Whether the answers accurately describe people’s actual behavior is another story.”³⁵

What is Forty Percent?

If that percentage (40%) is converted into the number of people attending a worship service on any given Sunday, then in 1939, 40 percent of the population would be 52,351,857. So, in 1939, approximately 52 million Americans were in church on any given Sunday. In 1968, when the U.S. population reached 200 million, 40 percent of the population attending church would mean that on any given Sunday, 80 million would be in church. And, when the population reached 300 million, using the same 40 percent of the population attending church on any given Sunday, it would mean that 120 million would be in church on any given Sunday.

Where are the people?

If there are 120 million people today that are in church on Sunday, and there are 319,045 Christian churches in the United States, this would mean the average attendance per church is approximately 376 people on any given Sunday. To some, this number seems to be too large, particularly in an era of increased secularism in the United States. Is this an accurate picture of

³³ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “What Percentage Attend,” Logos Bible Software.

³⁴ Rebecca Barnes and Linda Lowry, “7 Startling Facts: An Up-Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” ChurchLeaders.com, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>.

³⁵ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “What Percentage Attend,” Logos Bible Software.

how many Americans are in church on any given Sunday? Or, does research reveal a different number, a different picture of the American church? Rebecca Barnes notes that, “...a different sort of research paints quite a disparate picture of how many Americans attend a local church on any given Sunday.”³⁶

In their research, Hadaway and Marler determined that the average attendance for all congregations, Christian and non-Christian, was 161.³⁷ So, that is a significant difference, almost 57% less than the 376 per congregation should the 40% number be accurate. What did Hadaway and Marler find to be the approximate total number of people in the United States in a house of worship on Sunday? “Based on 331,000 congregations, we estimate that 53.6 million Americans attend worship services during an average week.”³⁸ There were many details involved, but this was the conclusion:

How many Americans, then, attend worship each week? We conclude that: (1) the best estimate for the total number of American congregations is 331,000, 25 percent of which are mainline Protestants, 54 percent conservative/evangelical Protestants, 7 percent Catholic/Orthodox, 11 percent other Christian, and 3 percent non-Christian; (2) average worship attendance varies among denominational groups, ranging from 125 or less for mainline Protestants, evangelicals, and other Christian groups to over 850 participants for Roman Catholics; and (3) therefore, 21 percent of Americans attend worship during an average week. Although these data remain estimates, we are satisfied that not only do they represent the best data of their kind to date but also they are, in every case, generous estimates.³⁹

Why is there such a difference with the data? How is it possible that the numbers are so different? And, if the lower numbers are indeed accurate (and generous at that), then what does that say about the effectiveness of small groups?

³⁶ Barnes and Lowry, “7 Startling Facts,” <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>, (accessed 2/15/2015).

³⁷ Hadaway and Marler, “How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week,” 316.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 318.

Halo effect in polling

The disparity in the data can be explained. This difference between how a survey question is answered and actual behavior is something sociologists call the “halo effect.” Hadaway and Marler explain it this way, “People tend to report what they usually do, what they would like to think they usually do, and what they used to do, rather than give an objective report of their actual behavior.”⁴⁰

Hadaway and Marler are not the only ones coming to this conclusion. Stanley Presser and Linda Stinson also said weekly attendance as measured in surveys is inaccurate. They write, “Our results support Hadaway et al.’s (1993) conclusion: Respondents in conventional surveys substantially over-report their religious attendance.”⁴¹

This inaccurate reporting was not just found in certain types of churches or regions of the United States. David Olson writes that this is observed across demographic and geographic lines. He states, “Religious behavior was found to be misreported, even by the members of a conservative, Bible-belt church. Most of the misreporting was by church members who considered themselves to be among the most active members of the congregation. Americans over report socially desirable behavior and underreport socially undesirable behavior.”⁴²

This was not just the case with churches in the United States. Olson continues,

In recent studies of selected counties in the United States and Canada, individuals were counted as they went into houses of worship. The researchers later interviewed a random sampling of adults in these counties. They found that the survey results were inflated by

⁴⁰ Hadaway and Marler, “How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week,” 308.

⁴¹ Presser and Stinson, “Data Collection,” 144.

⁴² Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “The Halo Effect,” Logos Bible Software.

about 100 percent from the actual attendance figures . . . Canadians over reported their attendance by the same percentage.⁴³

Adjusting for the halo effect

While the information above establishes attendance reporting inaccuracies and helps explains the reasons for such inaccuracies in reporting data, the real question is whether the data can be measured differently to compensate for the “halo effect” and reconciled to reflect more accurate numbers. Presser and Stinson answer affirmatively and find, “The research on misreporting of religious attendance that we present here is largely free of these complications.”⁴⁴

What does the data reveal once the “halo effect” is accounted for and the measurements are adjusted to compensate for this? Presser and Stinson make this observation concerning the adjustment, “This difference in measurement approach . . . alter[s] the observed trend in religious attendance over time: In contrast to the almost constant attendance rate recorded by conventional interviewer-administered items, approaches minimizing social desirability bias reveal that weekly attendance has declined continuously over the past three decades.”⁴⁵ In their study, they go on to state, “The time-use items reveal a dramatically different pattern. The national samples registered a drop in religious attendance . . . ”⁴⁶

The gap between reported numbers and actual numbers has not remained stagnant or narrowed, but has actually increased over time. Presser and Stinson continue,

⁴³ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “The Halo Effect,” Logos Bible Software.

⁴⁴ Presser and Stinson, “Data Collection,” 137.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 142.

Our findings also suggest that misreporting has increased in the last 30 years, thus distorting trends in religious attendance. Although reports to interviewer-administered direct items have shown little change in attendance over time, measures less subject to misreporting (time-use items and self-administered items) reveal a continuous decline in attendance since the mid-1960s, providing support for the hypothesis that America has become more secularized.⁴⁷

Actual numbers

So, what are the actual numbers? How many Americans do attend church services on any given Sunday? As one looks at the data, even from different sources, it all points to similar findings. For example, Hadaway and Marler conclude, “Based on 331,000 congregations, we estimate that 53.6 million Americans attend worship services during an average week.”⁴⁸ David Olson quotes from Hadaway and Marler in estimating the percentage of weekly church attendance and writes that it is, “17.7 percent of the American population in 2004.”⁴⁹ Olson uses other research that corroborates the percentage of Americans in church on any given weekend and observes, “The research of the American Church Research Project shows that 17.5 percent of the population attended an orthodox Christian church on any given weekend in 2005.”⁵⁰ This represents a decline, as Olson notes, “The percentage of Americans who attended a Christian church on any given weekend declined from 20.4 percent in 1990 to 17.5 percent in 2005.”⁵¹

Olson gives perspective on this decline, and not just in percentages. In real numbers, “The population of the United States has grown by 52 million people from 1990 to 2006, which happens to be the same number that attend church on any given weekend . . . More than 91

⁴⁷ Presser and Stinson, “Data Collection,” 145.

⁴⁸ Hadaway and Marler, “How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week,” 316.

⁴⁹ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “The Halo Effect,” Logos Bible Software.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “How Many New Americans Have Arrived Since 1990,” Logos Bible Software.

million people live in the United States today who did not live here 16 years ago.”⁵² Another way to look at this is that in the 16 years from 1990 to 2006, the American church did not add one person to church attendance, while the United States population grew by 52 million.

Olson goes on further to state, “From 2000 to 2005 . . . *In no single state did church attendance keep up with population growth!* Of the 50 states, Hawaii’s church attendance came closest to keeping up with population growth, missing that goal by the narrowest of margins - .02 of one percentage point!”⁵³

Thom Rainer is another voice that is talking about the decline in attendance. He writes, “The American church is not growing. From 1990 to 2000 the U. S. population grew from 248 million to 281 million, a 13 percent increase. In that same period, worship attendance in American churches grew by slightly less than 1 percent.”⁵⁴

James MacDonald, pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel in Rolling Meadows, Illinois, makes this observation:

I do remember the impact of a book that came out in 1980 titled *The Complete Book of Church Growth* by Elmer Towns, John Vaughan, and David Seifert. It lists the top 200 churches in North America by attendance. Interestingly, in 1980, the largest two churches had about 5,000 attendees. By the time they got down to the 200th church, they had gone under 2,000 in attendance. As of 2011, there were 1,200+ churches in America with attendance over 2,000; more than 100 churches that have attendance over 5,000; and more than 25 with attendance over 10,000. But wait! It’s a trick, because during that same time the population has grown by more than 40 percent and the total number of people actually attending church has *fallen by greater than 15 percent*. Bottom line: in real numbers, millions of people who were worshipping Christ in a Protestant church in

⁵² Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “How Many New Americans Have Arrived Since 1990,” Logos Bible Software.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005) 73.

1980 are not doing so today. So who are we kidding . . . Even if you are seeing a “win” on your side of town, we are a “loss” collectively.⁵⁵

In fact, it is not the churches that are growing; rather, it is the unbelieving population that is increasing. Christine Wicker notes, “Nonbelievers are the fastest-growing faith group in America in numbers and percentage. From 1990 to 2001, which was the last good count, they more than doubled, from 14 million to 29 million. Their proportion of the population grew from 8 percent to more than 14 percent.”⁵⁶ More recently, in the 2014 Religious Landscape Study conducted by Pew Research Center and shown in Figure 1-2 above, the unaffiliated (atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular) has increased from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent of the population.

Alvin Reid looks at it from an unchurched perspective and finds that, “41% of Americans are hard-core unchurched (have no clear understanding of the gospel, and have had little or no contact with a Bible teaching church), larger than the number of nominal Christians (30%) or active, participating Christians (29%).”⁵⁷

How Are Churches Growing?

Despite growing evidence that the church in America is declining, there are many that say that their church (or churches) are growing, and many state that small groups are an integral part of this growth. How does one reconcile the growing churches with the evidence thus far presented? Carl George commented on types of church growth over two decades ago when he

⁵⁵ James MacDonald, *Vertical Church: What Every Heart Longs For. What Every Church Can Be* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2012), under “Placing Soteriology Above Doxology,” Logos Bible Software.

⁵⁶ Christine Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation: The Surprising Crisis Inside the Church* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2008), 53.

⁵⁷ Alvin Reid, *Radically Unchurched: Who They Are and How to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2002), 21.

said, "With very few exceptions, all significantly large churches in the United States and Canada are receptor churches built on a system of feeder churches. . . . In one situation I studied, it appeared that over 95 percent of the growth had come from other fellowships, rather than from new conversions."⁵⁸ Alvin Reid supports this with his findings, "Of the 350,000 churches in the U.S . . . less than 1 percent is growing by conversion growth."⁵⁹ According to George Hunter, III, "In the USA, only about 20 percent of the nation's 360,000 churches are growing, and 19 of the 20 are growing mostly by biological growth . . . or transfer growth."⁶⁰

This decline in church is not as a result of lack of resources. Tom Johnston writes,

285 Billion! That's what the American Church spends on ministry each year, on average (Dr. David Barrett, author *World Christian Encyclopedia*). That's right – \$285 BILLION, not thousand, or even million. Based on this, if the church in the America were a single corporation, it would be the THIRD LARGEST in the world, right behind ExxonMobil and General Electric and just ahead of Microsoft. And yet, Christians as a percentage of U.S. population continue to decline.⁶¹

Despite all the materials and trainings and resources that have been put into small groups systems, it has yielded few results. Wicker evaluated the data and comes to this conclusion, "Evangelical Christianity in America is dying. The great evangelical movements of today are not a vanguard. They are a remnant, unraveling at every edge. Look at it any way you like: Conversions. Baptisms. Membership. Retention. Participation. Giving. Attendance. Religious literacy. Effect on culture. All are down and dropping."⁶²

⁵⁸ George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, 43-44.

⁵⁹ Reid, *Radically Unchurched*, 23.

⁶⁰ George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978), 32.

⁶¹ Tom Johnston, "285 Billion," The Praxis Center for Church Development, March 16, 2007, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://praxiscenter.blogspot.com/2007/03/285-billion.html>.

⁶² Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation*, ix.

What does all this mean? Wicker concludes, “The truth behind all these numbers is that evangelicals are not converting and cannot convert non-Christian adult Americans.”⁶³ Olson notes: “In reality the church in America is not booming. It is in crisis. On any given Sunday, the vast majority of Americans are absent from church. Even more troublesome, as the American population continues to grow, the church falls further and further behind. If trends continue, by 2050 the percentage of Americans attending church will be half the 1990 figure.”⁶⁴

What does this have to do with small groups? Many see small groups as the best way to grow a church, or at least, hold onto its numbers. Virtually all would agree that small groups are an effective way to disciple believers. There are a number of materials and pastors that claim this, as those mentioned above are representative of many. Small groups should be the most effective way to evangelize and make disciples, but this statement does not square with the evidence presented above. Perhaps Reid’s statement applies, even if it is one that will not be well received, “Most evangelistic methods used today are ineffective in making disciples.”⁶⁵ This paper will assess this and try to answer why small groups are not effective.

Statement of Limitations

The following are the parameters of this dissertation. First, when this paper uses the term small group, it is used generically. It is not used to define a particular type of small group or methodology. There are groups that meet on a church campus and groups that meet off campus, such as in a house or coffee shop. Some churches call their Sunday School program a small group. In this written discourse, all of these will be considered a small group.

⁶³ Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation*, 64, 67.

⁶⁴ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “Is the American Church Booming,” Logos Bible Software.

⁶⁵ Reid, *Radically Unchurched*, 24.

When a small group is referenced in this paper, a particular ideology is not given preference. For example, there are open and closed small groups. Some groups focus on Bible study, others on fellowship, and still others on service projects. All of these are considered a small group in this composition.

There are some groups that are part of an organization or network, and as such, follow a specific methodology. Some groups are very well organized and follow a specific plan, such as a G-12 group.⁶⁶ Others are less organized. While each of these groups may have a different methodology, for the purpose of this paper, all will be recognized as a small group.

This dissertation focuses on American churches and the data will come from American churches. While a study of small groups outside the United States would be interesting and beneficial, it is not within the scope of this writing.

This paper is not meant to be a comprehensive examination of every small group of every church in the United States. There has been a sampling of individuals in a cross-section of churches in the United States; from mega churches to medium-sized churches to small, rural churches. This dissertation will provide a glimpse of what typical church attenders might be experiencing in their small group, but by no means will this composition examine what every church attender experiences in every church in the United States.

Concerning the survey itself, not every question will be selected for analysis and observation in this dissertation. The following questions will be considered as found in Appendix A in this paper: Questions number 5, 24, and 26 through 41. This does not mean that the other questions have less value; to the contrary, they are included as a basis for further study.

⁶⁶ For more information about G-12, please refer to Joel Comiskey, *Groups of 12: A New Way to Mobilize Leaders and Multiply Groups in Your Church* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 1999), 1ff.

Finally, this dissertation does not imply that every church in the United States is experiencing the same thing. Some may be growing, while others have experienced a plateau or have declined. What this composition will do is examine the biblical basis and develop a theology for small groups and compare this to the data provided and draw some observations and conclusions. The purpose would be for the Lord to use this paper in some small way to add to the health of the church.

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical basis for this dissertation begins with the premise that theology breeds methodology. The small group is the church. Small groups are not to be an appendage or even a program of the church. It was not designed to be the focus of exponential growth or even a way to keep people attending a service. It is not just a core part of the church. The contention of this paper is that the small group is the church.

In order to support this contention, there will be a review of Scripture, especially those passages that apply to ecclesiology. A definition of the church will be posited. It will be necessary to define the church and to understand the beginnings of the New Testament church in Jerusalem.

The church is composed of people who have given their lives to Christ. That is the church. The church gathers in a variety of settings. The church meets on Sunday in a large gathering. The church will have one or more smaller gatherings that are called small groups. A subset of this is the one-on-one meetings that should be occurring as a natural byproduct of small groups.

The role of the church is to make disciples. The view of this author is that evangelizing and discipling are not separate tasks; rather, evangelism is part of the discipleship process. It is the contention of this paper that this is an integral component of small group ministry.

Definition of Terms

There is a distinction made between community and a biblical community, so the distinction will be defined below.

Community – Community is defined by Merriam-Webster as:

a unified body of individuals:

a: state, commonwealth

b: the people with common interests living in a particular area; *broadly*: the area itself the problems of a large *community*.

c: an interacting population of various kinds of individuals (as species) in a common location.

d: a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society a *community* of retired persons.

e: a group linked by a common policy

f: a body of persons or nations having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests the international *community*.

g: a body of persons of common and especially professional interests scattered through a larger society the academic *community*.⁶⁷

Biblical Community – a group of two or more people that are gathered in Jesus' name.

Christ's Basic Bodies – a community formed and baptized by the Holy Spirit. Each member is led by the embodied Christ, who edifies and reveals his presence, power, and

⁶⁷ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, online ed., s.v. "Community," accessed May 5, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community>.

purpose through them.⁶⁸ This can be referred to as a cell group, small group, home group, life group, and other similar designations.

Methodology

Chapter one began by looking at the importance of small groups by leaders of churches in the United States. As cited earlier in this chapter, there are claims of what a small group can do for a church regarding growth and attendance retention. An analysis was done of church attendance in the United States to determine if churches are indeed growing, or at least, retaining their numbers. The results are neither. Church attendance has actually been declining, and this has been happening for decades. If this is the case, how is it then that small groups are succeeding at growing the church, or at least, helping the church to not lose ground?

Chapter two will delve into the hermeneutics of small groups. The science and art of biblical interpretation is applied to passages such as Acts 2, since it is one of the most-quoted passage in relationship to small groups. An example of eisegesis and exegesis of Acts 2 is provided.

Chapter three is written with the premise that “theology breeds methodology.” Most of the books written about small groups are focused on methodology. Chapters three and four will focus on a study towards a biblical theology of the church and small groups. The purpose is to use the plumb line of Scripture to begin any conversation about small groups. Chapter three will focus on the theology of small groups.

Chapter four will continue with “theology breeds methodology,” focusing on the ecclesiology of small groups.

⁶⁸ Ralph W. Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies: Embracing God's Presence, Power, and Purposes in True Biblical Community* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 2008), 56.

Chapter five will look at church history and the role of small groups throughout the last two thousand years. Although this is not an exhaustive study, it should be representative enough to dispel any notion that small groups are a recent phenomenon in church history. Indeed, small groups have had a vital role throughout the history of the church.

Chapter six is a review of the data that has been collected from several small group members and leaders. It represents 145 people from 35 different churches. The size varies greatly, from small churches of fifty to a church of ten thousand, the result being that there is a variety of small groups represented in the survey. While the survey examines small group health from several different aspects, there are three areas in particular that are considered in this paper.

A Review of the Literature

A number of books and articles were relevant to this author. While all the sources made contributions to this study, the sources below stood out amongst the rest.

Books

Larry Crabb's *Connecting: Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships* is a book that, at *prima facie*, one would think was written by a small group pastor. In this book, Crabb makes both a charge for the church and a personal confession. Crabb writes, "The greatest need in modern civilization is the development of communities— true communities where the heart of God is home, where the humble and wise learn to shepherd those on the path behind them, where trusting strugglers lock arms with others as together they journey on."⁶⁹ Crabb also makes a confession in his book:

⁶⁹ Larry Crabb, *Connecting: Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships: A Radical New Vision* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1997), under "My Midlife Crisis," Logos Bible Software.

Before in my counseling, I spent too much time with the flesh. I over-studied doubt, denial, self-preserving psychological dynamics, and our selfishly driven strategies for relating to people. These topics are worthy of serious investigation, but it's easy (and appealing to the flesh) to become more fascinated with these matters than we need to be and, in the process, less appreciative of the power available in experiencing Christ.⁷⁰

He came to the conclusion that the “surest route to overcoming problems and becoming the people we were meant to be is reconnecting with God and with our community.”⁷¹ After reflecting on his years in his profession, he concludes, “I am now working toward the day when communities of God’s people, ordinary Christians whose lives regularly intersect, will accomplish most of the good that we now depend on mental health professionals to provide.”⁷²

Christ’s Basic Bodies, written by Ralph Neighbour, is, in his words, “. . . another whack at a message that is my life’s calling and passion. It shouts, ‘churchianity blinds the people of God from being the body of Christ.’⁷³ Dr. Neighbour compares the American church of this generation to a “. . . private goldfish bowl, now fully isolated from its surroundings. When fish stare into the glass walls of their bowl, they see only their mirrored reflection. They cannot see the world outside.”⁷⁴ While his words are strong, the message is clear, “The contemporary church is a living thing . . . it requires a specific environment in which to survive and thrive. I believe it may be suffocating from the environment it currently inhabits, but doesn’t realize it.”⁷⁵ He calls the church back to its theological foundations by stating, “Far too much attention is paid

⁷⁰ Crabb, *Connecting*, under “Three Ingredients of Healing Community,” Logos Bible Software.

⁷¹ Crabb, *Connecting*, under “Designed to Connect,” Logos Bible Software.

⁷² Crabb, *Connecting*, under “A Shift in My Thinking,” Logos Bible Software.

⁷³ Neighbour, *Christ’s Basic Bodies*, 15.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 16.

to the management of cells compared to the awesome ecclesiology that supports this ‘last days’ church life.”⁷⁶

Jim Egli’s and Dwight Marable’s *Small Groups, Big Impact: Connecting People to God and One Another in Thriving Groups* is well-researched and makes a valuable contribution in the study of small groups. In Marable’s words, “This book is based on a research project that Jim Egli and I conducted to answer the question, ‘what are the factors that impact conversion growth through small groups?’”⁷⁷

The Second Reformation by William Beckham, challenges the status quo by asking the question, “Are our churches really incarnating the Gospel of Jesus Christ?”⁷⁸ The observation is made and then supported throughout that, “... whenever God renews the church, key elements are a rediscovery of close-knit community and the ministry of all believers.”⁷⁹

While Egli’s and Marable’s book emphasizes results from research, Michael Mack’s *Small Group Vital Signs: Seven Indicators of Health That Make Groups Flourish* draws similar conclusions, but focuses on the practical application. He states,

This is the main reason I wrote this book. I believe God can and will use healthy small group communities to change this world, one life at a time. But this will not go unopposed. One of Satan’s main strategies is to convince Christians to play it safe, settle for unexceptional results, and aim for comfort. I don’t want to see small groups give into Satan’s corruption and watered down schemes.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Neighbour, *Christ’s Basic Bodies*, 17.

⁷⁷ Jim Egli and Dwight Marable, *Small Groups, Big Impact: Connecting People to God and One Another in Thriving Groups* (Saint Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2011), 11-12.

⁷⁸ William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the Twenty-First Century* (Houston, TX: TOUCH Publications, 1995), 9.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁰ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 18.

The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches is a wake-up call for the American church. David Olson provides a sobering assessment of the American church. He writes,

To the casual observer, the American church appears to be booming . . . In reality the church in America is not booming. It is in crisis. On any given Sunday, the vast majority of Americans are absent from church. Even more troublesome, as the American population continues to grow, the church falls further and further behind. If trends continue, by 2050 the percentage of Americans attending church will be half the 1990 figure.⁸¹

His research should make every church and every pastor ask the question, “Is the church making a real difference in our communities?”

Articles

There were two articles that helped greatly in understanding the misreporting of church attendance. The first was “Data Collection Mode and Social Desirability Bias in Self-Reported Religious Attendance.” *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 1 (February 1998): 137-45. This article helped explain why the church attendance numbers and percentages are inaccurate.

The second article is, “How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week? An Alternative Approach to Measurement.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 3 (September 2005): 307-22. This helped provide an alternative method of measurement that was more accurate and gave a better picture of church attendance.

Scripture

Ralph Neighbour has said, “Theology breeds methodology.” There should be a scriptural basis for what the church does, even in how it does church. Below are several passages that

⁸¹ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under “Is the American Church Booming?,” Logos Bible Software.

should shape how the church and small groups should be understood. All quotations will be taken from the New King James Version.⁸²

Deuteronomy 6:4 - “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord *is* one!”⁸³ At first, one may not readily see the connection between this verse, known as the Shema, and small groups, but it is a cornerstone to understanding biblical community.

Matthew 16:18 – “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”⁸⁴ In this verse, Jesus explains what the church is and how it is to operate. In short, the church is people and it is to be on the offense.

Matthew 18:20 – “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”⁸⁵ This verse is often used to support small group systems in the church. However, it is not only defining the numbers that can make up a church or a small group (at least two people), but it also reminds us of Jesus’ promise that He is in its midst. This promise is not an unconditional promise. It is a promise to those two or more that are gathered “in My name.”

Matthew 6:33 – “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”⁸⁶ This verse is used by the author as a reminder of how to prioritize small group ministry without sacrificing important parts. It is not about choosing one over the other. It is seeing how all the parts fit together, arranged properly, so that the small group meets in His name.

⁸² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

⁸³ Deut. 6:4–5.

⁸⁴ Matt. 16:13–18.

⁸⁵ Matt. 18:20.

⁸⁶ Matt. 6:33.

Matthew 28:19-20 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.”⁸⁷ This passage provides the command of Jesus to make disciples, which begins with evangelism and continues with those new converts being in a discipleship relationship.

John 17:3 – “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”⁸⁸ This verse helps to explain that an essential purpose of a small group and a church is to know God.

Acts 2:41-47 – The following is an oft-cited passage concerning small groups:

⁴¹ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.⁸⁹

There have been a number of methods for small groups that have been derived from this passage of Scripture. However, this passage is not a small group methodology. Rather, it describes what happened as the church began in Jerusalem. There was a reason they went from house to house and broke bread, and so on. This passage, along with others, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter two.

⁸⁷ Matt. 28:19–20.

⁸⁸ John 17:2–3.

⁸⁹ Acts 2: 41–47.

CHAPTER TWO

The Hermeneutics of Small Groups

During the Gulf War II in 2003, there was a man in Iraq who was the Minister of Information. His name was Saeed al-Sahaf. He was derisively known as “Baghdad Bob.” He would speak daily to the Iraqi people to assure them of American failure if they attempt to invade. When indeed, the U.S. did land troops and start their march to the city of Baghdad, Baghdad Bob denied they were approaching, even while American tanks were appearing on the outskirts of the city. He was captured inside of Baghdad and interrogated and released. Some months later, he gave a few interviews. In one interview, he was quoted as saying, “My information was correct, but my interpretations were not.”⁹⁰

The information on small groups is ubiquitous and is communicated through a variety of mediums such as books, videos, and conferences, just to mention a few. The question to be asked is not whether information is communicated, because it clearly is. The question to ask is, just like Baghdad Bob, whether the interpretation of the information is correct.

Hermeneutics, Exegesis, Exposition and Small Groups

It is here that one can recognize the great value of the principles of hermeneutics as it relates to communicating information, and, specifically for the purpose of this paper, the information about small groups. Hermeneutics and communication are related. Bernard Ramm wrote about this when he was explaining hermeneutics, “When a person speaks or writes he

⁹⁰ Emily DePrang, “‘Baghdad Bob’ and His Ridiculous, True Predictions,” *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2013, accessed December 2, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/baghdad-bob-and-his-ridiculous-true-predictions/274241/>.

gives meaning; when he listens or reads he receives meaning. Hermeneutics is then deeply imbedded in the larger structure of communication.”⁹¹

What is hermeneutics? “Hermeneutics...is the science and art of interpreting the Bible.”⁹² Milton Terry explains,

Hermeneutics, therefore, is both a science and an art. As a science, it enunciates principles, investigates the laws of thought and language, and classifies its facts and results. As an art, it teaches what application these principles should have, and establishes their soundness by showing their practical value in the elucidation of the more difficult Scriptures. The hermeneutical art thus cultivates and establishes a valid exegetical procedure.⁹³

What is a valid exegetical procedure, or more simply, what is exegesis? Exegesis is “The determination of the meaning of the biblical text in its historical and literary contexts.”⁹⁴ Roy B. Zuck further elaborates, “The exegetical process takes place in the workshop, the warehouse. It is a process in private, a perspiring task in which the Bible student examines the backgrounds, meanings, and forms of words; studies the structure and parts of sentences; seeks to ascertain the original textual reading (textual criticism); etc.”⁹⁵

When this is done, the principles of a given topic can be effectively communicated within its historical and grammatical context. This stage is called exposition. Zuck defines exposition

⁹¹ Ralph G. Turnbull, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1967), 100.

⁹² Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 19.

⁹³ Milton Spenser Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise On the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 20.

⁹⁴ Zuck, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 20.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 21.

as “the communication of the meaning of the text along with its relevance to present-day hearers.”⁹⁶

How do exegesis and exposition relate to one another? Zuck notes, “An effective expositor is first an effective exegete. Exegesis precedes exposition, just as baking a cake comes before serving it.”⁹⁷ Zuck contrasts exposition and exegesis by observing, “Exegesis is thus a means to an end, a step toward exposition. Exegesis is more technical and is basic to exposition, which is more practical.”⁹⁸ F.F. Bruce notes, “To be valid, exposition must be firmly based on exegesis: the meaning of the text for hearers today must be related to its meaning for the hearers to whom it was first addressed.”⁹⁹

Why is this important as it relates to small groups? It has been said that if one asks the wrong question, then one will get the wrong answer. If one does not read the Scriptures concerning the church and small groups within the context of its historical, cultural and literary settings, it is easy to eisegete (read into) the passage what one wants it to say, rather than doing the hard work of letting the passage speak for itself and within its context.

This is similar to the experience when learning another language. Until one becomes fluent in a language, there is the process of translation that one has to understand the words in his/her own contextual setting (language). The author had this experience while living in Brazil. It was necessary to understand people in their context and not impose the author’s context into the translation. It was hard work and this author was surprised at how tired he could get after

⁹⁶ Zuck, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 20.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 21-22.

⁹⁹ F.F. Bruce, “Interpretation of the Bible,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 505.

having a conversation with someone for just a short while. It is interesting to note that the word *hermeneutics* carries this connotation:

. . . The verb *hermēneuō* came to refer to bringing someone to an understanding of something in his language (thus explanation) or in another language (thus translation). The English word *interpret* is used at times to mean “explain” and at other times “translate.” Of the 19 times *hermēneuō* and *hermēneia* occur in the New Testament, they are more frequently used in the sense of translating.¹⁰⁰

If one is not careful, one can place the information above the proper interpretation of that information and the result can be a method of doing small groups that is placed above the biblical principles and purposes of small groups. Joel Comiskey observes that, “Some pastors are not aware of the biblical values that undergird their philosophy of ministry and end up choosing the most popular strategy at the time.”¹⁰¹

Interpretation of Acts 2:42-47 Exhibit A

One of the author’s Bible College professors said in class, “A proof text without a context is a pretext.” One must be mindful of not using proof-texts to support personal preferences. Comiskey writes, “We have to be careful not to erect entire models from a few New Testament passages.”¹⁰² For example, one of the most-quoted passages used for small groups is Acts 2:42-46:

⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all,

¹⁰⁰ Zuck, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 19.

¹⁰¹ Joel Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church: Developing Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Moreno, CA: CCS Publishing, 2012), 28.

¹⁰² Ibid., 29.

as anyone had need.⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,¹⁰³

The author, in an informal gathering of small group ministers, once heard an explanation of one church's small group ministry based on this passage. It was explained that there are two types of churches – the corporate church and the community church. The corporate church is a place that has buildings, where one learns “it,” a place where someone is teaching doctrine and giving direction, and a place that offers a relationship with Jesus. The community church, in contrast, is when the church leaves the building, a place where you live “it,” a place where people dialog and debate and offers a relationship with other Christians. Further, they explained specifics about their model of small groups. They said it was based on Acts 2:42-46. In this passage, they see five types of groups, so they have five types of groups that someone can join at their church:

- a. Study group - emphasis is on studying the Bible
- b. Share group - doing life together. These groups concentrate on fellowship and are formed with people who have something in common.
- c. Service group - main focus is outreach or some type of service within the church.
- d. Support group - similar to divorce care, grief share, or celebrate recovery.
- e. Search group - leader and co-leader are Christians and the rest of the group is made up of seekers.

This is a classic example of proof texting. While this is a method that one church is using today, it does not reflect the reasons the believers in the 1st century church in Jerusalem chose to meet in the way they did in Acts 2. In other words, while the pastor in this church provided an explanation of the “how” in this 21st century church, it is not reflective of either the “how” or the “why” of the first church in Jerusalem. This exposition of Acts 2 does not take into

¹⁰³ Acts 2:42–46.

consideration at all the historical or cultural setting which is described in Acts 2. Yet, this type of “eisegesis” is prevalent in small group resources. The emphasis is on the “how” and not the “why,” and certainly the exegesis is not within the context of the 1st century church. Michael Mack notes this tendency to focus on the pragmatic at the expense of proper exegesis when he writes, “It’s fascinating to me that the Holy Spirit did not inspire New Testament writers to give us methods or systems for doing small group ministry. Instead, we see instructions for how to *be* the church; live together in the body of Christ, and successfully reach a world that needs God and biblical community.”¹⁰⁴

This is an easy trap to fall into, and Comiskey explains this as he describes another common trap: “Another way to search for a biblical foundation is to look for proof texts that stipulate how we should meet. Of course, the New Testament contains many texts that talk about churches that met in homes. . . . All the New Testament letters were written to 1st century house churches.”¹⁰⁵

Comiskey further elaborates on the dangers of what this author calls eisegeting small groups into a passage. Comiskey puts it this way, “Although we can say that the early church met in homes, we are unwise to try to build an exact pattern for every modern church. This is what I call proof texting because no absolute pattern for house churches exists.”¹⁰⁶ Comiskey concludes by writing, “Rather than using proof texts, we have to do the hard work of putting the pieces together and filling in a few gaps to define principles for today’s church.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Mack, *Small Group Vital Sign*, 22.

¹⁰⁵ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 31.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Interpretation of Acts 2:42-47 Exhibit B

Concerning the passage in Acts 2, the best example of doing the “hard work of putting the pieces together and filling in a few gaps to define principles for today’s church” is the exegesis of Acts 2 that this author has witnessed is from a missionary who is ministering to Muslims. He has seen hundreds come to Christ through his ministry while applying the principles from Acts 2 to his ministry context. He recently spoke at Noelridge Park Church and the following is an overview of his teaching on Acts 2.¹⁰⁸ The result was insight into the principles of small groups.

As this missionary began to teach on Acts 2, he explained what it was like for a Muslim to come to Christ. He states, “Muslims believe in the brotherhood of Muslims in the world. This brotherhood unites them together in *Ummah*. Loyalty to the unity is stronger than loyalty to one’s secular state...They are unable to make any independent decisions without repercussions from the community.”¹⁰⁹ He went deeper into what is at stake for a Muslim to consider coming to Christ, “. . . Muslims cannot make independent decisions about their faith . . . The consequences of changing one’s faith are very clear. They would be ostracized, persecuted or even be killed if they change their religion. Islam encompassed all aspects of their lives since birth.”¹¹⁰ He explained that it is an unbearable thought to be ostracized from a supportive community of blood relatives and other Muslims. He shared that the following statement was a common testimony from Muslims who came to Christ, “Almost all of my Muslim friends deserted me and influenced my family to go against me.”

¹⁰⁸ Name Withheld for Security Purposes, “Acts 2 and the First Church” (Sermon, Noelridge Park Church, Cedar Rapids, IA, May 24, 2015).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

One might think that the Christian church has had some effect on seeing Muslims come to Christ. However, according to this missionary, it was just the opposite. He states, “Muslims come from a very warm, friendly and supportive community. When Muslims convert to Christianity, they expect the same from the Christian community. However, they are often very disappointed to find that it is not so.” As the missionary put it, “The attitude of Christians and Christian leaders is one of the hindering factors of conversion.” Sadly, the missionary added that, “Almost all the subjects mentioned that before their conversion, the church did not have any impact or active role in their lives. Their decisions to be Christians were not due to any effort of the church.” Further, he stated that, “Some Christian friends also treated the new converts with disbelief and this further compounded their sense of alienation from loved ones and society.” Often their new Christian communities were not aware of their inner struggle and loneliness during such times. He said it was common for a new convert to question their decision. More than one had privately confessed to him that they “wondered if I should still stay or would it be better for me to return to the warm Muslim community.”

Why is it that, in general, churches hear how difficult it is to see Muslims come to Christ, yet this missionary states that he has seen hundreds in the last several years come to Christ just within his ministry context? Simply put, the missionary shared that he realized, in order to be effective at reaching Muslims, he had to minister holistically. He had to consider not just the spiritual needs, but others such as the social, emotional, and other practical needs. In other words, he had to become the new family and the new community for the Muslim who came to Christ.

He then made the connection between the Jews of Acts 2 and Muslims today. Just as Islamic culture is entrenched in the lives of Muslims today, Jewish culture was entrenched in the

lives of the Jews of Acts 2. “As Muslims came from supportive, communal backgrounds, their social needs must be recognized.”¹¹¹ So it is the same with the Jews of Acts 2. The Jews of Acts 2 risked losing their families, their place in their community and their livelihoods and even their lives by choosing to follow Christ. As the missionary stated, the Jews in Acts 2 did not develop small groups as a church growth strategy, or as a way to close the back door, nor was it any of the other myriad of reasons that we read about today in small group books. They gathered together in small groups because this was natural for them in their cultural environment. These new Christians together became a new family and a new community.

This is how to do the hard work of exegeting a passage to find the principles that can then provide the foundation for developing a theological framework for small groups. Dr. Ralph Neighbour points this out by stating, “In these last days, the Godhead has thrust a unique community into the world. There is no single model to duplicate, no single pattern that can be mimicked as the sole ‘how to.’ The biblical form must be created by a radical new expression of ἐκκλησία.”¹¹²

Without the proper theological groundwork, the foundation of small groups is built on sinking sand, a quick results and methods-oriented approach that is far from the powerful move of God in the lives of believers that was experienced in the Early Church and throughout history (more on that in chapter five). So, why would someone jump over the why and address the how? Why develop the methodology without the proper theological foundation? Why risk ending up like Baghdad Bob and be known for having the information, but getting the interpretation wrong? There is one possible explanation.

¹¹¹ Name Withheld for Security Purposes, “Acts 2 and the First Church” (Sermon, Noelridge Park Church, Cedar Rapids, IA, May 24, 2015).

¹¹² Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 27-28.

Church Consumerism

Carl George has been an advocate for small group ministry. He has been an influence on a number of pastors who represent some of the largest churches in the United States. He makes an interesting statement concerning a church model he advocated and the role of small groups. Notice that one's concept of church directly affects how one sees the role of small groups. He writes, "This corporate model affirms the possibility for churches to reach the same goal: keep growing bigger while organizing the "consumer" into ever-smaller groupings so they can be cared for in even more personal ways."¹¹³

Notice the goal of the church, according to George, is to "keep growing bigger" and to care for the consumer (church attender) by placing them in small groups. He even describes the person attending church as a customer. As he was describing the challenges of churches ministering today, he states, "Churches are faced with a similar dilemma. We quickly forget that the felt needs of our 'customers' are in a constant state of flux."¹¹⁴

As the emphasis of the church shifted to increased attendance, so did the purpose of the church as it became more dedicated to meeting the needs of its "customers." Roozen and Hadaway noticed this shift when they wrote, "Church consumerism replaced traditional religiosity as the strongest predictor of church attendance."¹¹⁵ Additionally, their research indicated ". . . that worship attendance in the eighties was less a case of particular religious beliefs, parental legacy, or social habit than it was in the seventies. In a world of busyness and multiple organizational options, traditional reasons are less compelling. Church consumerism

¹¹³ George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, 22.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹¹⁵ David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *Church and Denominational Growth: What Does (And Does Not) Cause Growth and Decline* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 264.

and personal satisfaction increasingly provide such reasons for making the ‘church choice.’”¹¹⁶ They further note, “American church attendance is increasingly influenced by a concrete, local connection (church membership) and consumer satisfaction. Institutions exist primarily to serve the individual, and not vice versa.”¹¹⁷ Ralph Neighbour makes this observation, “The ‘Megachurch’ has become the contemporary ‘supermarket’ for churchgoers.”¹¹⁸

What happens when churches go down the road of making their main goals increasing attendance and meeting felt needs of its customers through small groups? Michael Mack observes that, “The danger of serving ‘people’ and their desires is that instead of making true, fully-devoted, obedient and active disciples of Christ, what is produced are unhealthy, passive church attendees.”¹¹⁹ Larry Stockstill notes that, “In the majority of American churches, the most anyone ‘does’ in church is stare at the back of the person’s head in front of them. This lack of involvement breeds apathy, stagnation and resignation from any responsibility in the church.”¹²⁰

Mack further comments on consumerism in the church, “Consumerism has replaced commitment. Today, it seems, ‘Christians want change without challenge, strength without suffering, community without commitment.’”¹²¹ William Beckham observes that, “A large percentage of church members are consumers, not producers. They are consumer Christians because the traditional church has no viable context in which to make them producers, or use

¹¹⁶ Roozen and Hadaway, *Church and Denominational Growth*, 265.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ralph Webster Neighbour, *Where Do We Go from Here? A Guidebook for the Cell Group Church*, rev. ed. (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 2000), 57.

¹¹⁹ Michael C. Mack, *Leading from the Heart: A Group Leader's Guide to Passionate Ministry* (Houston, TX: Cell Group Resources, 2001), 43.

¹²⁰ Stockstill, *The Cell Church*, 76.

¹²¹ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 110.

them in a productive way.”¹²² Mack makes a final comment about consumerism which explains why the church has been mostly ineffective at reaching Muslims, or, for that matter, others for Christ: “Consumerism kills healthy community more than anything else.”¹²³

Therefore, what is considered a healthy and successful church (and small group) has been redefined. Towns, Stetzer and Bird allude to this when they write, “. . . The definition of ‘success’ in the typical American church is to lead a new believer to come to church, give a tithe and take on a job assisting somehow in the church’s ministry. Most of our discipleship processes are intended to produce those three things.”¹²⁴ They also discuss the results of modern discipleship today, “They are important, but they can (and often do) occur without the necessity of a life-changing impact within the Christian. Something is wrong when the typical /American Christian does not experience powerful life change when encountering the power of the gospel and the church. Yet, sadly, mediocrity happens more often than transformation.”¹²⁵ They conclude that the solution should be a re-thinking of how to do church. “It (the church) needs to be simple enough to accomplish God’s objective and complicated enough to follow the biblical teaching regarding how to accomplish it.”¹²⁶

With the emphasis on numbers and attendance, and meeting the needs and expectations of the customer instead of true discipleship, what sort of impact has this had on the church? Carl George suggests that, “All church leaders could profit by likewise asking themselves, ‘How

¹²² Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, 44.

¹²³ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 33.

¹²⁴ Elmer L. Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church: How Today's Leaders Can Learn, Discern and Move Into the Future* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007), 45.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 47.

would a marketing expert describe the fundamental motivations of the people of our parish?”¹²⁷

One church actually did this and published their results. Their findings were surprising and disappointing. One question that was answered was about attendance as it relates to spiritual growth:

Does increased attendance in ministry programs automatically equate to spiritual growth? To be brutally honest: it does not. Attendance numbers help you determine if people like what you are doing. If they like what’s happening, they choose to participate . . . But the bottom line is that attendance numbers alone will never provide the information we need in order to know conclusively that church activities are really helping people grow.¹²⁸

As noted by Hawkins and Parkinson, “It’s a whole lot easier to count heads than it is to measure heart change.”¹²⁹

In fact, they went on to say, “We discovered that higher levels of church activity did not predict increasing love for God or increasing love for other people . . . Church activity alone made no direct impact on growing the heart. . .”¹³⁰ They ask, “If the activities of the church are all about turning people toward Christ and encouraging them to grow spiritually, why doesn’t there appear to be a solid connection between participation in church activities and spiritual growth?”¹³¹ The conclusion is startling, “The church becomes less of a place to go for spiritual development and to find spiritual relationships, and more of a platform that provides serving opportunities.”¹³² Essentially, the church is only for seekers and baby Christians, and those who are more mature actually can outgrow their need for church. Joe Hellerman recognizes this is the

¹²⁷ George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*, 17.

¹²⁸ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 13-14.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 35-36.

¹³¹ Ibid., 39.

¹³² Ibid., 42.

result when “. . . traditional church models and approaches to ministry [are] driven by consumer-oriented pragmatism.”¹³³ These types of conclusions are examples of what can happen when one seeks marketing advice rather than first turning to the Word of God.

¹³³ Joe Hellerman, in Joel Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church: Developing Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Moreno, Calif.: CCS Publishing, 2012), 3.

CHAPTER THREE

The Theology of Small Groups

In the last chapter, the story of a missionary ministering to Muslims was used to help provide insight into Acts 2 and how it relates to small groups. Now, why would the church have, at best, no affect, and, at worse, a negative effect on Muslims coming to Christ? Dr. Ralph Neighbour has some insights into this problem. He may not be addressing Islam specifically, but he is addressing the root issue. It goes back to philosophy versus theology. He states, “Many church growth methods have become fads, endorsed by those who want to put patches on the old wineskin of traditional church life . . . I don’t believe in patches. I do, however, believe that new wineskins can replace the old.”¹³⁴ He further states, “Many churches have adopted new wineskins - new ways of doing church - while still filled with the old wine. The wineskins have been overemphasized. Methods and strategies are not the problem; their ecclesiology is defective.”¹³⁵

Philosophy vs. Theology of Small Groups

As previously mentioned, the majority of these small group resources focus on the “how” of small groups. Many of these resources tell the story of how small groups are working in their particular ministry environment, with a promise that if others will follow their model, they will experience similar results.

While doing this will provide one with a philosophy of ministry regarding small groups, it can also produce a shallowness, or even a lack of understanding the biblical principles that

¹³⁴ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 17.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

undergird small group ministry. It is necessary to go further and develop a theology of small groups. Christian Schwarz makes this observation about methods and principles,

The literature of church growth, up to that time, had largely worked with a model-oriented approach (even though most of the models claim – and that is the real problem – that they offer universally applicable principles) . . . I realized that despite 40 years of church growth studies, there had not been a single study that answers the question: What really are the proven principles that globally apply to all growing churches?¹³⁶

Dr. Ralph Neighbour expresses this priority of theology over methodology this way. He states that, concerning the church and small groups, that “Theology breeds methodology.”¹³⁷ If methodology is put before theology, then Neighbour comments, “I believe the lethal ingredient at this stage is a fuzzy ecclesiology or an incomplete understanding of the sacredness of the body of Christ.”¹³⁸ Even worse, Dr. Carson writes that, if one is not careful, then what can happen is, “Sometimes bad theology breeds reactionary bad theology.”¹³⁹

It is necessary to move beyond the pragmatic, the “how” and past determining the specific model and focus on answering the “why” much more than the “how.” Comiskey cautions about this when he writes, “We will have to understand the context in which the Bible was written. We must resist the urge to have our pragmatic questions answered. This will require us to slow down and listen. . . . This caused me to go deeper and deeper into the worldview of the New Testament church and then apply it to today’s church.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Christian A. Schwarz, *The ABC's of Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), 7.

¹³⁷ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 60.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹³⁹ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word*, Vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998).

¹⁴⁰ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 35.

This contrast with philosophy versus theology can be illustrated with the author's experience concerning forms of worship in church. This author, not having a background or expertise in this area, relegated his views of worship to mostly preference with a proof text or two to support his position should he engage in a conversation where he would be asked to explain his position. In other words, the author developed a philosophy of worship. He understood certain methods, but found that he struggled with really understanding the biblical principles for worship. Recognizing the need to have a more developed view of biblical worship, the author took a class at Liberty University – WRSP 997: Global Worship. The following is a description of the class from the syllabus,

A study of worship as observed in biblical examples. Scriptural principles regarding worship are applied to the life of the individual and to individual responsibility in the corporate worship experience. Emphasis is on building a theological orientation for interculturality by understanding the nature of worship as the foundation for building interdependent relationships in the kingdom of God.¹⁴¹

The syllabus further explained the rationale, “This course is designed to establish biblical principles for worship that are eternal and universal, while recognizing the great diversity within the various world cultures that are demographic in nature. The purpose is to provide for critical contextualization in the use of indigenous music for worship, discipleship, and evangelism.”¹⁴² The end result was that this course moved the author from a philosophy of worship to a theology of worship. He is today able to apply the principles of biblical worship to a variety of cultural settings.

¹⁴¹ John Benham, “WRSP 997: Global Worship” (syllabus - Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, July 16, 2012).

¹⁴² Ibid.

In the same way, in order for one to have a biblical understanding of small groups, one must move from a philosophy of small groups to a theology of small groups. This move from philosophy to theology is necessary if one wants to apply the biblical principles in a variety of ministry settings. As Steve Gladden notes, “Methods may or may not transfer. Principles, however, will always transfer. Principles are based on truth; God’s Word is the truth. It is not the truth only in certain locations; it is the truth in every location.”¹⁴³

All too often, one never gets past the philosophy, the methods, when approaching small group ministry. Joel Comiskey comments on this, “Some pastors are not aware of the biblical values that undergird their philosophy of ministry and end up choosing the most popular strategy at the time.”¹⁴⁴ Rad Zdero comments on this when he wrote that it is necessary to move beyond the errors that “pragmatism, personal preference and even biblical blueprintism” and “find a biblical remedy for the nature of the New Testament church.”¹⁴⁵

Warren Wiersbe expresses this thought of principles and methods this way, “Because I had received excellent training, I didn’t lack for methods or ideas; but I wasn’t clear as to principles. I was on the ocean of life with a road map instead of a compass, and I wasn’t sure how to handle the rudder of the ship.”¹⁴⁶ The author identified with this statement as it applied to his view of worship. It was not until the author could move beyond the methods and the philosophy to the principles and theology, that he could have a truly biblical understanding of

¹⁴³ Steve Gladden, *Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 23.

¹⁴⁴ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 27-28.

¹⁴⁵ Rad Zdero, in Joel Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church: Developing Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Moreno, Calif.: CCS Publishing, 2012), 4.

¹⁴⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *On Being a Servant of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson, ©1993), 2.

worship. Christian Schwarz also points out the difference between philosophy and theology, although he states this distinction between the two by using the words model and principle.

Today we call this the difference between a “model-oriented” and a “principle-oriented” approach. “Models” are concepts that one or sometimes many churches in some part of the world have experienced positively. But imitating these experiences may not at all be the right answer for churches in other situations. “Principles”, however, are those elements that have been proven to apply to all growing churches around the globe.¹⁴⁷

The author remembers having to memorize the following from a seminary classes with Dr. Elmer Towns, “Methods are many, principles are few. Methods may change, but principles never do.”¹⁴⁸ Comiskey succinctly summarizes all this when he writes, “Theological values must guide methodology.”¹⁴⁹

The focus on methodology without first developing a theology is echoed by G. W. Icenogle when he writes, “While the Christian world is increasingly bullish on small groups the Christian small group movement has experienced very little theological depth. Small groups tend to be a program or technique of ministry rather than a call to return to the roots of the very nature of what God created humanity to be.”¹⁵⁰

Proof texts supporting the methodology of small groups in very specific ministry contexts are not enough. While it is interesting to have the discussion of philosophy versus theology, how does it apply to a theological understanding of small groups? Icenogle made a similar observation when he wrote:

¹⁴⁷ Schwarz, *The ABC's of Natural Church Development*, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Dr. Elmer Towns in many of my classes with him. He even made this a test question.

¹⁴⁹ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 28.

¹⁵⁰ Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrative Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 11.

While many books have been written on the psychology and practice of small groups and on the programmatic life of Christian small groups, few works have attempted to articulate the biblical and theological foundations for small group ministry and to integrate this material with parallel knowledge in spirituality, ecclesiology, psychology, sociology and anthropology. Bits and pieces of biblical and theological material may be found as introductory material in several small group books. Also, many books have been written on the general themes of Christian community and the nature of human community, but few books focus Christian community into the small group framework.¹⁵¹

For the remainder of this chapter, one Old Testament text and one New Testament text will be considered.

Old Testament

In The Beginning

To understand the theology of small groups, one can take a page from Maria in *The Sound of Music*, when she sings, “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.” Theologically speaking, small groups and biblical community has its basis not in ecclesiology and the New Testament, but in another section of systematic theology called Theology Proper, or the study of God. Historically, the biblical basis for small groups is not in the beginning of the church in Acts 2, nor in the Gospels that tell of Jesus with His twelve disciples, but rather in Genesis 1. Concerning the origin of community, Julie Gorman writes, “Christians should be concerned about community because it traces its origins directly back to God. The essence of community finds its roots deep in biblical-theological soil. Without God there would be no community.”¹⁵² Gilbert Bilezikian explains further this starting point when he writes, “In the beginning, the image of God had a relational dimension. The nature of the Godhead as a

¹⁵¹ Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, 11.

¹⁵² Julie Gorman, *Community That Is Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), under “Chapter 1 Biblical Foundations of Community,” Logos Bible Software.

plurality of interdependent persons provided the model for relationships among humans. It was not good for the man to be alone because his creation in God's image called for a union of oneness with someone like him.”¹⁵³ In other words, the Trinity is the basis for community.

The Trinity

Though this paper is not about the Trinity, a brief review is in order. At *prima facie*, the connection between the Trinity and Christian community might not be readily evident. Stanley Grenz addresses this,

The process that eventually netted the church's teaching about God as triune was generated by a theological puzzle that lay at the very basis of the Christian community. The early theologians found themselves grappling with a three-part question: how could the confession of the lordship of Jesus and the experience of the indwelling Holy Spirit be understood within the context of the nonnegotiable commitment to the one God that the early believers retained from their connection with Israel?¹⁵⁴

Comiskey connects the dots when he writes about the very foundation of what Christians believe, “The doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to Christianity. It not only defines who we worship and serve, but this doctrine also guides the church to practice love, care, and unity.”¹⁵⁵

This brief review will look at one verse. In attempting to fully understand the doctrine of the Trinity, one can keep in mind the words of Lindsell and Woodbridge, “The mind of man cannot fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. He who has tried to understand the mystery fully will lose his mind; but he who would deny the Trinity will lose his soul.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Gilbert G. Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 61.

¹⁵⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: a Trinitarian Theo-Ontology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 293.

¹⁵⁵ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 39.

¹⁵⁶ Harold Lindsell and Charles J. Woodbridge, *A Handbook of Christian Truth* (Westwood, NJ: F. H. Revell), 1953, pp. 51-52.

Deuteronomy 6:4

The passage that is known as the confessional statement to Judaism is called the Shema. It is found in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” It is within this verse that God describes Himself. A couple of observations will be made from this verse. First, the Hebrew word translated “God” is the word “Elohim” (**אֱלֹהִים**). The observation that will be made is simply that the word is plural in number.¹⁵⁷

Next, notice the word “one.” There are nine different Hebrew words which at times are translated as the word “one.”¹⁵⁸ One of these words is the word “yachid” (**יָחִיד**). Morey explains, “The word is **יָחִיד** and means an absolute or solitary oneness. It is even translated ‘solitary’ in Psalm 68:6 (**יְחִידִים**) and refers to someone who is absolutely alone. This is its general meaning throughout Scripture. . . . When we turn to the Bible, what do we find? The authors of Scripture never applied **יָחִיד** to God. They never described God as a *solitary* person.”¹⁵⁹

The word that is translated “one” in Deuteronomy 6:4 is the word “echad” (**אֶחָד**). In the list of Hebrew words which speak of oneness, the word **אֶחָד** refers to a compound oneness in which a number of things together are described as “one.”¹⁶⁰

Harris, Archer and Waltke note that from this verse everything hinges. “God summarizes His wholeness. It is the question of diversity within unity has theological implications. The New Testament also is strictly monotheistic while at the same time teaching diversity within the unity

¹⁵⁷ Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 43.

¹⁵⁸ Robert A. Morey, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues* (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1996), 87.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

(Jas 2:19; 1 Cor 8:5–6).^{”161} To clarify further, “God is plural (’*ělōhîm*), possibly implying the Trinity, and **one** (’*ehād*) may suggest a unity of the Persons in the Godhead (cf. Gen. 2:24, where the same word for “one” is used of Adam and Eve).^{”162}

Trinity Basis for Community

Comiskey summarizes the information presented above, “Rather than promoting an individualistic, lone ranger God, the doctrine of the Trinity emphasizes life, love, and movement within the Godhead.^{”163}

In the paragraphs above, oneness and unity is mentioned. Bilezikian speaks of God’s nature in reference to community when he writes, “Community is God’s dearest creation because it is grounded in his nature and reflects his true identity as a plurality of persons in oneness of being.”^{”164}

Now, what Bilezikian is referencing is that God is a tri-unity and the concept of community, of oneness, is reflected in His creation. This biblical concept of community and oneness did not originate with man or any part of creation, but rather with God Himself. Bilezikian explains, “Oneness existed prior to the creation of humans. Indeed, community finds its essence and definition deep within the being of God. Oneness is primarily a divine mode of being that pertains to God’s own existence, independently from and prior to any of his works of creation.”^{”165}

¹⁶¹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 30.

¹⁶² John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 274.

¹⁶³ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 38-39.

¹⁶⁴ Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 43.

¹⁶⁵ Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 16.

Julie Gorman builds on this idea of oneness when she writes, “God created and calls us to oneness. When we pursue that we move from a collection of players to a winning team; from instruments labeled woodwinds, strings, percussion, and brass to an orchestra that produces the sounds of music; from artist, color, shapes, canvass, paint, and subject to masterpiece.”¹⁶⁶ She then moves from describing oneness to the intended purpose of oneness in community – reflecting the image of our Creator, “No one would think to claim that the canvass, the instruments, or the positions were the sought-after end. When we are together in community (harmoniously combined in oneness), we reflect our Creator.”¹⁶⁷

This concept of God being a tri-unity and the importance of understanding this concept as it applies to community can be further clarified. The author has heard posited as a reason that God created man is that God needed someone to love. Tim Keller comments on this:

The Augustinian argument says that if God was uni-personal, then there wouldn’t have been love until he created somebody. Therefore love would not actually be intrinsic to God. It’s not the essence of God and therefore not the foundation of life. It comes in later as sort of an optional thing. Sovereignty, power, that kind of thing is more basic than love. And love is not really one of God’s perfections because it’s not intrinsic, it comes in later on. But if you have a God who is tri-personal and therefore is in a loving community of relationships from the beginning, then love is at the foundation of everything and it’s the reason why we find love to be so important and why relationships are more vital than anything else. And also to say God is love is not possible unless you have a triune God. Not just that God is loving now, that’s one thing. But to say, God IS love in his very essence, that’s another.¹⁶⁸

Community and oneness did not come into existence at some point in God’s creative work. It has always existed and is intrinsic to the being of God. Bilezikian states, “Whatever community exists as a result of God’s creation, it is only a reflection of an eternal reality that is

¹⁶⁶ Gorman, *Community That Is Christian*, under “Chapter 1 Biblical Foundations of Community,” Logos Bible Software.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Phil Callaway, “The Innerview,” philcallaway.com, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.philcallaway.ab.ca/Articles/Interviews/TimKeller.htm>.

intrinsic to the being of God. Because God is eternally one, when He created in His image, He created oneness.”¹⁶⁹ As Icenogle summarizes, “God exists in community.”¹⁷⁰

Community and Relationship

Icenogle comments about God’s desire to be in relationship with us. He writes, “God is separate and very different from humanity, but Scripture teaches us God’s great creation desire is to be in community with humanity.”¹⁷¹

Though this can be demonstrated in a number of ways, there is one in particular that Icenogle notes. It is in the records of sacred Scripture. Icenogle continues, “The biblical history of the people of God is as a covenant community. Covenant is the intentionality and responsibility of being together in relationship.”¹⁷²

Icenogle uses an important word – covenant. It modifies the word community in the sentence that Icenogle wrote. It is a word that may have lost its richness of meaning over time. The word covenant is defined in one source this way,

A covenant is a legally binding agreement between two parties. It is often solemnized or ratified by an oath or other means and usually places demands on one or both parties. Covenants played a major role in the ancient Near East, which made them a useful way for God to relate to his people and demonstrate His commitment to them. God’s covenant with Israel is the primary concept used to describe his relationship with his people.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 16.

¹⁷⁰ Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, 10.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid., 14.

¹⁷³ Douglas Mangum ed., *Lexham Theological Wordbook* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), under “Covenant,” Logos Bible Software.

Notice that the word covenant involves relationship. Tony Evans highlights this aspect when he writes, “Keep in mind that a covenant is much more than a contract. A contract involves requirements and expectations that can be fulfilled in the absence of any personal relationship. However, a covenant always includes a relationship as well. It has the legal considerations of a contract yet includes an essential relational component.”¹⁷⁴

God is Relational

Why is this essential to understanding the relational aspects of community? It is essential because it is the foundation for small group ministry. “Because God’s nature is communal, small group ministry must be based on God’s character.”¹⁷⁵

Relationship is central and foundational to community life. It is foundational to Christianity and understanding Christianity. It is foundational to the church and small groups. God is relational.

Jesus explained this to His disciples the night before He went to Calvary. He said in John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”¹⁷⁶

Jesus tells his disciples that eternal life is to know God. But, what does it mean to know God? Louw-Nida explains it this way,

27.18 γινώσκω: to learn to know a person through direct personal experience, implying a continuity of relationship—‘to know, to become acquainted with, to be familiar with.’ καὶ ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐγνώκαμεν αὐτόν ‘then we are sure that we know him’ 1 Jn 2:3; ἵνα γινώσκωσιν σὲ τὸν μόνον ἀληθινὸν θεόν ‘for people to know you, the only true God’

¹⁷⁴ Tony Evans, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012), under “Chapter 1, The Centrality of the Covenant,” Logos Bible Software.

¹⁷⁵ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 15.

¹⁷⁶ John 17:3.

Jn 17:3. In translating γινώσκω in Jn 17:3, it is important to avoid an expression which will mean merely ‘to learn about.’ Here the emphasis must be on the interpersonal relationship which is experienced.¹⁷⁷

The point of this verse is that God is very relational. The application of this principle is that one cannot know and experience all that God wants a person to know and experience about Him simply by individual, lone ranger type of Bible study and prayer, or, for that matter, simply by studying. There must also be involvement with the church; both in the large gathering and the small group.

This relational aspect of God can be further illustrated in the following way. If one has conducted even a cursory study of any philosophical or religious worldview or system, one recognizes that it is rooted and known in one of three main ways. The first way is through knowledge. This is postulated in the following manner: If one learns this particular data or information or insight into life, then one can learn what, ultimately, life is all about. This is known as epistemology, something that is rooted in knowledge.

There is a second main way, and it is through feelings. If one can have certain experiences, then, somehow, one will find meaning and purpose in life. Many eastern religions do this. So the first way that a worldview or system can come to us is through the acquisition and pursuit of knowledge. The second way is through experience, through the engagement with experience, and that is rooted in what is called the existential.

The third way is pragmatism. This way emphasizes principles and patterns on how to live life and it is up to the individual to begin implementing these into his or her life. It is about doing. One might hear this approach at a business seminar.

¹⁷⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 327.

But Christianity is not rooted in any of these three. Christianity is not rooted either in epistemology (the pursuit of knowledge) or in the existential (the collection of experiences) or pragmatism (in a practical way to live). These three all have a part, but they are not the main root of Christianity. Christianity is not mainly epistemological (rooted in knowledge), nor chiefly existential (rooted in experience) nor primarily pragmatic (rooted in doing); it is mainly ontological (rooted in being).

Christianity is therefore unique in all systems of thought and all world religions because it is not rooted in a set of ideas, it is not rooted in a set of experiences, it is not rooted in a way of life; it is rooted in the person of Christ. That is why the Apostle Paul does not say in II Timothy 1:12 I know what I have believed, but rather, I know whom I have believed, because Christianity is a person. And this goes back to the beginning; to the Trinity and to community.

Trinity, Community and Small Groups

All too often, though, the approach to small groups is pragmatic in nature. It is essential to build upon the right foundation because the pragmatic approach that is taken all too often today with small groups is an emphasis on the pragmatic at the sacrifice of theological basis for small groups. Icenogle comments, “Most of the current small group activity in the church is not organic but technical and curricular. Churches do groups because they work.”¹⁷⁸

Julie Gorman also writes about this pragmatic approach to small groups. She states, “Some people equate community with small groups and claim that the act of instituting small

¹⁷⁸ Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, 11.

groups is biblical.”¹⁷⁹ She then illustrates that community does not necessarily follow small groups:

There is a difference between small groups and community. Do we find small groups used as a methodology in Scripture? Yes. Does that make the methodology of grouping a few people together for some purpose biblical? Not necessarily. Boats were used in Scripture for various purposes, but we do not consider boats biblical. Small groups may become a means to an end. They can provide for the experiencing of community. Some people spend hundreds, even thousands, of hours in groups. But they may experience glimpses of community in only three or four of those groups or perhaps not at all. While community is God’s intended purpose for when his people get together, it is not automatically present, nor can it be created on demand.¹⁸⁰

If Christianity were primarily pragmatic, then organizing into small groups in order to experience biblical community should just work. However, Christianity is primarily ontological. God is relational, and trying to use methods and formulas can only take one so far in knowing God. The church and small groups must go beyond the formulas and methods and enter into a relationship. Larry Crabb puts it this way,

We were designed by our Trinitarian God (who is himself a group of three persons in profound relationship with each other) to live in relationship. Without it, we die. It’s that simple. Without a community where we know, explore, discover, and touch one another, we experience isolation and despair that drive us in wrong directions that corrupt our efforts to live meaningfully and to love well.¹⁸¹

Icenogle notes, “While many say this interest in and need for small group process is part of a ‘paradigm shift’ of human culture, Christians can look deep into our faith roots and discover

¹⁷⁹ Gorman, *Community That Is Christian*, under “Chapter 1 Biblical Foundations of Community,” Logos Bible Software.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Larry Crabb in Foreword, Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 13.

small groups are not new. Small groups are reflective of the very nature of God and humanity.”¹⁸²

New Testament

In The Midst

There is a New Testament passage that is often quoted and considered central to small groups. It, too, flows with the above paragraphs concerning the Old Testament passage of Deuteronomy 6:4 and the Trinity, community and relationship. Which passage is it? Michael Mack answers, “Jesus provided the most vital principle for healthy groups and churches throughout his ministry. He modeled it and repeatedly taught it to his disciples. The principle is simple yet profound: God is not far away. When we keep our focus on him, he promises to be with us...leading us, moving us, working in and through us. He is our Companion.”¹⁸³ Mack answers that community; authentic, biblical community can be experienced by people today because of the reality of the person and presence of God in our midst. He goes on to explain, “Jesus explained this principle most precisely in Matthew 18:20. He promised that whenever we gather together in his name and for his sake (because of him or for his purposes), he will be there among us.”¹⁸⁴

The entire verse reads, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”¹⁸⁵ This is an amazing statement Jesus makes! As noted earlier, not only should true, biblical community reflect the triune God, but Jesus goes even further and promises His very presence in our midst.

¹⁸² Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, 10.

¹⁸³ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 32.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Matt. 18:20.

Presence, Purpose and Power of Christ

Mack mentions in the statement above concerning a principle which involves the presence and purpose of Christ. One way the author expresses this principle is in this statement, “Where two or more are gathered according to Christ’s purposes, He promises His presence. Where the presence of Christ is, there is his promise of power to transform lives because Christ is in the midst.” There are three aspects of this to explore – presence, purpose, and power.

Presence

The first is presence. It is noted in the latter part of Matthew 18:20, “I am there in the midst of them.” Morris notes the significance of this phrase and its similarity to a rabbinical phrase common in Bible times, “The rabbis could say, ‘if two sit together and words of the Law (are spoken) between them, the Divine Presence rests between them’ (*‘Abot 3:2*). For Christians, coming together in the name of Jesus replaces coming to study the law, and the presence of Jesus is ‘the Divine Presence.’”¹⁸⁶ John Nolland expands on this line of thought, “. . . since his presence mediates God’s presence, it surely brings with it the answer to prayer promised in 18:19. In the LXX of Nu. 35:34; Joel 2:27 εἰμι . . . ἐν μέσῳ (‘I am . . . in [the] midst’) is used by God to declare his presence.”¹⁸⁷ Blomberg also comments on God being present when he writes, “Jesus implicitly equates himself with God and promises his continuing spiritual presence in the church after his death. Echoes of the Immanuel theme of 1:23 (God with us) reverberate.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 470-471.

¹⁸⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary On the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2005), 751.

¹⁸⁸ Craig Blomberg, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 22, *Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 281.

How does this apply to small groups? Dr. Ralph Neighbour states the main mission of the group is to be a proclamation not of information, but of revealing His (Jesus') incarnation.¹⁸⁹ Scott Boren writes concerning this principle, “At the heart of authentic biblical community is one thing: the presence of Jesus. Without Him, incredible group meetings and life-giving interaction between the meetings will be no better than what people experience at the local tavern. Without Him, cell groups are just hard work.”¹⁹⁰ Blackaby links the phrase “in my name” (purpose) and “in the midst” (presence) when he writes, “The name was closely associated with the person and his presence...calling on His name indicates that you are seeking His presence.”¹⁹¹ It is the presence of Jesus that transforms lives and He promises to be with two or more who gather in His name.

Purpose

The second of the three parts is purpose. The phrase, “in My name” is crucial to understanding this verse and the presence and purpose of Christ. German New Testament Scholar Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer writes,

The *higher, spiritual* object of the meeting together of the two or three lies not in συνηγμένοι, which expresses nothing more than the simple fact of being met (in answer to Grotius, de Wette), but in εἰς τὸ ἐμὸν ὄνομα, which indicates that the name of Jesus Christ (*i.e.* the confession, the honouring of it, etc.) is that which in the συνηγμένον εἴναι is contemplated as its specific motive.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 30.

¹⁹⁰ M. Scott Boren, *The ABC's of Making Cell Groups Work* (Houston, TX: Cell Group Resources, 2004), 10.

¹⁹¹ Henry T. Blackaby, Claude V. King, and Richard Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God, Revised and Expanded* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2007), 73.

¹⁹² Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, ed. William Stewart, trans. Peter Christie (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1884), 2:15.

John Broadus adds this comparison with two other verses that are found in the Gospel of Matthew, “**In my name** is here in Greek a different construction from 18:5, but without substantial difference of meaning (see on 28:19). They are assembled with reference to Christ, and not to some other person or object—assembled according to his teaching, in reliance on him as their Saviour, with desire to please him and to advance his cause.”¹⁹³ Nolland also comments on this phrase by saying, “A comprehensive commitment to Jesus and what he has brought, done, and stands for is intended.”¹⁹⁴

Mack applies this principle of purpose to the small group. To gather “in his name” is to be aligned to Jesus’ purpose. It is to be prioritizing things the same way Jesus did. Hence, the small group is to prioritize things the same way that Jesus did. Michael Mack observes,

In a healthy group, there is certainly time for individuals to share their stories, what’s happening in their lives, and their thoughts and feelings about various topics. But while doing this, they are purposely learning to deflect the attention from themselves and aim the praise to Christ. Good things like Bible study, serving, social times, prayer, and everything else on the agenda are all means to consistently expose and embrace Christ’s purposes.¹⁹⁵

Does this happen at every group? “As you may have experienced or guessed, this does not happen automatically just because a small group of believers have gathered for a meeting in a home. It happens when the group members understand that the purpose and focus of the gathering is on Jesus Christ and His agenda for their time together and their lives.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 389–390.

¹⁹⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 750.

¹⁹⁵ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 33.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

It is one thing to state that a small group needs to align itself with the main purpose of Christ. While this statement would elicit a hearty “Amen!” from many, it still does not specify what the purpose of Christ is. The author wanted to find that answer and looked through the Gospels to see all the reasons Jesus said that he came to earth. Though Jesus expressed several reasons for His coming in the Gospels, the one that comes to the forefront is that He came to seek and save the lost. So, if the small group is to align itself with the main purpose of Jesus, it certainly seems that a priority of the small group would be to reach others for Christ. Randall Neighbour describes this as a biblical community. He writes, “Think of biblical community as a typical home fellowship group on steroids, without the negative side effects. It grows with new members . . . It is a place where Christians gather to experience Christ in their midst.”¹⁹⁷

All too often, a small group will settle on the secondary rather than taking the extra step of faith to focus on the primary. Boren observes, “Claiming Scriptures, deep Bible study, intensive counseling, long prayer sessions – as good as all of these things are – do not have the ability to transform a life from the inside out.”¹⁹⁸ Mack notes that there is a profound difference between the primary and the secondary. He writes, “I have had to learn to discern between activity *for* God and the activity *of* God.”¹⁹⁹

Power

The third aspect is power. If a small group or church aligns itself with Christ’s purpose, He promises His presence. Where Christ’s presence is, there is power manifested that results in a life-changing encounter with Christ. The Gospels are replete with examples of changed lives

¹⁹⁷ Randall Neighbour, *Community Life 101: Getting the Most Out of Your Small Group Experience* (Houston, TX: Cell Group Resources, 2004), 14-15.

¹⁹⁸ Boren, *The ABC’s of Making Cell Groups Work*, 11.

¹⁹⁹ Mack, *Leading from the Heart*, 33.

as a result of an encounter with Christ. It is no different today. Dr. Neighbour writes concerning this aspect of power, “The organic nature of Christ’s Basic Bodies is expressed by the intimacy within the small group . . . Christ in the midst causes a level of love and spiritual power that sets it apart from all man-made structures.”²⁰⁰

One reason this is not seen more often is that the choice is made to focus on the secondary rather than the primary. “More often than not, what we want is not what God wants Being faithful means getting an opportunity to witness the power of God.”²⁰¹ Eldredge states rather pointedly (and this relates well to the small group arena), “You can do some study till you’re blue in the face, and it won’t heal the brokenhearted or set the captives free. We come; we learn; we leave. It is not enough. Those hearts remain buried, broken, untouched, unknown.”²⁰² Boren also addresses this when he states, “Only the presence of God Himself, working through our study of the Word, honest sharing, and prayer has the ability to touch and renew a life.”²⁰³

Michael Mack asks the question about that every small group should ask of itself.

Is your group leader-centered? Challenge-centered (focused on a group member’s or the group’s issues)? Content-centered (focused on curriculum or a certain study or author)? Interest-centered (focused on an interest or affinity all members share)? Cause-centered? Centering a group on one of the above will yield a good group, but a healthy (or great) group is focused on Christ’s presence, power and purposes.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Neighbour, *Christ’s Basic Bodies*, 26.

²⁰¹ John D. Barry and Rebecca Kruyswijk, *Connect the Testaments: A One-Year Daily Devotional with Bible Reading Plan* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012) under “January 4: Listen, Build, and Listen Again,” Logos Bible Software.

²⁰² John Eldredge, *Waking the Dead: The Glory of a Heart Fully Alive* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 194.

²⁰³ Boren, *The ABC’s of Making Cell Groups Work*, 11.

²⁰⁴ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 32.

Ralph Neighbour ties together the nature of the triune God with the presence of Christ when he writes, “To fully unveil the nature of God, we must surrender our self-centeredness and ‘look not only to (our) own interests, but also to the interests of others.’ The essence of the triune God is best expressed when there is a God-made body to be viewed close-up. The community of the Godhead must be made known by a special community incarnated by Christ.”²⁰⁵

Though Blackaby may not have been writing specifically to a small group, what he writes is, nonetheless, very applicable when considering the presence, purpose and power of Christ that should be manifested when two or three gather together in His name:

What our world often witnesses today is a devoted, committed Christian or church serving God. But they are not seeing God. They don’t see anything happening that can be explained only in terms of God’s activity . . . Let Christ be lifted up, not in words but in life. Let people see the difference the living Christ makes in a life, a family, or a church; that will affect how they respond to the gospel. When the world sees things happening through God’s people that cannot be explained except that God Himself has done them, the world will be drawn to such a God.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 26.

²⁰⁶ Blackaby, King, and Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, 143-144.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ecclesiology of Small Groups

It was necessary to begin with a theology of small groups before an ecclesiology of small groups could be developed. Why? Chin writes concerning this priority, “In terms of theology it frees ecclesiology from isolation and shows the necessity and virtue of relating it with all aspects of theology. It particularly asserts that the Trinity is the key to ecclesiology . . .”²⁰⁷ He continues, “A key result of basing ecclesiology on a Trinitarian basis is to link ecclesiology to the whole of theology.”²⁰⁸

What is the Church?

The starting point for developing an ecclesiology of small groups is to look at the word church. Davis notes, “The Septuagint uses the term [ἐκκλησία] to translate the Hebrew word קהָל (*qāhāl*), which means ‘assembly’ or ‘congregation’ and often refers to Israel’s religious gatherings. The New Testament use of *ekklēsia* reflects both of these uses of the term, though it probably deliberately applies the image of Israel’s congregation to the gathering of believers.”²⁰⁹

A simple search of the New Testament reveals that the English word church appears, in singular and plural form, one hundred and ten times in one hundred and seven verses in the New Testament. A study of the Greek text reveals that every singular form of the English word church and every plural form of the English word church comes from the Greek word ἐκκλησία. The Greek word ἐκκλησία appears an additional four times in the New Testament where it is

²⁰⁷ Soh Guan Chin, *A Trinitarian Covenantal Theology of the Church* (Lincoln, NE: IUniversity Press, 2000), 214.

²⁰⁸ Chin, *A Trinitarian Covenantal Theology of the Church*, 214.

²⁰⁹ Mangum, *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, under “Assembly, Religious,” Logos Bible Software.

translated with a word other than church. It is translated congregation in Acts 7:38 and it is translated assembly in Acts 19:32, 39 and 41.

Table 4.1. Singular form of church in New Testament

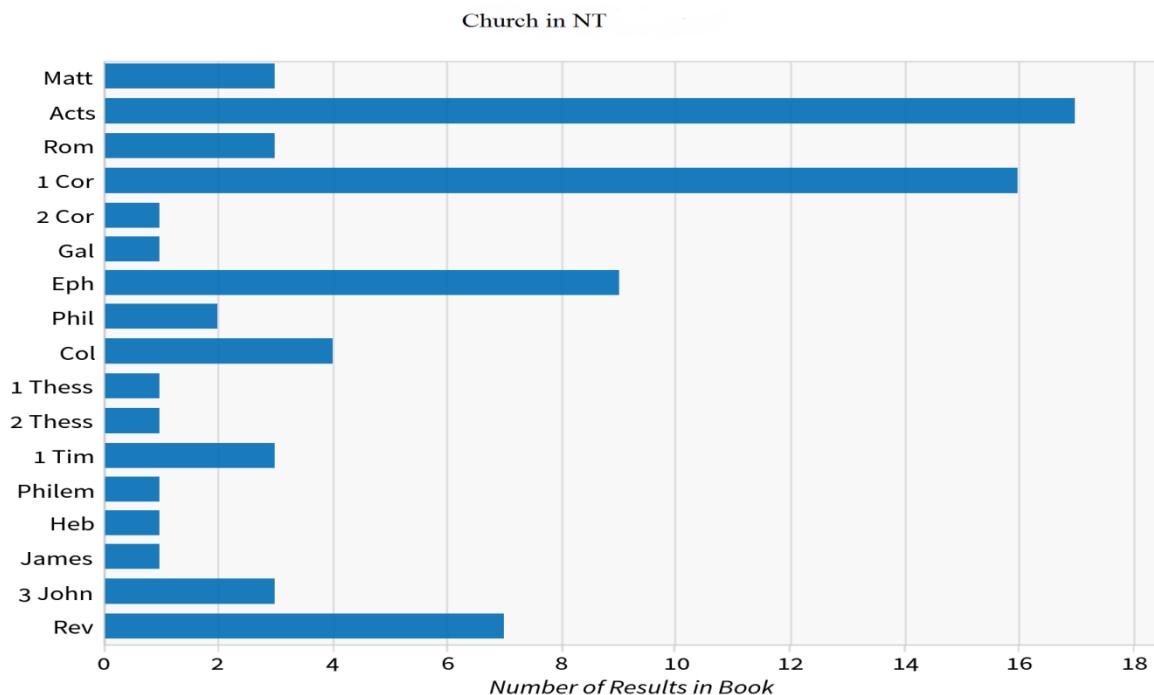
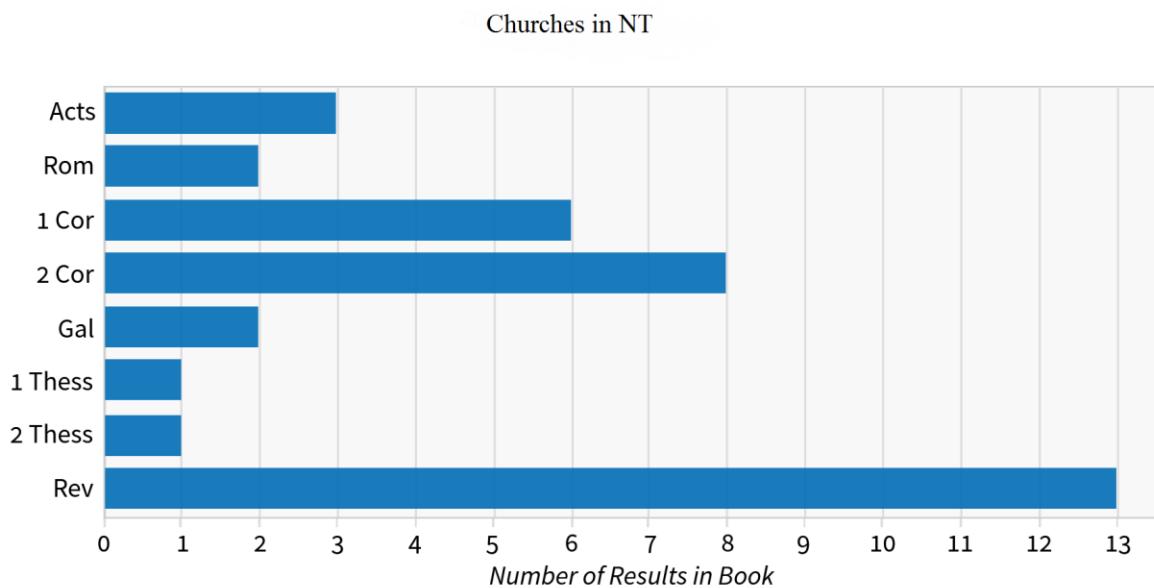


Table 4.2. Plural form of church in New Testament



While the translation of the word ἐκκλησία can be done with one word - “church” - it is helpful to expand this definition. Louw-Nida state,

The term ἐκκλησία was in common usage for several hundred years before the Christian era and was used to refer to an assembly of persons constituted by well-defined membership. In general Greek usage it was normally a socio-political entity based upon citizenship in a city-state (see ἐκκλησία^c, 11.78) and in this sense is parallel to δῆμος (11.78). For the New Testament, however, it is important to understand the meaning of ἐκκλησία as an assembly of God’s people.²¹⁰

Now, at this point, Louw-Nida provides a word of caution: “In the rendering of ἐκκλησία a translator must beware of using a term which refers primarily to a building rather than to a congregation of believers. In many contexts ἐκκλησία may be readily rendered as ‘gathering of believers’ or ‘group of those who trust in Christ.’”²¹¹ Comiskey also notes this tendency to confuse the church with the building, “Most people do think in terms of church buildings, church meetings, and specific church days. Today when we read the New Testament, it’s almost impossible to avoid these modern day images and experiences of church.”²¹²

Michael Mack makes this distinction about the church when he writes, “We say, ‘I’m going to church,’ meaning a building, a mass meeting, or possibly a structured program of some sort. The New Testament never uses the word church that way. Rather it refers to God’s people, called to carry out his mission.”²¹³ As another simply put it, “We don’t go to church; we are the church.”²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 125.

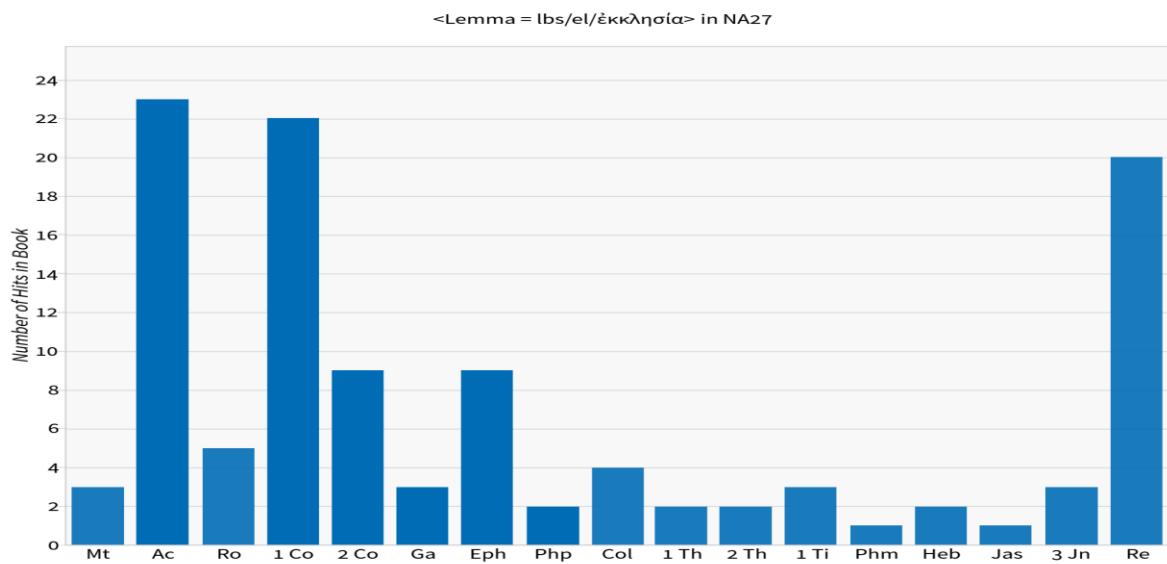
²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 87.

²¹³ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 22.

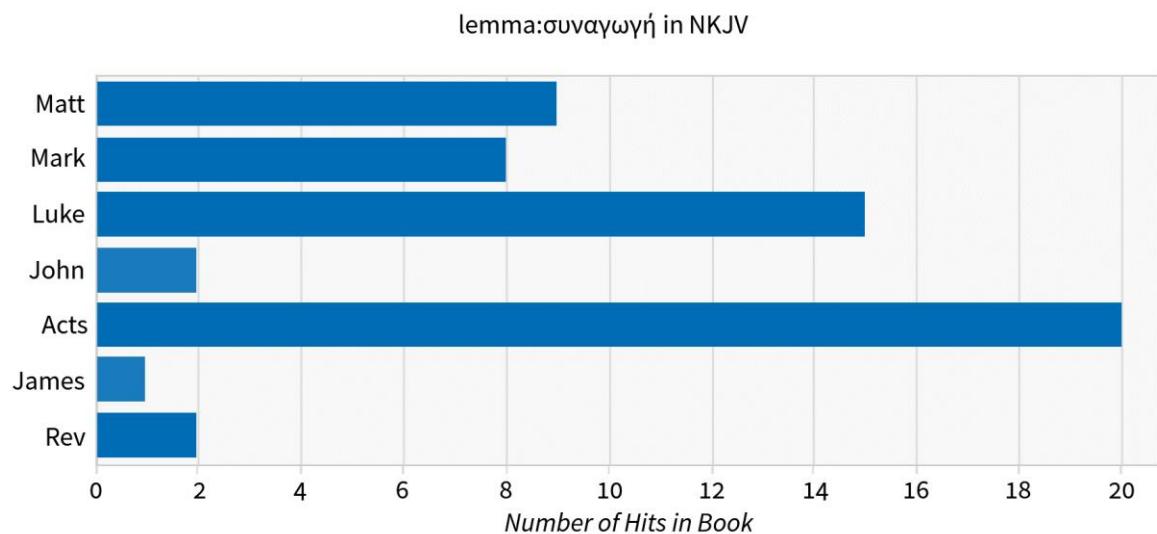
²¹⁴ Towns, Stetzer, and Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, 27.

Table 4.3. ἐκκλησία in New Testament



Notice that in all of this, the word ἐκκλησία never refers to a building. It always refers to people. So, what word was used in the New Testament to reference a building? It is the word συναγωγή. It is found 59 times in the New Testament and is translated as synagogue.

Table 4.4. συναγωγή in New Testament



To expand upon this concept, Davis writes that it is, “A gathering place for Jewish worship and learning—whether in Israel or the diaspora. The Gospels and Acts use this term to refer to a location where local Jews would gather for worship and learning. It can refer to a place where the scrolls of Moses and the prophets were read (Luke 4:16; Acts 15:21).”²¹⁵ One (*συναγωγή*) refers to a place and the other (*ἐκκλησία*) refers to people gathering together. Zodhiates goes a step further and makes this distinction between *συναγωγή* and *ἐκκλησία*, “The Christian community was designated for the first time as the *ekklēsia* to differentiate it from the Jewish community, *sunagōgē*. ”²¹⁶ Louis Berkhof adds clarity to this distinction by writing,

The New Testament also has two words, derived from the Septuagint, namely, *ekklesia*, from *ek* and *kaleo*, “to call out,” and *sunagogue*, from *sun* and *ago*, meaning “to come or to bring together.” The latter is used exclusively to denote either the religious gatherings of the Jews or the buildings in which they assembled for public worship, Matt. 4:23; Acts 13:43; Rev. 2:9; 3:9. The term *ekklesia*, however, generally designates the Church of the New Testament, though in a few places it denotes common civil assemblies.²¹⁷

What's In a Name?

While a denotation of the word *ἐκκλησία* has been provided and a distinction made between that and *συναγωγή*, it still leaves some blanks that need to be filled in about the word *ἐκκλησία*. Dr. Neighbour makes this observation about *ἐκκλησία*, “They are given a special name in Scripture: ‘called-out ones’ (*ἐκκλησία*). Note the term is plural, referring to a community, not individuals.”²¹⁸ Notice he uses the word “community” and that *ἐκκλησία* connotes community.

²¹⁵ Mangum, *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, under “Assembly, Religious,” Logos Bible Software.

²¹⁶ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), under “1577. ἐκκλησία ekklēsia,” Logos Bible Software.

²¹⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1938), 555–556.

²¹⁸ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 25–26.

A definition for ἐκκλησία from BDAG notes the same thing in that the word refers to, “a specific Christian group *assembly*, *gathering* ordinarily involving worship and discussion of matters of concern to the community.”²¹⁹ Dr. Neighbour explains how one theologian attempted to clear up the meaning of the word church by stating, “The English word, church, in Greek is ἐκκλησία meaning ‘called out ones.’ One of my favorite German theologians, Adolph Schlatter, grew so disgusted with ‘church’ being the wrong description for ἐκκλησία that he used the term ‘community’ as a replacement for ‘church’ in his books.”²²⁰ He explains further this concept of community, “The community is exclusively made up of ἐκκλησία, ‘called-out ones,’ formed by the work of the Holy Spirit to receive the indwelling presence of Christ. What can be clearer than Paul’s words in I Corinthians 12:27: ‘Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it?’”²²¹

This leads to an understanding that the church, the ἐκκλησία, is much more than just an assembly of people, or even like-minded people. As Banks writes,

. . . The church is described as belonging not to the people by whom it is constituted (as with the Thessalonians), nor to the district to which they belonged (as with the Galatians), but rather to the one who has brought it into existence (that is God) or the one through whom this has taken place (that is Christ). This means that the ἐκκλησία is not merely a human association, a gathering of like-minded individuals for a religious purpose, but a divinely created affair.²²²

²¹⁹ Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

²²⁰ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 92.

²²¹ Ibid., 31.

²²² Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 37.

To recap, the church is a group, not a building or a location, of people called out by God, not just formed by like-minded individuals who decide to band together. It is a community that is formed by God to accomplish His Kingdom purposes.

A Word Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

The author has an acquaintance who is a master at communicating by using similes and metaphors in his speech. His ability to create word pictures enables him to make his point more impactful and memorable. Word pictures are an effective way to accomplish this.

The term word picture sounds like a dichotomy, or at least contradictory. Is it a word or is it a picture? In fact, it is using words to create an image for the listener that is as powerful as a visual or picture would be. Old time radio shows had this ability to turn pictures on in one's mind. And what makes the image powerful is finding a descriptive example that the listener can identify with and that expands his/her understanding. Below is an example of a word picture. The first statement is the statement that is to be communicated. It is in black and white. The second statement is the word picture. It is in color.

The average kindergarten student has watched more than 5,000 hours of TV.	The average kindergarten student has watched more than 5,000 hours of TV. That's more than it takes to earn a college degree.
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Figure 4.1. Example 1 – Statement Without and With “Word Picture”

In this case, the comparison provides depth to the initial piece of information (the number of hours the student watches TV) and provides a provocative reference point to put the

information in context (comparing the time it would take to earn a college degree). It is similar to viewing a two-dimensional object as compared to a three-dimensional object. The word picture can add depth and clarity, much like a 3-D image.

Here is another example:

UNICEF reports that almost 1,500 children every day die of malaria in sub-Saharan Africa. ²²³	"Imagine four Boeing 747s filled with children crashing into Mount Kilimanjaro each day, and you begin to get an idea of malaria's horrifying toll."
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Figure 4.2. Example 2 - Statement Without and With "Word Picture"

Here the word picture, distressing though it is, is hauntingly memorable. Anyone listening to this description can visualize the airplanes and feel the horror of the outcome.

What makes word pictures work is not so much constructing complex or poetic words, rather it is putting everyday words together to describe something in a way the listener can see and feel. It's allowing the listener to experience the words, not just hear them.²²⁴

Metaphors for the Church

Who was it that first created word pictures? God did, of course. God has used word pictures, or metaphors, to describe His church. The word ἐκκλησία “is fundamental to the imagery and theology of the letters in the New Testament.”²²⁵ David Ewert writes, “It is not

²²³ “Despite Progress, 1,500 African Children Die Daily from Malaria,” UNICEF, April 25, 2013, accessed December 3, 2015, <https://www.unicefusa.org/press/releases/despite-progress-1500-african-children-die-daily-malaria-8240>.

²²⁴ Kathy Reiffenstein, “Strengthen Your Presentation with Word Pictures,” *Professionally Speaking...Kathy Reiffenstein’s Blog on Creating Confident, Persuasive Speakers*, March 3, 2010, accessed December 3, 2015, http://andnowpresenting.typepad.com/professionally_speaking/language/.

²²⁵ Mangum, *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, under “Assembly, Religious,” Logos Bible Software.

possible to understand the NT concept of the church if we overlook the numerous metaphors used to portray it.”²²⁶

Just how many metaphors are recorded in Scripture that describe the ἐκκλησία, the church? Dr. Paul S. Minear has answered this question in his book, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. He found there to be ninety-six different metaphors (or images or word pictures) for the church in the New Testament.²²⁷ As McVay notes, “Minear catalogued ninety-six images of the church in the NT; then he sifted out thirty-two ‘minor images’ (e.g., the salt of the earth, a letter from Christ) and grouped the remaining images under the rubrics ‘The People of God,’ ‘The New Creation,’ ‘The Fellowship in Faith,’ and ‘The Body of Christ.’”²²⁸

For example, under the “People of God” category, Minear cited twenty examples, including I Peter 2:9 where Peter compares the church to a holy nation and a chosen race. Under the “New Creation,” there are sixteen examples, including the church being described as first fruits in the Books of Romans and I Corinthians. Under the “Fellowship of Faith,” Minear identifies the church as being faithful in Colossians and friends in III John. Last, the examples that fit under the category “The Body of Christ” have several mentions in I Corinthians.

Ninety-six different metaphors for the church are a lot of ways to describe the church of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Out of all those word pictures, is there one in particular example that is preeminent above the rest? Is there one metaphor, one image that is considered the best “word picture” for the church?

²²⁶ David Ewert, *How to Understand the Bible* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2000), 74.

²²⁷ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 268-269.

²²⁸ John K. McVay, “Biblical Metaphors for the Church and Adventist Ecclesiology,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 44, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 285.

The Church as Family

There seems to be a significant consensus as to the preeminent metaphor for the church in the New Testament. For example, Joel Comiskey writes, “My research, in fact, points out that family is the principal image for the New Testament church.”²²⁹ He states it again just for emphasis, “In fact, the primary image of Christ’s church is the family of God.”²³⁰ Robert Banks agrees and ties this metaphor into an understanding of biblical community when he states, “The comparison of the Christian community with a ‘family’ must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all. For that reason it has pride of place in this discussion. More than any of the other images utilized by Paul, it reveals the essence of his thinking about community.”²³¹ Joseph Hellerman adds, “The most important group for persons in the ancient world was the family. It is hardly accidental that the New Testament writers chose the concept of family as the central social metaphor to describe the kind of interpersonal relationships that were to characterize those early Christian communities.”²³² Arthur Flake puts it very succinctly, “The church is a family . . . the family of God.”²³³

Why would this metaphor of family be the most significant? It is because of the specific context of the culture in which the church began that family has such preeminence. Halvor Moxnes explains, “In the traditional Mediterranean culture, the family was the basic reference of the individual, and the channel through which he or she was inserted into social life. To be born in a certain family was a decisive factor, because family was the depository of ‘honor’ and of

²²⁹ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 15.

²³⁰ Ibid., 72.

²³¹ Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 53-54.

²³² Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009), 6.

²³³ Arthur Flake, *The True Functions of the Sunday School* (Nashville, TN: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1930), 25.

position in society, and the transmitter of economic resources.”²³⁴ Hellerman adds to this explanation by noting, “. . . one’s family demanded the highest commitment of undivided loyalty, relational solidarity, and personal sacrifice of any social entity in Jesus’ strong-group Mediterranean world. And the major life decisions were made in the context of the family.”²³⁵

This New Testament concept of family has its ties to the Old Testament. Hadaway, DuBose and Wright note concerning the metaphoric use of family within the pages of Scripture, “Paul’s letters contain a number of figures of speech to describe the nature and function of the church. A major metaphor is that of a household, a family. This figure conveys an idea which has a deep rootage in the Old Testament where God’s people are often referred to in a variety of family-oriented figures.”²³⁶ Jim and Carol Plueddemann write, “Family-oriented metaphors are sprinkled throughout the Old Testament to describe God’s relationship with his people.”²³⁷ Comiskey makes this observation, “Even with such a large number of people, God organized them according to family units.”²³⁸ He goes further, stating, “We often use the word ‘nation’ to describe Israel, but we must remember that they were organized according to families, clans, and tribes.”²³⁹

When one applies this information to Acts 2:42-47, one comes to the conclusion that the passage does not describe either a strategy for growing a church, or a small group strategy that keeps people coming to the service each Sunday. In fact, it does not describe any sort of church

²³⁴ Halvor Moxnes, ed., *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997), 62.

²³⁵ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 31.

²³⁶ C. Kirk Hadaway, Francis M. DuBose, and Stuart A. Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 57.

²³⁷ Jim Plueddemann and Carol Plueddemann, *Pilgrims in Progress: Growing through Groups* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1990), 2.

²³⁸ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 57.

²³⁹ Ibid.

growth or small group strategy. It simply describes how God was working within the 1st century church in Jerusalem. Hellerman observes, “The New Testament church was decidedly strong-group in its social orientation, but this was no accident of cultural accommodation. Jesus unequivocally affirmed such an approach to interpersonal relationships when He chose ‘family’ as the defining metaphor to describe His followers.”²⁴⁰

Family of God and Household of God

There is another term supplementing the family metaphor that provides a broader explanation and understanding of small groups and how it fits into ecclesiology. It is the term for *household*. Comiskey writes, “‘The family of God’ and ‘household of God’ are both used in the New Testament to describe Christ’s church. These two terms are the principal church images of the New Testament.”²⁴¹ Hadaway, DuBose and Wright confirm this statement of Comiskey’s when they state, “In writing to Timothy, Paul referred to the church as the ‘household of God’ (1 Timothy 3:15). He used the same language in writing to the Ephesian Christians (Ephesians 2:19). In Galatians 6:10, Paul changed the language slightly and referred to the church as the ‘household of faith’.”²⁴²

Why is this significant? Because it is through the concept of household that family is defined in New Testament terms. The people of New Testament times did not see the family as we do. They would not describe family as a nuclear family. Moxnes writes concerning this, “There is in the New Testament, as in other Greek literature, no specific word for ‘family’ in the

²⁴⁰ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 31.

²⁴¹ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 63.

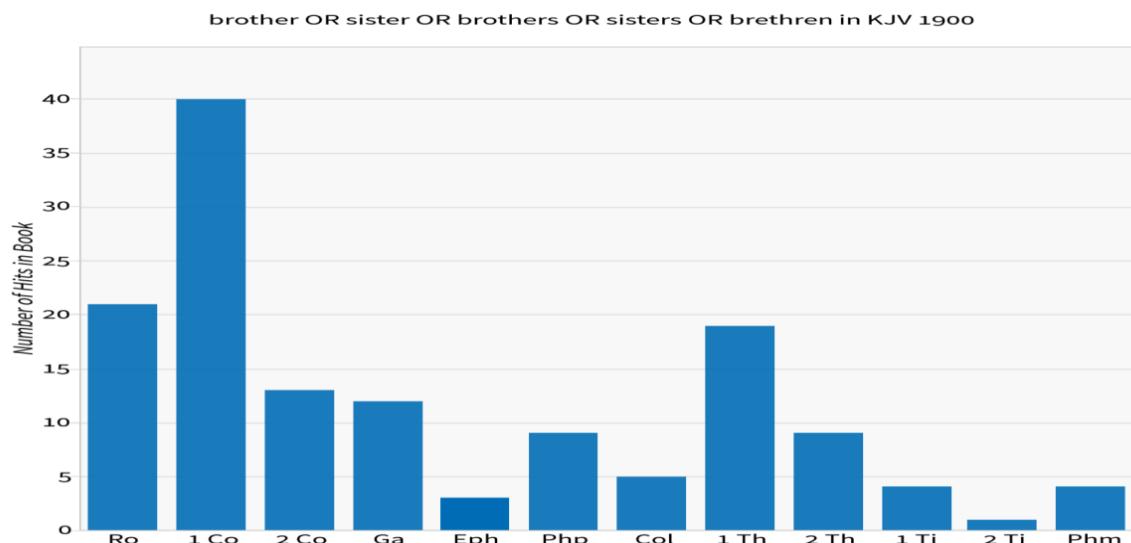
²⁴² Hadaway, DuBose, and Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, 57.

sense of ‘a group consisting of wife, husband, children,’ what we find is the terminology of ‘household’ which includes a larger number of people.”²⁴³

The family in New Testament times is made up of a larger number of people than what is understood in 21st century United States. Comiskey notes this connection between church and family, “The early church saw itself as God’s new family . . . They saw themselves as brothers and sisters and wanted to serve one another as Jesus served his own disciples. . . . the phrase one another appears more than fifty times in the New Testament. These phrases instructed the early believers on how to cultivate relationships among themselves.”²⁴⁴

In fact, Paul uses the term brother or sister (or some variation) 140 times in 132 verses throughout his letters to the churches.

Table 4.5. Brothers or Sisters in New Testament



So, the Early Church used the familial language of “brothers and sisters” (*ἀδελφοί*, *adelphoi*) to describe its relationship with one another through Christ (Acts 6:3; Rom 12:1;

²⁴³ Moxnes, *Constructing Early Christian Families*, 29.

²⁴⁴ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 97.

1 Cor 1:10–11).²⁴⁵ Paul goes a step further than just expanding the concept of family beyond blood relations. He expands it to include those outside the Jewish faith. Notice how Moxnes states how the Apostle Paul applies this to Gentiles:

Paul transformed the Jewish notion of kinship by introducing a distinction between descending from Abraham and the ethnic identity associated with that descent. The relations between kinship and ethnic identity become ambivalent. In Paul's discussion in Galatians 3 it is less ambivalent, since the descent from Abraham (and ultimately from God) is clearly established by 'faith in Christ Jesus', with no distinction between Jews and Greeks (3:15–29). In this way Paul has taken a central Jewish family term and moved it into the area of 'fictive kinship' which also included non-Jews.²⁴⁶

Williams also comments on this expansion of the church and the family:

The Jesus movement was born in a group-oriented world where the household/family was regarded as the very basis of social life. . . . The group that gathered around Jesus in his lifetime consisted of family members, most frequently siblings and/or their mothers, who left the households of their fathers and husbands. In the Jesus movement they found a surrogate family.²⁴⁷

The best word picture for the church is family, and the family is made up of not just immediate family, but extended family as well. The church as family goes beyond extended the family to include others that are not blood related. The author was once told by a friend, "You have blood and you have family. Sometimes your blood is not your family, and sometimes your family is not your blood." This was the idea of the church being the family of God. It goes even further and includes those with different ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the biblical perspective of the family of God is not just in how it is made up, but also in how it is to function.

²⁴⁵ Mangum, *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, under "Family", Logos Bible Software.

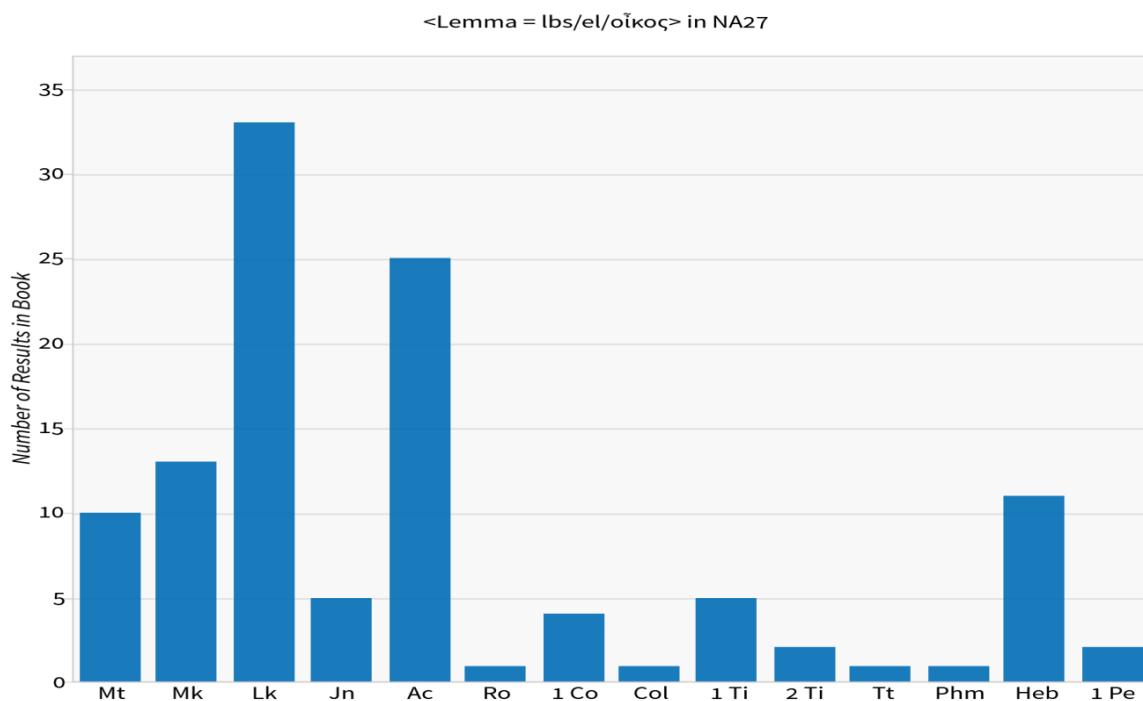
²⁴⁶ Moxnes, *Constructing Early Christian Families*, 29.

²⁴⁷ Ritva H. Williams, *Stewards, Prophets, Keepers of the Word: Leadership in the Early Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 42.

οἶκος

It has been previously noted that the English word *church* appears, in singular and plural form, one hundred and ten times in one hundred and seven verses in the New Testament. The definition of the word *church* has been discussed. The ninety-six metaphors that describe the church have been mentioned, and the one word picture that best describes the church -family-has been determined. The next step for developing a theology of small groups is to look at the word translated *house* in I Timothy 3:15. It is the word οἶκος. The word οἶκος is found 114 times in 106 verses.

Table 4.6. οἶκος in New Testament



In English, the word οἶκος is translated in various ways. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states, “In the NT οἰκία is used 1. lit. for ‘house’ (Mt. 5:15; 7:24 ff.; 10:12a etc.), then fig. for ‘family,’ ‘household’ . . . It is not impossible that the first and last in the series

(οἰκία-άγροι) include the other members, though οἰκία could also mean the ‘household’ or *familia*.²⁴⁸

The translations generally center on home and family as shown in the diagram below:

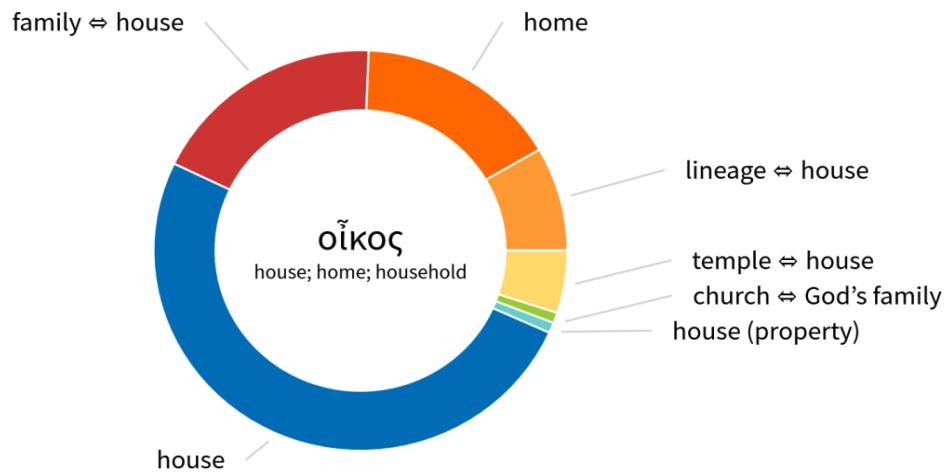


Figure 4.3. Various senses of οἴκος in New Testament

Dr. Ralph Neighbour notes concerning the word οἴκος,

Oikos is a Greek word usually translated as ‘household.’ It refers to a house and the people living in it. Thus, it can refer to either the people in the household or to the house itself (Acts 5:42). In 1 Peter 2:5, the term has a special meaning . . . The household [oikos] believes along with the Head (Acts 16:15, 34). Thus the households [oikos] became the nucleus for the early life of the church.²⁴⁹

The various forms of οἴκος all point to house and family. The *Lexham Theological Wordbook* comments on the word οἴκος, “The New Testament seems to use *oikos* and *oikia* virtually interchangeably to refer to both the physical house and the household or family. For

²⁴⁸ Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 131.

²⁴⁹ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 74-75.

example, in Acts 16:32 the Philippian jailer's household is referred to with *oikos* in Acts 16:23 and with *oikia* in Acts 16:33.²⁵⁰ There is another word that is used to describe oīkoç. It is the word community. "In the Old Testament 'my house' refers to Israel itself, so that the New Testament exegesis reminds us of the equation of 'house of God' and the community. Indeed, the Midrash presupposes theologically that the community is the 'house of God.'"²⁵¹ When one compares the Early Church and the idea of family and community with the concept of today's church and its individualism, there is a striking contrast. Neighbour writes, "The early body of Christ formed itself oikos by oikos, a far cry from our modern, rampant individualism."²⁵² Hellerman is even more direct in his criticism, "There is, in fact, no better way to come to grips with the spiritual and relational poverty of American individualism than to compare our way of doing things with the strong-group, surrogate family relations of early Christianity."²⁵³

Louw-Nida note, "In a number of languages the equivalent of oīko or oīkia would be 'those who live together' or 'those who have the same fence' (this being a reference to a group of huts surrounded by a fence and thus constituting a single so-called 'family unit'))."²⁵⁴

Roger Gehring mentions how the family nature of the oīkoç might have looked like in the 1st century church,

Because of the small size of house churches, it was possible to maintain a family-like atmosphere and practice brotherly love in a very personal and concrete way. . . . Even though the evidence is not as conclusive for the primitive church in Jerusalem as it is for the Pauline communities, here as well we can assume that the ancient oikos served as a

²⁵⁰ Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), under "Family," Logos Bible Software.

²⁵¹ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 125–126.

²⁵² Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 75.

²⁵³ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 6.

²⁵⁴ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 112.

source of evangelistic contacts, with its built-in network of relationships reaching far beyond the immediate family to servants, friends, clientele, and business associates.²⁵⁵

It has already been discussed that the idea of church as family goes beyond the nuclear family concept. There is one passage found in I Timothy that has been agreed upon as the central ecclesiological passage in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy, the church has the specific nuance of a larger household.²⁵⁶ Both the words ἐκκλησία, which has been discussed earlier, and the word οἶκος are included.

Gehring writes concerning this specific passage, “Scholars have correctly declared 1 Timothy 3:15 to be the central ecclesiological passage . . . The understanding of the church here goes beyond the metaphorical; the church is characterized, in its concrete organizational structures, by the perception of itself as a household, with the ‘household’ understood in terms of the ancient oikos.”²⁵⁷

In other words, Gehring is saying that the term *household* is more than just a word picture for the church. Gehring continues, “For the Pastorals the church really is the household or the family of God. Viewed in this way, ‘house or family of God’ becomes the model for responsible behavior as well as for church order and leadership structures, and thus the central, all-guiding image for the self-understanding and organization of the church.”²⁵⁸

Notice the words “responsible behavior” in the preceding paragraph. What does Gehring mean by that? He continues and notes, “The small size of house churches contributed to the fact

²⁵⁵ Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), p. 117.

²⁵⁶ Mangum, *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, under “Assembly, Religious,” Logos Bible Software.

²⁵⁷ Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, p. 261.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

that they . . . remained family-like, personal, friendly, and attractive to outsiders. Because the groups were small, it was easy to keep track of relationships and hold one another accountable.”²⁵⁹ Neighbour adds to this thought, “Scripture describes ‘household’ by the Greek word οἶκος. It always defines a small group of intimately related persons, small enough to allow maximum accountability to exist between them.”²⁶⁰

Small Groups and the Church Today

This chapter has provided information about ἐκκλησία and οἶκος, but how do the two relate to each other? It is here that the shift is made from a philosophy of ministry to a theology of ministry, and it is here that many stop and do not cross this bridge. The best way to illustrate this is with statements made by pastors today. On the surface, the statements seem to be common sense observations, but they reveal far more than just observable data. Underneath, they reveal a philosophy of ministry.

For example, Larry Osborne gives his idea on the parameters for the size of a small group, “A group needs to be small enough that everyone has a chance to contribute, but large enough that no one feels forced to speak up or share more than they want to.”²⁶¹ This makes sense. One wants 100% participation in a small group, but the pastor does not provide specifics concerning numbers. Rick Warren is more specific when he comments about the appropriate size of a small group, “You don’t want to have small groups of 20 or 30 or 40 people. That’s not a small group, that’s a church.”²⁶² So, these two statements provide some guidelines as to the

²⁵⁹ Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, p. 227.

²⁶⁰ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 28.

²⁶¹ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 76.

²⁶² Rick Warren, “Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities,” (video), 3:04, accessed December 26, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GArl_P_8umU.

appropriate size of a small group, but, more importantly, to the issue of philosophy of ministry as opposed to a theology of ministry. Notice the distinction between a small group and a church. If a group is a certain size, whether based on the abstract (the ability for all to interact) or the concrete (less than 20 people), it is a small group. If it exceeds that size, then it becomes a church.

This philosophy of ministry becomes even more clear when one considers this statement made by Warren, “The 58 ‘one anothers’ of the Bible- love one another, care for one another, help one another, encourage one another, serve one another, share with one another - can only be done in a small group setting.”²⁶³ Dave Ferguson says something very similar,

If you take a careful look at what are often called the “one another” passages in the New Testament – the commands and encouragement from Paul and the other apostles that specifically address relationships in the church – you’ll find a clear reminder of the importance and necessity of small groups. It is only through small groups that we are able to facilitate the kind of community that God wants you, your friends, and your church to experience.²⁶⁴

This is an interesting statement. These ““one another’ passages . . . specifically address relationships IN THE CHURCH (emphasis added).” Notice the next statement, “It is ONLY THROUGH SMALL GROUPS that we are able to facilitate the kind of community that God wants you, your friends, and YOUR CHURCH to experience.” Notice that there is a distinction between small groups and the church.

Here is the issue. Over and over again, when one looks at the resources available for small groups, there is a distinction made between small groups and the church. What is difficult

²⁶³Rick Warren, “Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities,” (video), 2:12, accessed December 26, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GArl_P_8umU.

²⁶⁴Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential: How You and Your Friends Can Start a Missional Church Movement*, Exponential Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 91.

to find is, from a theological point of view, what is the relationship between small groups (*οἶκος*) and the church (*ἐκκλησία*)? Are small groups a strategy for church growth, or are they a way to close the back door, or is there more to the relationship between the two?

ἐκκλησία and οἶκος

Dr. Ralph Neighbour writes about the connection between *ἐκκλησία* and *οἶκος* in the Bible. He provides an interesting and insightful look at these two terms and how they relate to one another in terms of understanding the church. He uses two New Testament metaphors, the body of Christ and family, to describe how these terms *ἐκκλησία* and *οἶκος* relate to one another.

Dr. Neighbour introduces the term “Christ’s Basic Bodies”. In the list of metaphors mentioned earlier in the chapter, there is another metaphor for the *ἐκκλησία* (church) and that is the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is one of the four major metaphors for the church found in the New Testament and makes up eleven of the ninety-six metaphors used to describe the church in the New Testament.²⁶⁵ Of these instances mentioned in the New Testament, there are four passages that make clear reference to both the body of Christ and the word “church” in the same passage. Two of these passages are provided below:

²² And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church,²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

¹⁸ And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.²⁶⁶

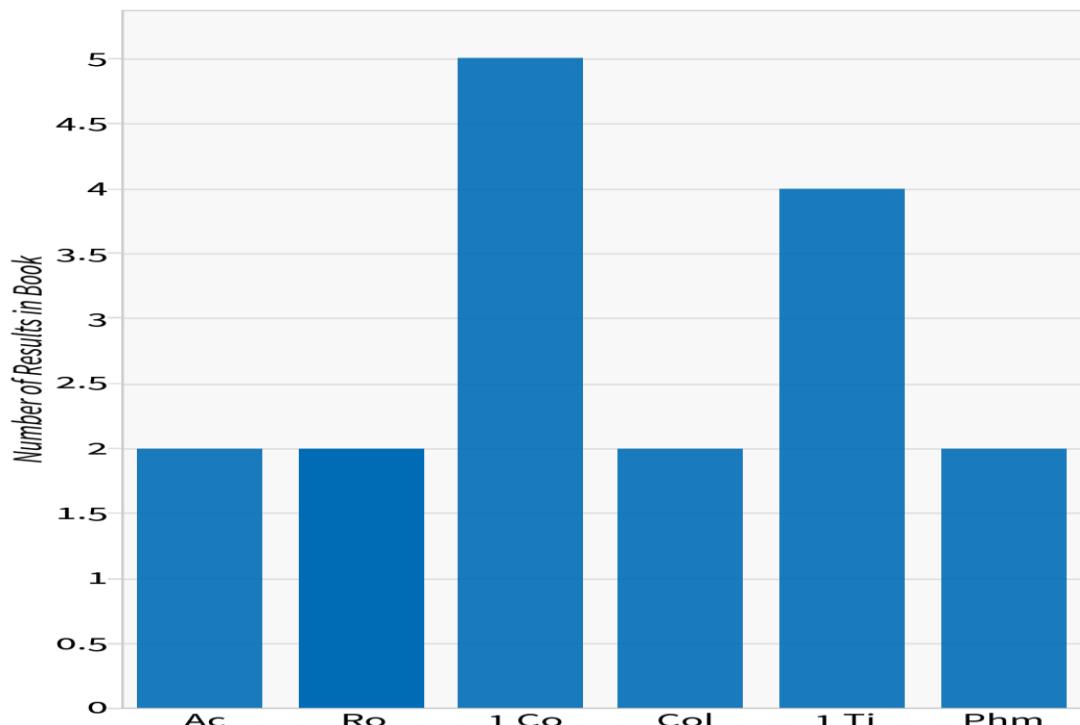
²⁶⁵ McVay, “Biblical Metaphors for the Church,” 288.

²⁶⁶ Eph. 1:22-23; Eph. 5:23-31; Col. 1:18; Col. 1:24.

As mentioned earlier, the word οἶκος has been used in reference to the metaphor of the church being a family. Notice that Dr. Neighbour applies this metaphor of the Body of Christ to also describe οἶκος. But if both ἐκκλησία and οἶκος are the church, how do they relate to one another?

Table 4.7. ἐκκλησία and οἶκος in the same verse in the New Testament

`<Lemma = lbs/el/οἶκος> + <Lemma = lbs/el/ἐκκλησία> in NA27`



He continues to explain how ἐκκλησία and οἶκος relate to one another, “These Basic Bodies do not exist independently. They are bound together to form a larger assembly of the ἐκκλησία. Even as a single individual cannot reveal community, neither can a single Basic Body detach itself from fellow Basic Bodies and function independently.”²⁶⁷ Gehring echoes this thought when he states, “. . . a plurality of house churches alongside the whole church at one

²⁶⁷ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 28.

location would shed light on the controversial issue regarding the clarification of the relationship between the individual churches and the whole local church, and between the local church and the universal church.”²⁶⁸ Comiskey concurs with this when he writes, “House churches in the New Testament were not independent of each other. Rather, they were part of a larger unit. The house church and the larger gathering of several house churches existed side by side in early Christianity.”²⁶⁹ Perhaps, in place of reading “individual churches”, it might help, for clarification’s sake, to read “small groups”.

This concept that the small group is the church is not a new idea. Even if one chooses to use terms more familiar to church traditions of today, there is still recognition that Sunday School and the morning church service were both “church”. Arthur Flake writes, “The Sunday school service of a Bible teaching on Sunday morning is as much a church service as either the eleven o’clock preaching service or the mid-week prayer service.”²⁷⁰

Paradigm Shift

I Corinthians 14:23 says, “²³ Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in *those who are* uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?”²⁷¹ When one reads the word “whole”, what number comes to mind? In other words, how many people have to come together to make up the whole church?

²⁶⁸ Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, p. 26.

²⁶⁹ Joel Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups: A History of Cell Ministry in the Church* (Moreno Valley: CCS Publishing, 2014), loc. 213-215, Kindle.

²⁷⁰ Flake, *The True Functions of the Sunday School*, 25.

²⁷¹ 1 Cor. 14:23.

Louw-Nida define the term ὅλος, which is translated “whole” as “pertaining to being whole, complete, or entire, with focus on unity—‘whole, all, complete, entire.’”²⁷² BDAG states the same thing, “pertaining to being complete in extent, whole, entire, complete.”²⁷³ Notice that a number is not given as to what makes up the whole. Dr. Neighbour comments on this verse and this word in particular, “The word for ‘whole’ in Greek is *holos* and it simply means, ‘complete.’ No specific size is defined. It just means everyone in the *ekklesia* is present.”²⁷⁴

The first mention of the word ἐκκλησία was by the Lord Jesus Christ in Caesarea Philippi as recorded in Matthew 16. A.W. Pink mentions the law of first mention and how it will help the expositor exegete the passage correctly. He writes, “In order to discover the prime elements of the word we must have recourse to the law of first mention. Whenever we are studying any word or expression in Scripture, it is very important to pay special attention to the initial mention of it.”²⁷⁵ He further explains, “The initial occurrence of this expression defines its scope.”²⁷⁶ Stewart Custer states concerning the law of first mention, “The law of first mention stresses that the first time a subject is introduced is often a key to the understanding of the later development of the doctrine. A careful study of that first passage will give insight into later references.”²⁷⁷

Jesus was the first one to use the word in the New Testament, and He applied it to the company that gathered about Him in Matthew 16:18. They had recognized Him publicly as their

²⁷² Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 612.

²⁷³ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 704.

²⁷⁴ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 93.

²⁷⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *A. W. Pink's Studies in the Scriptures*, 1924-25 (Lafayette: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 2:243.

²⁷⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 73.

²⁷⁷ Stewart Custer, *Tools for Preaching & Teaching the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1998), 46.

Lord, and accepted the principles of the Kingdom of God.²⁷⁸ How many were included in that group? This passage occurred after many who were following the Lord Jesus Christ had already left (John 6:66-70), so it seems that this was a small group, most likely the original twelve.²⁷⁹ This first mention of the church would be considered, by today's standards, a small group.

Is there any additional guideline as to how many people make up the whole church? Neighbour continues, "Therefore, the 'whole ekklesia' in this passage (I Corinthians 14:23) might be as small as two people! Did not Jesus say, 'For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them'?"²⁸⁰

This is now the theological key to understanding the relationship between small groups and the church. Small groups are not a program of the church or a church strategy. Small groups are the church. Neighbour continues,

Let's establish that a community of three persons is not a part of a church; they are the church! It is extremely difficult to change this paradigm, but when we think "church," we must not see a large group of people. The church of God, formed by him at Pentecost, created home groups of believers. In their paradigm, "church" referred to a small group of believers intimately attached to each other with Christ in their midst.²⁸¹

J. B Libanio expands on this. When he uses the term "cell-based community", think small group:

Description of a cell-based community: "They are not a movement, an association or a religious congregation . . . They are not a method (or the only method) of building up the church: they are the church itself. They are not a miraculous recipe for all the ills of society and the church. They are the church renewing itself . . . They are not a utopia; they are a sign of the kingdom, though they are not the kingdom . . . They are not

²⁷⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 556.

²⁷⁹ Johnston M. Cheney and Stanley A. Ellisen, *Jesus Christ, the Greatest Life: A Unique Blending of the Four Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Paradise, 1999), 113, 139.

²⁸⁰ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 93.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

messianic, but they can be prophetic and produce prophets like the church should. They are not a natural . . . community . . . identified with a race, language, people, family . . . They are the church . . . They are not a protest group, although their life is a protest against the mediocrity, sloth and in authenticity of many . . . They are not special groups for special people. They are the church committed to the ordinary man, to the poor, to those who suffer injustice . . . They are not closed: they are open to dialogue with all. They are not a reform of anything in pastoral work: they are a decisive pastoral option, made in order to construct a new image of the church.²⁸²

Michael Mack also has this understanding of the small group when he makes this point, “At its core, a small group is Christ’s body in action. Stop and think about this for a moment. Your small group *is* the church. Not a subset of the church. Not a supportive program within the church. Not a tool to close the back door. Unfortunately, in today’s world, our mental image of “church” is usually something much bigger or more institutional than a single small group.”²⁸³ Simply put, “. . . a true cell is the Body of Christ.”²⁸⁴ Schwarz observes that, “Christian small groups are not a nice, yet dispensable hobby. No, it is the very essence of the true church of Jesus Christ that is worked out in small groups.”²⁸⁵

²⁸² J.B. Libanio, quoted in William A. Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the Twenty-First Century* (Houston: TOUCH Publications, 1995), 31.

²⁸³ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 22.

²⁸⁴ Neighbour, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 21.

²⁸⁵ Schwarz, *The ABC's of Natural Church Development*, 16.

CHAPTER FIVE

The History of Small Groups

Edmund Burke observed that, “In history, a great volume is unrolled for our instruction.”²⁸⁶ This also applies to Bible history in general, and specifically, to that part of Bible history that is called “church history”. Even more specific and germane to the topic of this paper, church history provides information about small groups. Though this chapter will not provide a comprehensive overview of small groups in church history, it will attempt to provide a “thread” that connects the early church with the church of the 21st century. Beckham makes the statement that, “We cannot understand the church unless we see the church within its New Testament paradigm.”²⁸⁷ Icenogle echoes this thought when he writes, “While many say this interest in and need for small group process is part of a ‘paradigm shift’ of human culture, Christians can look deep into our faith roots and discover small groups are not new. Small groups are reflective of the very nature of God and humanity.”²⁸⁸ Snyder also adds to this when he writes, “In fact, the use of small groups of one kind or another seems to be a common element in all significant movements of the Holy Spirit throughout church history.”²⁸⁹

Comiskey expands on this when he writes, “The reality is that God has used small group ministry throughout church history to disciple, revive, consolidate, and evangelize.”²⁹⁰ Ferguson

²⁸⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections On the French Revolution*, The Harvard Classics (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1914), 24: under “Paragraph 242,” accessed December 16, 2015, <http://www.bartleby.com/24/3/10.html>.

²⁸⁷ Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, 18.

²⁸⁸ Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, 10.

²⁸⁹ Howard A. Snyder, *Radical Renewal: The Problem of Wineskins Today* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1996), 149.

²⁹⁰ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 65-67, Kindle.

goes even further into biblical history and observes the significance small groups had in the Old Testament,

Throughout the Scriptures, we see that God utilizes small group structures to provide care for his people and to help people learn what it means to experience true community with one another and with him. In the Old Testament, we find that God's people, the nation of Israel, were organized around large and small groups. Israel was divided into tribes, and the tribes were broken down into families or clans, and the families or clans were subdivided into single family units.²⁹¹

Comiskey also connects small groups in the Old Testament to small groups in Jesus' day, "Although small groups played an important role in the Old Testament (Exodus 18), Jesus took small group ministry to a new level by creating his own band of followers and then sending them to start house churches."²⁹² Finally, he makes the final connection from the time of Jesus to the early church recorded in the New Testament, and then beyond, when he writes, "We know that the early church was a movement of networked house churches that spread over the world and triumphed over the sword."²⁹³ He concludes, "Small groups throughout Church history have helped purify the church and return it to its historic roots."²⁹⁴

New Testament

Many books written about small groups comment on the significance of the house meeting (small group) and the role it had in the early church. For example, Osborne writes concerning the early church, "When the New Testament was written, the typical church was so small that it was, in essence, a small group."²⁹⁵ Ferguson observes, "The temple court was a

²⁹¹ Ferguson and Ferguson, *Exponential*, 89-90.

²⁹² Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 65-67, Kindle.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., loc. 73-74, Kindle.

²⁹⁵ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 45.

public place where large groups of people gathered. But the early church also met in home, where people gathered in small groups to enjoy a meal together and share the Lord's Supper.”²⁹⁶ Concerning the Lord's Supper and the role of small groups, Barclay writes, “The Lord's Supper began as a family meal or a meal of friends in a private house . . . It was there that the Lord's Supper was born in the church. It was like the Jewish Passover which is a family festival at which the father and the head of the household is the celebrant.”²⁹⁷

Comiskey has put forth a reason as to why homes were an important part of the early church:

One key reason Jesus chose the home as his operational headquarters was because he wanted to create a new spiritual family. And to make this happen, he first had to transform people where they lived and where essential character values were displayed. Jesus wanted to infuse the normal family network with a new vision of love and sacrifice. To do this, he lived among his disciples in houses, showing them practically how to love and serve one another (John 13: 1–17).²⁹⁸

He continues and explains the prevalence of house churches, “As one reads through the New Testament, it is apparent that House-based ministry became so common that throughout the book of Acts, every mention of a local church or of a church meeting, whether for worship or fellowship, is a reference to a church meeting in a home.”²⁹⁹

Early Church History

For the first several centuries, there was not much of a change in the church in terms of the small group structure. Comiskey writes that the early church never owned a building until

²⁹⁶ Ferguson and Ferguson, *Exponential*, 91.

²⁹⁷ William Barclay, *The Lord's Supper* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 111.

²⁹⁸ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 126-129, Kindle.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., loc. 165-166, Kindle.

approximately two hundred years after Christ's death.³⁰⁰ The small group was the basic unit of the church's life during its first two centuries. Snyder adds to this observation when he writes, "There were no church buildings then; Christians met almost exclusively in private homes."³⁰¹ Over the first several hundred years, God added to the church. How much did God add to the church? Olson makes an estimate, "In AD 40 the Roman Empire had a population of 60 million people with a very small Christian population. By AD 350 there were as many as 31 million Christians-more than half of the population."³⁰² Comiskey concludes, "House churches played an essential role in the rapid growth and ultimate triumph of Christianity, and it would be safe to say that the first three centuries belonged to the house church movement."³⁰³

Constantine

There were changes in the church starting in the 4th century. Pleuddemann writes about this change, "A significant change took place during the 4th century with the legitimization of Christianity under Constantine. Previously, because Christianity had been an illegal religion and worship often had to be in secret, the church was largely home-based. But now that the emperor had officially embraced Christianity, church structures replaced house churches."³⁰⁴ The church was primarily a small group movement, but the rise of Constantine and the legalization of Christianity changed the landscape, both literally and metaphorically. Comiskey writes, "The fact is that the early Christians met primarily in the homes of individual members over a period of nearly three hundred years—until the 4th century, when Constantine began building the first

³⁰⁰ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 274-275, Kindle.

³⁰¹ Snyder, *Radical Renewal*, 149.

³⁰² Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, under "How Did the Church in the First Three Centuries Respond to Its Growth Challenge" Logos Bible Software.

³⁰³ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 167-168, Kindle.

³⁰⁴ Plueddemann and Plueddemann, *Pilgrims in Progress*, 4-5.

basilicas throughout the Roman Empire.”³⁰⁵ Gehring notes that, “The first formal Christian architecture for early Christian assembly came into existence with Constantine. It was implemented rather abruptly around 314 C. E. with the Lateran basilica.”³⁰⁶

It was not just the change in meeting places and building structures that changed. The church changed from within as well. Comiskey explains, “With the rise of Constantine, house churches were no longer the primary meeting place for believers. There was little interaction between the priests and the people, and the church became progressively ritualistic.”³⁰⁷ He also notes that the church progressed from the family of God meeting in homes to institutionalized religion.³⁰⁸ This shift affected the role of the pastor, as the church gradually moved from bishop as a servant-shepherd caring for a house church or group of house churches to an administrative ruler.³⁰⁹ Comiskey explains, “When the house church structure was functioning properly, there was liberty for the laity to minister. The priesthood of all believers was in full force and the needs of the church were being met. Yet as Church history continued, the rights of particular office-holders usurped those of the common lay ministers.”³¹⁰ The eventual result was, “Ministry became the exclusive, personal role of select ministers and the rest were reduced to the hearer role. The normal Christian was expected to obey. The Bible was taken from the hands of the people and given to those learned men who would study it and offer their judgments. This

³⁰⁵ Comiskey, *Biblical Foundations for the Cell-Based Church*, 87-88.

³⁰⁶ Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 12.

³⁰⁷ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 354-358, Kindle.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., loc. 407-408, Kindle.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., loc. 417-418, Kindle.

³¹⁰ Ibid., loc. 432-435, Kindle.

cast system of hierarchy killed lay initiative.”³¹¹ As Plueddemann notes, “The priesthood of all believers was de-emphasized and believers no longer gathered together in homes as before.”³¹²

How did this shift begin and how did it affect the early church and small groups?

Comiskey continues,

The Eucharist replaced the individual sharing, so common in the early house churches. The early New Testament believers celebrated the Lord’s Supper as a meal, but by the second century it had become a ritual. Rather than exercising spiritual gifts in an atmosphere conducive to ministry, people came to the mass, performed Christian rituals, and left without the spiritual and emotional intimacy they once had with other believers in the house churches.³¹³

What Comiskey has described above, Dr. Neighbour puts another way. The church shifted from being more of an organism to an organization. He writes about the result of this focus on organization and its effect on small groups, “The understanding of that organism changes everything about our current practice of church life. Since the time of Constantine – all the way to the Reformation and through the previous century – the true nature of Christ’s Basic Bodies has been missing.”³¹⁴

This does not mean that the church building is, in and of itself, wrong. Beckham notes that, “It was not the cathedral that affected the church; it was what the cathedral approach did to the small group context of the church.”³¹⁵ Towns, Stetzer and Bird summarize this turning point in church history this way, “The Constantinian model of Building + Clergy + Program = Church

³¹¹ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 429-431, Kindle.

³¹² Plueddemann and Plueddemann, *Pilgrims in Progress*, 5.

³¹³ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 354-358, Kindle.

³¹⁴ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 26.

³¹⁵ Beckham, *The Second Reformation*, 43.

neither stands up to the biblical picture nor to the test of mission, and it has not lead to a more godly culture or more godly people.”³¹⁶

Middle Ages

The Middle Ages is not a time in church history where small groups took a front seat, or even a back seat, for that matter. But there were still instances of small groups that existed. For example, Comiskey notes the example of Patrick, a missionary to Ireland in the 5th century, “Patrick’s model of reaching out to others was highly relational, hospitable, and community-oriented... They lived life in community, but this was never an end in itself. They never lost sight of giving their community away. In fact, their evangelistic strategy resembled the prayer of Jesus in John 17 where he tells the disciples that the world would know and believe by their unity.”³¹⁷ These groups were not just inward-focused; they were also outward-focused as well. “Those who entered the group saw transformed lives, love in action, and how disciples were supposed to act. The seekers were then invited to become Christ’s disciples.”³¹⁸

Small groups continued on in Monasticism. Comiskey writes, “The word monk means alone (from Greek monos = alone, solitary) and by definition, a monk lived apart from others.”³¹⁹ However, from 300-700 A.D. the balance between individual isolation and Christian community occurred.³²⁰ Plueddemann makes this observation concerning Monasticism, “Monastic movements, such as those of Benedict and Augustine, continued to gather men and women into intentional communities for growth in faith and expressions of service. But unlike the house

³¹⁶ Towns, Stetzer, and Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, 48.

³¹⁷ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 555, 559-560, Kindle.

³¹⁸ Ibid., loc. 563-564, Kindle.

³¹⁹ Ibid., loc. 491-492, Kindle.

³²⁰ Ibid., loc. 509-510, Kindle.

churches, monasticism had no room for the family. Christian instruction in homes continued, but it no longer had an integral connection with church life.”³²¹

Pre-Reformation

Though the role of small groups seemed to fade from the forefront of church history, God used small groups during this time leading up to the Reformation. Below is a look at a summary of small groups leading up to the time of Luther.

Waldensians

Peter Waldo lived during the 12th century and his followers developed a system whereby they would go into a town and meet secretly with small groups of Waldensians. They ministered to one another in the home groups.³²² Alan Kreider notes, “These Waldensian cells, meeting generally at night . . . Women were there in disproportionate strength . . . The Bible was memorized and recited . . . After recitations, the Bible would be commented upon and applied.”³²³ Zdero notes that God used the Waldensians throughout Europe.

They expanded their work all over Europe, so much so that it was believed by the canon of Notre Dame that a third of all Christendom had attended the Waldensian meetings. Their gatherings usually occurred outdoors after nightfall under the direction of an itinerant brother. After an opening prayer and sermon, they went back into their homes for supper meetings to pray, discuss, and eat the Lord’s Supper.³²⁴

³²¹ Plueddemann and Plueddemann, *Pilgrims in Progress*, 6.

³²² Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 762-764, Kindle.

³²³ Alan Kreider, “Protest and Renewal,” *Christian History Magazine-Issue 9: Heritage of Freedom: Dissenters, Reformers, & Pioneers* (Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 1986), under “The Dangerous Bible,” Logos Bible Software.

³²⁴ Rad Zdero, *The Global House Church Movement* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2004), p. 63.

Lollards

The Lollards are believed to have their origin in the 14th century. The writings of John Wycliffe inspired the beginnings of this group.³²⁵ The exact origin of the term Lollard remains uncertain, but it is believed by many etymologists to have come from the Dutch word *lollaerd*, meaning *mumbler*.³²⁶ Comiskey goes on to write about the distinctions of the Lollards, “They believed in a lay priesthood and challenged the church’s authority to invest or deny the divine authority to make a man a priest.”³²⁷ Concerning the priesthood of believers, Comiskey states, “Their belief in the priesthood of all believers stirred them to mutual accountability in home meetings— just like the early house churches.”³²⁸ Comiskey notes the correlation of oīkoç between the early church and the Lollards, “These web relationships were reminiscent of early church evangelism that spread through oikos or extended family evangelism.”³²⁹ Kreider notes the importance of the Word of God in the small groups the Lollards formed, “The central activity of these cells was reading the English Bible.”³³⁰

Hussites

John Hus was a Czech priest from the late 14th to early 15th century. Comiskey notes, “Although Hus didn’t establish a system of small groups . . . the church grew primarily through house-to-house ministry in its homelands of Bohemia and Moravia to a membership of two

³²⁵ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 793-796, Kindle.

³²⁶ Ibid., loc. 793-796, Kindle.

³²⁷ Ibid., loc. 822-823, Kindle.

³²⁸ Ibid., loc. 825-826, Kindle.

³²⁹ Ibid., loc. 833-834, Kindle.

³³⁰ Alan Kreider, “Protest and Renewal,” *Christian History Magazine-Issue 9: Heritage of Freedom: Dissenters, Reformers, & Pioneers* (Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 1986), under “The Life of the Lollards,” Logos Bible Software.

hundred thousand.”³³¹ One of the things Hus emphasized was the importance of community. “The Brethren also taught that there is no true Christianity without a visible community of love. Their understanding of Christian community was inspired by the example of the early church of the apostles.”³³² Comiskey makes this concluding observation about the small groups of the pre-Reformation era, “Home groups were the natural habitat of these pre-reformation movements.”³³³

Reformation

Luther

Although Luther is known for his great contribution to the Reformation and the Bible being the sole authority in the believer’s life, he also made contributions to the area of small groups. Comiskey observes that, “Luther looked for ways to apply the priesthood of all believers and entertained the idea of using small groups as part of the church’s reformation.”³³⁴ He further states, “Luther saw the potential of the house church and had a vision of meeting in homes for deeper expression of faith, which was absent in the institutional church. We know from Luther’s writings that he could see great possibilities for ministry in the small house churches . . .”³³⁵

Luther himself wrote concerning small groups:

The third kind of service should be a truly evangelical order and should not be held in a public place for all sorts of people. But those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other

³³¹ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 875-876, Kindle.

³³² Craig D. Atwood, *The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2009), p. 5.

³³³ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 891-892, Kindle.

³³⁴ Ibid., loc. 948-949, Kindle.

³³⁵ Ibid., loc. 957-959, Kindle.

Christian works. . . . Here one could set up a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer and love . . .³³⁶

Hadaway, Wright and DuBose note,

Luther, the great reformer saw potential in the house church despite the fact that it was associated with the more radical wing of the Reformation, such as the Anabaptists. Luther had a vision of the devout meeting in homes to practice their faith in a depth of expression which was difficult to achieve in the mainstream of church life and practice. . . . The house church is best illustrated during this period among the Anabaptists. They had no church buildings but came together in homes for worship and the development of their spiritual community.³³⁷

Ultimately, Luther did not choose to implement this third kind of service. Comiskey explains,

In reality, the Anabaptists were simply taking Luther's doctrine to its logical conclusion. They were following Scripture, which taught the priesthood of all believers, the early church house gatherings, and a more simple hierarchy. Meeting in home groups was Luther's unwritten thesis which he believed, but failed to implement because of a spirit of caution, political considerations, and fear of losing the movement to the Anabaptists.³³⁸

Bucer

Martin Bucer was a contemporary of Luther. Bucer drew heavily from Luther's theology but emphasized more of a practical, pastoral theology, as opposed to Luther's theological leanings.³³⁹ According to Comiskey, "Bucer became increasingly drawn to the model of the primitive church which emphasized both large and small groups. He felt that small groups would

³³⁶ Martin Luther, "Preface to the German Mass and Order of Service," *Luther Works*, Vol. 53, Helmut T. Lehman, ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1965), 63– 64.

³³⁷ Hadaway, Wright, and DuBose, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, 48.

³³⁸ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 1000-1003, Kindle.

³³⁹ Ibid., loc. 1043-1044, Kindle.

make the church at Strasbourg . . . more faithful to the primitive and ancient churches.”³⁴⁰ Bucer was influenced by Luther in that he believed in justification by faith, but he also knew that this justification needed to be lived out through sanctification. Small groups were a pragmatic way to work out sanctification.³⁴¹

Both Bucer and Luther recognized what the Anabaptists were doing with small groups, but whereas Luther was reluctant to move forward with implementing small groups, Bucer was not. “He realized that a house church structure was not an Anabaptist phenomenon but rather a New Testament imperative. He understood that primitive Christianity challenged the reformation to take steps toward change.”³⁴²

Wright chronicles this decision of Bucer to utilize small groups. He writes that in “. . . the years 1546-9 . . . (Bucer) attempts to establish discipline, the tensions that surrounded the city’s negotiations concerning the Interim, and the establishment of ‘ecclesiae in ecclesia’ or ‘Christliche Geneinschaften’ (Christian communities).”³⁴³ He goes on to write that, “The creation of the ‘Christlichen Gemeinschaften’ – small communities of confessing Christians in the midst of the church of the majority at Strasbourg – during the years 1547-9 was certainly one of the most original elements of Bucer’s activity.”³⁴⁴

William Beckham often uses the phrase, “It takes two wings to fly,” and Wright picks up on this with Bucer. Wright continues,

³⁴⁰ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 1048-1049, Kindle.

³⁴¹ Ibid., loc. 1057-1058, Kindle.

³⁴² Ibid., loc. 1082-1083, Kindle.

³⁴³ D.F. Wright, ed. *Martin Bucer: Reformer Church and Community* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 84.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 129.

. . . This motif of the essentially majority character of the church attended all his ecclesiological considerations. There was always an ambivalence between this aspect of openness and the no less indispensable aspect of a church better structured and more energetic as a community. This motif of twofold ecclesiology, at once both majority-based and confessing, played an important role in the slow maturation of Bucer's plans for small communities.³⁴⁵

Comiskey puts it this way, "For Bucer, it was not a matter of deciding to support the inclusive state church or the church gathered in homes. Rather, he felt the need for both."³⁴⁶ He summarizes, "He was the first true forerunner of cell-based ministry because he desired to connect the gathered church with the scattered church."³⁴⁷

Pietism

Spener

Philip Jakob Spener was a German theologian that lived during the 17th century and is known as the father of pietism. Plueddemann observes, "Spener wrote about the 'little church within the church,' which he saw as a means of renewal for a rigid and dogmatic church establishment."³⁴⁸ Spener sets forth six concrete measures for church reform. In brief these are:

1. *A more serious attempt to spread the Word of God.* Pastors should preach from the entire Bible and Christians should meet in small groups to study the Bible.
2. *The Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers should receive a new emphasis.* The differences between the laity and clergy should be minimized. The clergy in particular should recognize that their calling involves Bible study, teaching, reproving and consoling and a personal, holy life.
3. *More attention should be given to the cultivation of individual spiritual life.* Love for God and man should take priority over theological disputes. Knowledge is secondary to practice.
4. *Truth is not established in disputes but through repentance and a holy life.*

³⁴⁵ Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 134-135.

³⁴⁶ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 1084-1085, Kindle.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., loc. 1088-1089, Kindle.

³⁴⁸ Plueddemann and Plueddemann, *Pilgrims in Progress*, 7.

5. *Candidates for the ministry should be “true Christians.”* Their training should include small groups for devotional life and personal Bible study.

6. *Sermons should not show the preacher’s erudition,* but attempt to edify believers and produce the effects of faith.³⁴⁹

Concerning the first suggestion of the list above, Comiskey writes about Spener and his desire for, “The earnest and thorough study of the Bible in private meetings, ecclesiolae in ecclesia (little churches within the church).”³⁵⁰ Latourette notes, “He started to hold religious meetings at his home, which he called collegia pietatis (schools of piety or godliness). In these home groups, he would repeat his sermons, expound passages of the New Testament, and encourage those present to ask questions and apply Scripture.”³⁵¹ Comiskey adds, “He encouraged others to open their own homes to practice the priesthood of all believers, so that everyone would be involved.”³⁵²

Spener was concerned that small groups were necessary because people were not sufficiently learning the Word of God through Sunday worship services. Spener writes:

It may appear that the Word of God has sufficiently free course among us inasmuch as at various places (as in this city) there is daily or frequent preaching from the pulpit. When we reflect further on the matter, however, we shall find that with respect to this first proposal, more is needed. I do not at all disapprove of the preaching of sermons in which a Christian congregation is instructed by the reading and exposition of a certain text, for I myself do this. But I find that this is not enough. In the first place, we know that “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (II Tim. 3: 16). Accordingly all Scripture, without exception, should be known by the congregation if we are all to receive the necessary benefit. If we put together all the passages of the Bible which in the course of many

³⁴⁹ “The Pia Desideria (Pious Desires),” *Christian History Magazine-Issue 10: Pietism: The Inner Experience of Faith* (Worcester, PA: Christian History Institute, 1986), under “The Manifesto of Pietism,” Logos Bible Software.

³⁵⁰ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 1408-1409, Kindle.

³⁵¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975), 895.

³⁵² Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 1386-1387, Kindle.

years are read to a congregation in one place, they will comprise only a very small part of the Scriptures which have been given to us. The remainder is not heard by the congregation at all, or is heard only insofar as one or another verse is quoted or alluded to in sermons, without, however, offering any understanding of the entire context, which is nevertheless of the greatest importance. In the second place, the people have little opportunity to grasp the meaning of the Scriptures except on the basis of those passages which may have been expounded to them, and even less do they have opportunity to become as practiced in them as edification requires. Meanwhile, although solitary reading of the Bible at home is in itself a splendid and praiseworthy thing, it does not accomplish enough for most people. It should therefore be considered whether the church would not be well advised to introduce the people to Scripture in still other ways than through the customary sermons on the appointed lessons.³⁵³

Moravians

In 1722, Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf permitted those who were being persecuted to build a village that was called Herrnhut, located on his estate. Among those seeking asylum were people from Moravia. Small groups played a very important role with the Moravians. “Zinzendorf did not intend for the Moravians to become a separate church. Like Spener’s Pietist groups, the Moravian communities were to be ecclesiae in ecclesia (little churches within the Church) whose purpose was to renew the whole Church.”³⁵⁴ Comiskey concurs and adds, “Zinzendorf believed that Christianity should be experienced and not just taught. . . . The Moravians also placed special importance on community through small groups... he emphasized the growth of the spiritual relationship between the believer and the Savior...and that every believer needed to live in a faith community.”³⁵⁵

³⁵³ Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, translated by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 87-88.

³⁵⁴ Doyle L. Young, *New Life For Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 110.

³⁵⁵ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 1636-1641, Kindle.

Methodism

John Wesley lived during the 18th century, was part of the First Great Awakening, and was the founder of Methodism, also known as the Methodist Church. What is not as well-known is that small groups played a large role in his ministry. Snyder writes, “John Wesley practiced this principle and laid the foundation for the modern cell-church explosion. By the end of the 18th century, Wesley had developed more than 10,000 cells groups (called classes).”³⁵⁶ Comiskey comments about Wesley’s commitment to small groups, “Wesley wasn’t persuaded that someone had made a decision for Christ until that person became involved in a small group.”³⁵⁷

Where did John Wesley learn about small groups? There were two major contributors to Wesley’s education into small groups. The first was Spener and the second was Zinzendorf. Comiskey states, “Wesley, the keen observer, was taking meticulous notes while he met with the Count and studied their practices and methodology.”³⁵⁸ Hunter also comments about this,

He learned from exposure to the home groups (the ecclesiolae in ecclesia) that the Lutheran Pietist leader Philipp Jacob Spener developed to fuel renewal and outreach, and Wesley learned particularly from the Moravians. Wesley also learned from Anabaptist groups and from the occasional “societies” within the Church of England, so his group movement was eclectic Protestant.³⁵⁹

It is interesting to note that Wesley did not come to this conclusion about small groups naturally. It was not second nature to him. Richard Wilke comments about this particular point, “Wesley changed his structures and methods, almost against his will, in order to save souls. He

³⁵⁶ Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 63.

³⁵⁷ Joel Comiskey, *Home Cell Group Explosion: How Your Small Group Can Grow and Multiply* (Houston, TX: Touch Publications, 2002), 23.

³⁵⁸ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 1923-1924, Kindle.

³⁵⁹ George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 84.

didn't want to use women, but he did in exceptional circumstances. The 'exceptional' became normal. He didn't want to use lay pastors, but he did. They were able to reach the unbelievers. He didn't want to preach in the open air, but he did so that more might hear the Word of God.”³⁶⁰

What did one of Wesley's small groups look like? How did they function? Comiskey answers this, “John Wesley and Methodism significantly moved forward the concept and practice of small groups. Wesley's small groups emphasized transparency, holiness, evangelism, and multiplication.”³⁶¹ Concerning the “one another's” that has been referenced earlier in this writing, Comiskey notes, “Wesley would often use the ‘one-anothers’, such as bearing each other's burden, to describe the essence of the class meetings. They were a family away from family, just like the early house churches.”³⁶²

Just how effective were Wesley's small groups? D. Michael Henderson answers this when he quotes from Whitefield, “George Whitefield said this: ‘My brother Wesley acted wisely— the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in classes, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand.’”³⁶³

³⁶⁰ Richard B. Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 59.

³⁶¹ Comiskey, *2000 Years of Small Groups*, loc. 1848-1849, Kindle.

³⁶² Ibid., loc. 2247-2249, Kindle.

³⁶³ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 30.

CHAPTER SIX

The Survey of Small Groups

Up to this point, the focus of this paper has been on exploring the theology of small groups. A hermeneutic approach was taken that includes the historical, cultural and grammatical aspects of small groups as presented in Scripture. As previously mentioned, theology breeds methodology. Whether this theology is good theology or bad theology, both do breed a methodology. The importance of this is noted by Neighbour as he describes his experience working with a group of pastors:

The training focused on the premise that “theology breeds methodology!” (Remember, by “theology” I concentrated on only one area: their ecclesiology, or the doctrine related to the structure of “church.”) While suggestions were given about ways to structure a cell meeting, the primary focus was on redefining the word “church.” Christ dwelling in small groups formed to be his body were to become “basic Christian communities” (what I now call Christ’s Basic Bodies). Sadly, the theology was ignored by many of the South African pastors. Most adopted the methodology without the theology. The importance of developing core values before creating structures was often ignored. Without a proper understanding that the cells were bodies inhabited by Christ, some strayed far from a New Testament model. Thus, “cells” often became whatever their church leaders chose to make them. Instead of demonstrating how Christ expresses himself by empowering the life of his body, these groups became exclusive and ingrown.³⁶⁴

Have small groups in the United States today made the same mistake as this group of pastors and churches in South Africa in placing methodology above theology? Is there more of a focus on the methodology, or is there a robust theology behind the methodology?

Survey Parameters

The survey questions are broad enough to explore several topics. For the purpose of this paper, there are three areas that will be reviewed. The first area is this concept of church as

³⁶⁴ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 60.

family. If it is the primary metaphor for the church in the New Testament, then how are small groups doing in this area?

The second is in the area of understanding the small group as the church. Is it the perception of the people participating (in the small groups that were surveyed) that the living Christ is in their midst, and how do they come to recognize Him in their midst?

The third topic looks at how the group is doing in terms of reaching others for Christ.

Who is in the Survey?

Who are the participants in this survey? As mentioned in chapter one under the heading entitled *Methodology*, 145 people from 35 different churches participated in this survey. The first chart shows what the breakdown is of leaders, assistant leaders and group members.

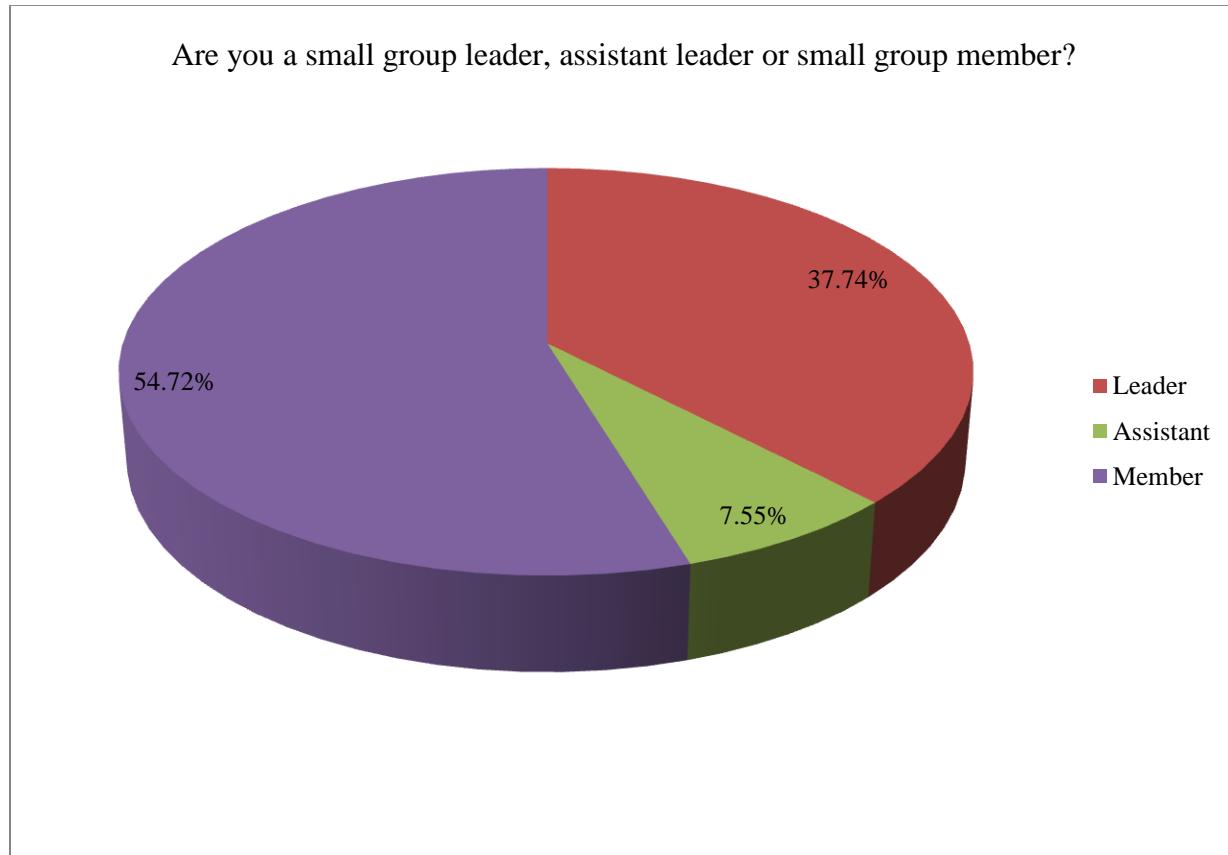


Figure 6.1. Survey Question #1

Next, the question asked was how long the member has been a part of the group.

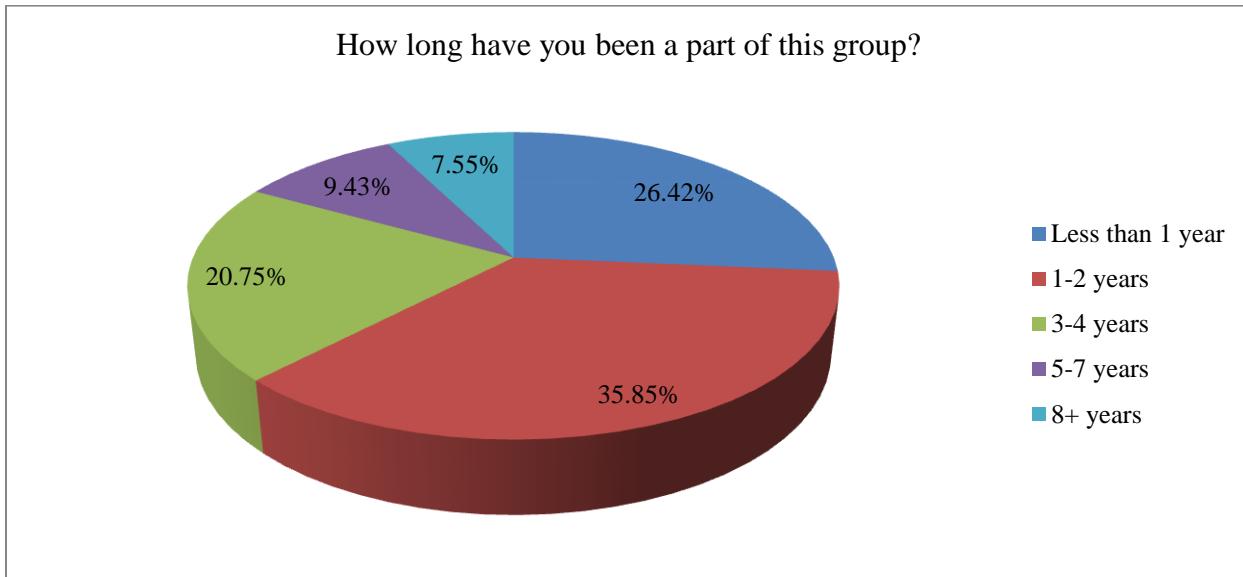


Figure 6.2. Survey Question #4

Another question that was important in understanding who participated in the survey was asking how the member would classify the group?

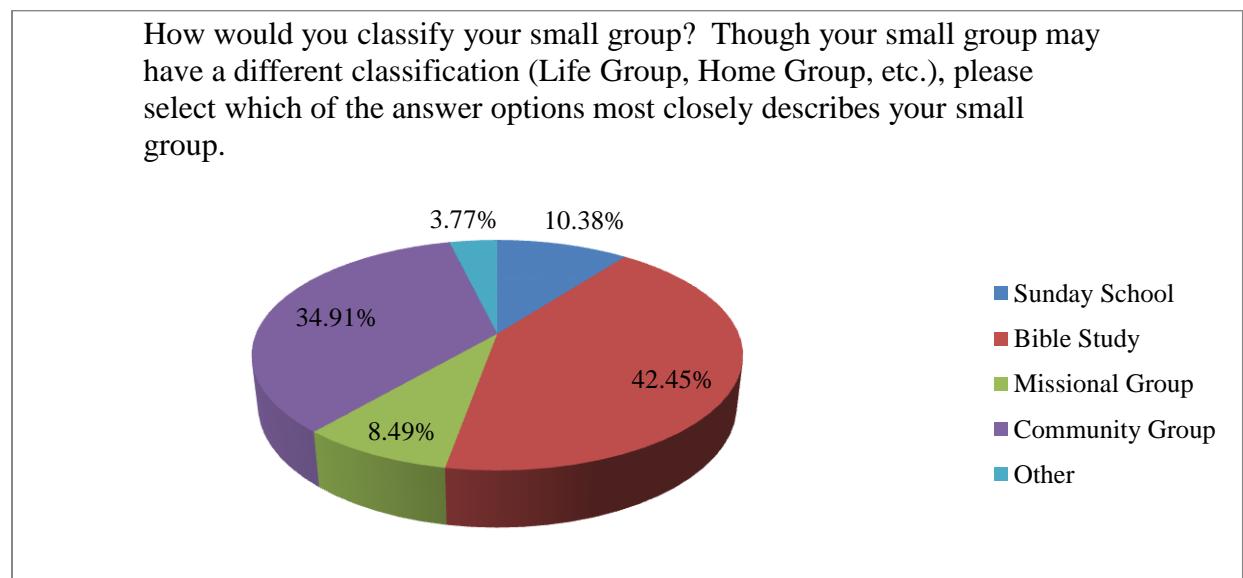


Figure 6.3. Survey Question #8

One of the other responses that was noteworthy was one who responded that his/her small group was just a social club.

Another question asked the average attendance of the group.

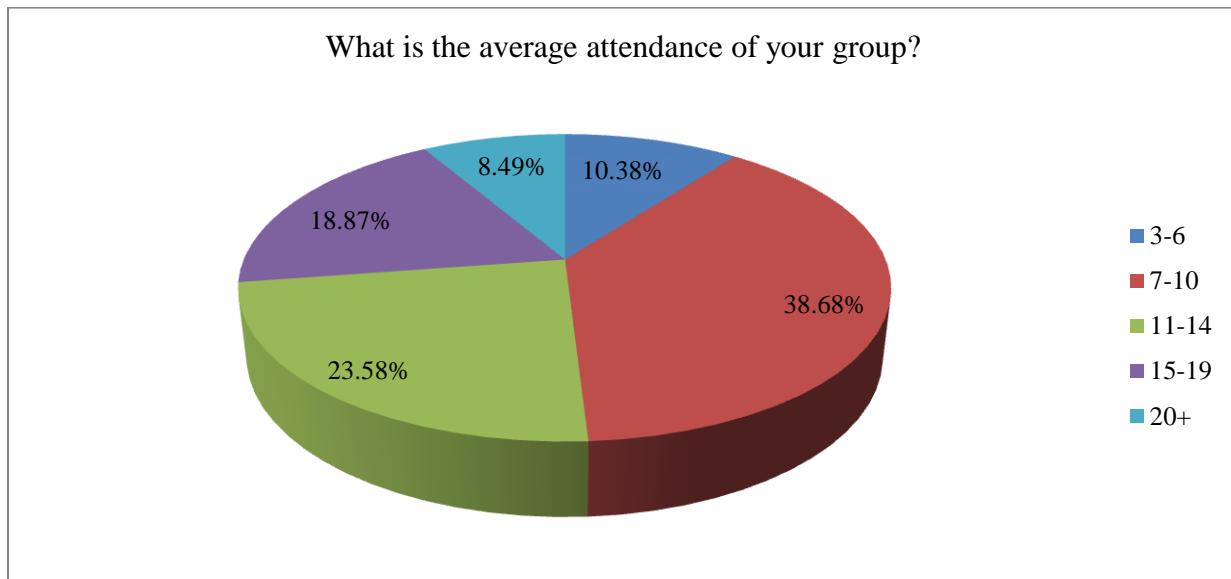


Figure 6.4. Survey Question #9

Survey Results

Small Group as Family

Chapter three discussed the metaphors that describe the church and the preeminence of the metaphor family. As noted throughout this paper, several pastors talked about the importance of small groups and how, in that setting, one would experience the church as family, as opposed to the large gathering (Sunday morning service). Are small groups fulfilling that role as family, as a place where one can live out the “one another’s” of Scripture? Several questions from the survey pertained to this concept of the church as family.

The first two questions are general in nature and demonstrate how the group members feel about each other. The first is, “Our group members feel responsible to help each other with personal needs and struggles.” The results of the survey are below:

Our group members feel responsible to help each other with personal needs and struggles.

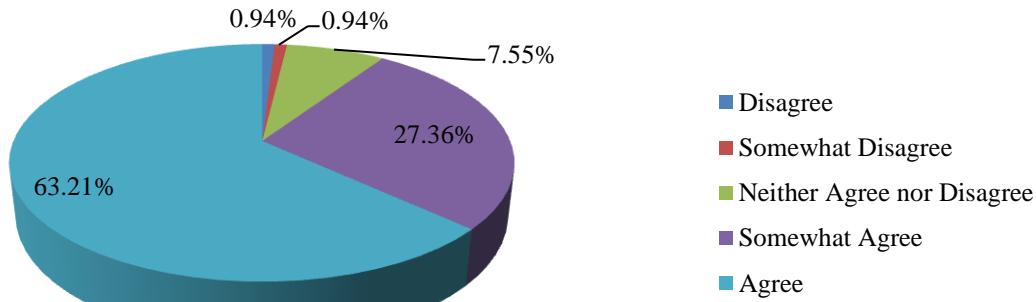


Figure 6.5. Survey Question #31

Over 90 percent responded to this question as “agree” or “somewhat agree”. Conversely, less than 2 percent answered “disagree” or “somewhat disagree”. This is a very positive response and aligns with the concept of the church as family that is presented in Scripture.

The next query is similar to the first, but goes a little deeper. It explores just how much time the members in the small group spend with each other outside of the meeting. The survey group responded this way:

Our group does life together (for example, we get together with others to care for, encourage, pray for, or listen to one another, or just to hang out or play together) outside of meetings.

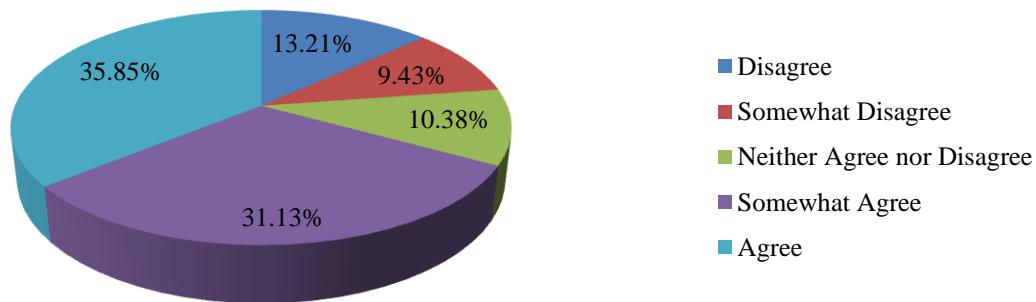


Figure 6.6. Survey Question #33

The results were different from the previous query. Approximately 67 percent responded to this question as “agree” or “somewhat agree”, which is a drop from the previous question, but still a majority. However, notice that almost 23 percent answered “disagree” or “somewhat disagree”. If asked about a general feeling, the response was overwhelmingly positive. However, when asked for some tangible display of that feeling, the numbers drop significantly.

The next question is relatively light. It is simply, “How many parties or fun activities has your group enjoyed together in the past three months?” The event could be in lieu of the regular meeting, or in addition to the regular meeting. No distinction was made as to when the event would take place. The answer is below:

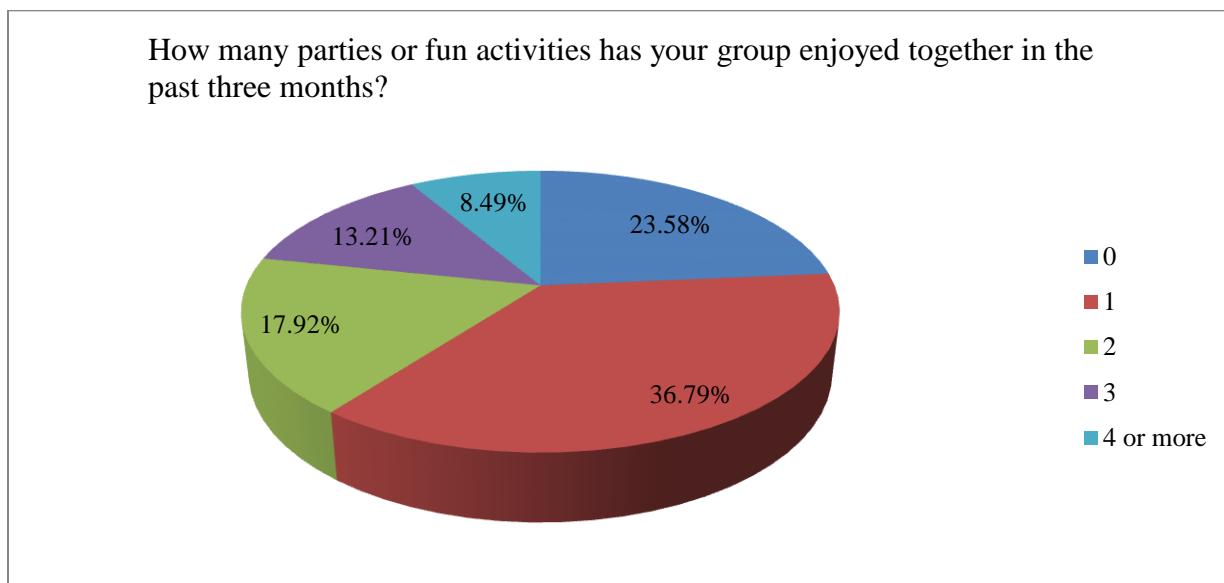


Figure 6.7. Survey Question #32

The survey revealed that 60 percent answered that they have come together to enjoy each other’s company either zero or one time in the last three months. Conversely, approximately 40 percent answered either twice or more, indicating a group that spends more time together outside of regular meetings.

This next question is “How often do you communicate with small group members by phone, text, email, cards, or letter in order to encourage them?” Below are the survey results:

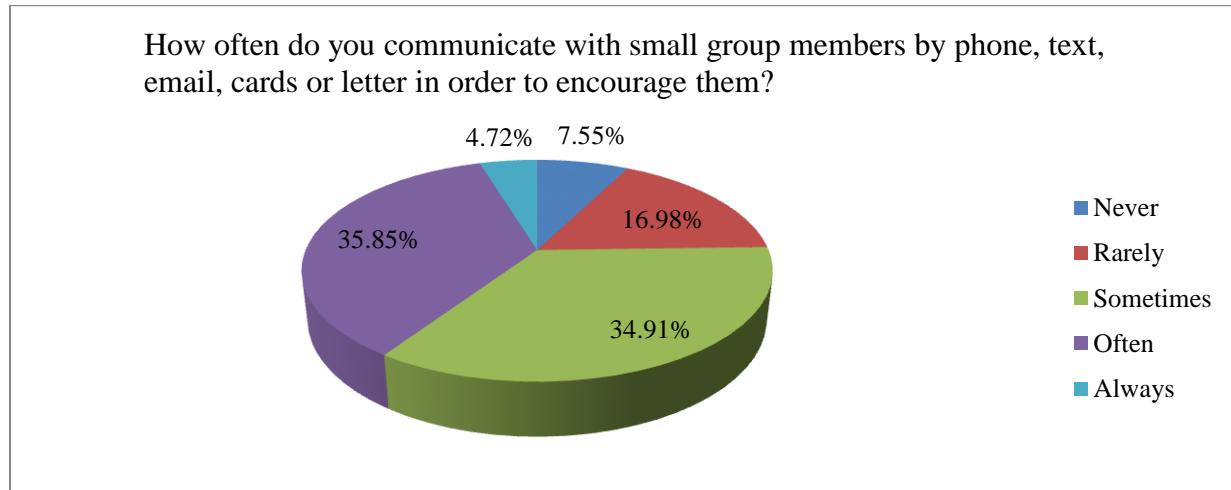


Figure 6.8. Survey Question #35

Notice that almost 60 percent answered either “never,” “rarely,” or “sometimes.” However, 40 percent did answer “often” or “always.”

The last question gets to the heart of the matter. How do the small group members perceive the relationship between each other? The results:

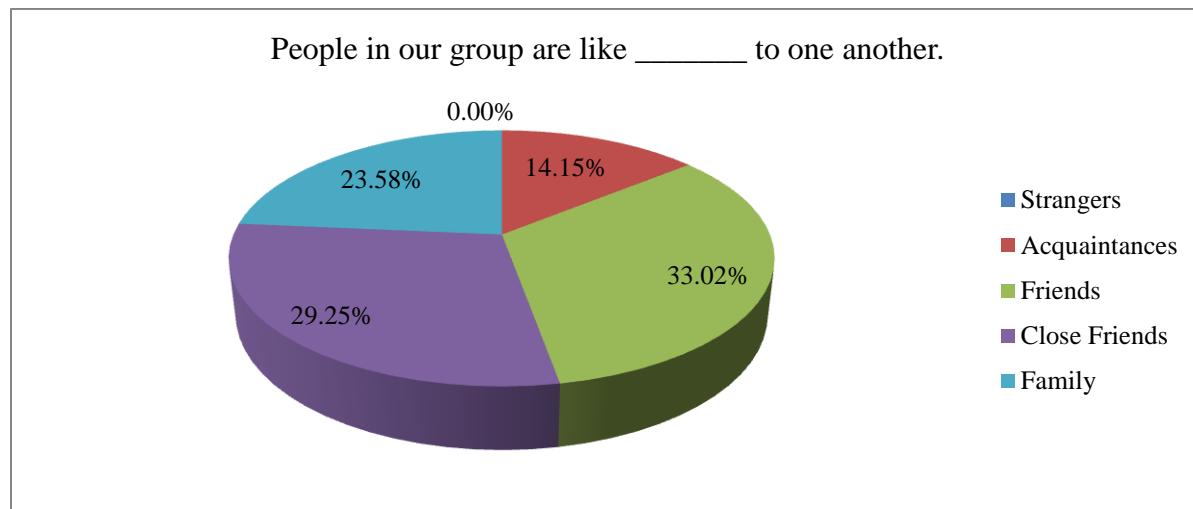


Figure 6.9. Survey Question #34

When asked this question and given the choice of family as one of the responses, approximately 24 percent chose this specific answer. This means that three out of four respondents to the survey do not perceive the other members of their small group as family. This does not mean that the small groups represented by the 75 percent are not doing good things, nor that Christ is not working in their midst, but it does mean that they could be doing and experiencing more of Christ in their midst if they were to consciously move towards a familial approach to small groups as is demonstrated in Scripture.

Presence Purpose and Power of Christ

The next set of questions revolves around the idea of meeting with the purpose, presence and power of Christ centermost in the small group. Dr. Neighbour commented on the importance of recognizing Christ in the midst of the group when he wrote, “The current small group movement is a ‘course correction’ within the old wineskins of ‘Churchianity.’ They can have many focuses, from cognitive Bible studies, to social work projects and self-help for addictions. Unless each group admits its primary purpose is to receive the indwelling presence of Christ and experience his power, knowing they are fulfilling his purpose, they fall short of a true Christ’s Basic Body.”³⁶⁵

How well do the members of the small group do at recognizing Christ in their midst? The first question was a general question which reveals what the members perceive as Christ at work in their midst, transforming people’s lives.

³⁶⁵ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 88.

It is very evident to see the transforming power of Christ at work in the lives of our small group members.

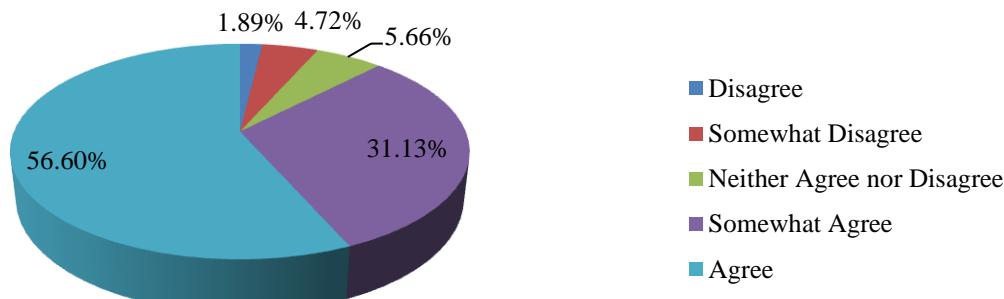


Figure 6.10. Survey Question #30

The vast majority, almost 87 percent, agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement.

Those who disagreed or somewhat disagreed totaled only 6 percent of those surveyed.

The next question simply asked if during the meeting time, there is a recognition of Christ in their midst.

In our meeting, we consciously recognize that Christ is in our midst.

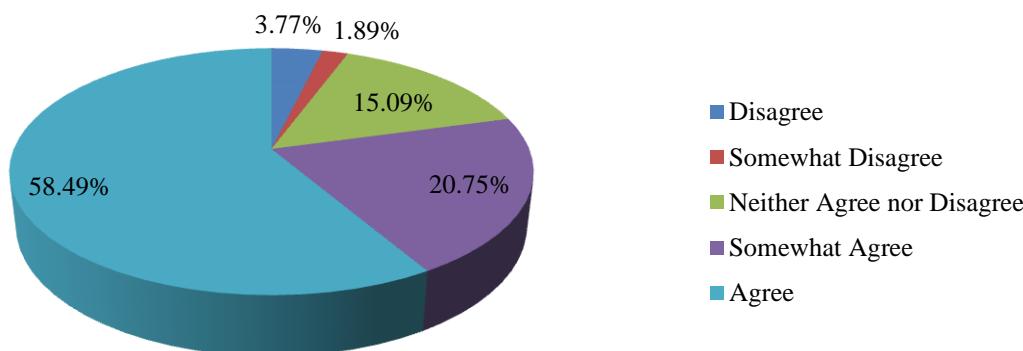


Figure 6.11. Survey Question #26

Again, a vast majority, 79 percent, stated that there was a conscious recognition of Christ in their midst. Conversely, only 5 percent disagreed or somewhat disagreed with the statement.

However, when the question was rephrased and a bit more specific, the percentages changed.

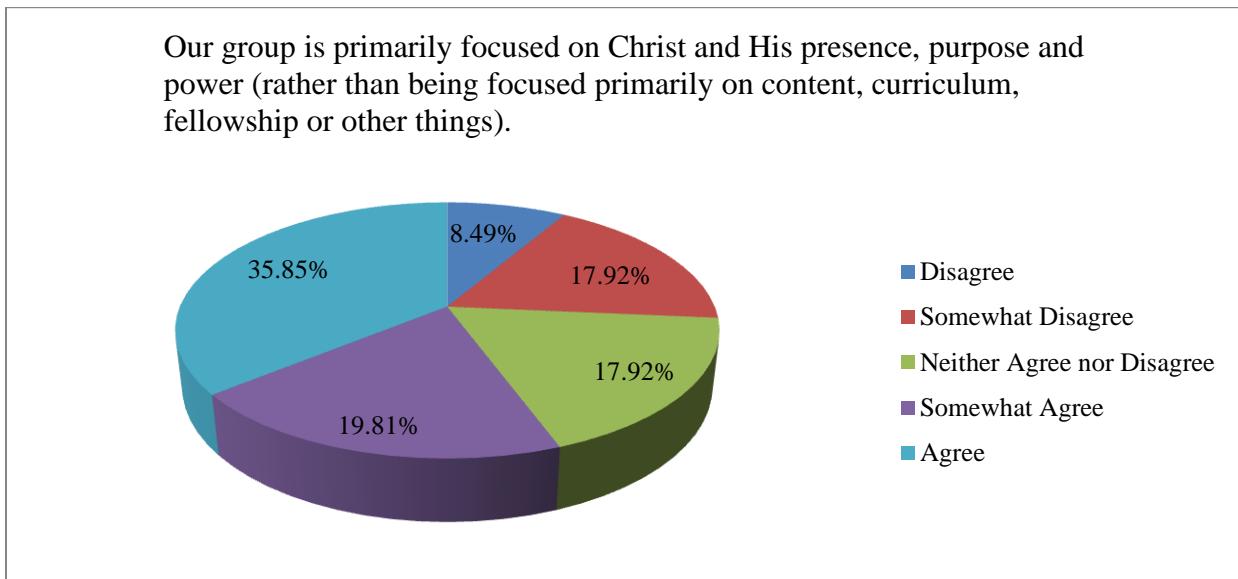


Figure 6.12. Survey Question #29

Notice that the number of those who answered agree or somewhat agree was reduced to 55 percent, a drop of twenty-four percentage points. Even more interesting was those who answered “disagree” or “somewhat disagree”. That number rose to 27 percent; which is a five-fold increase.

If a group consciously recognizes the living Christ and is focused on Christ’s presence, purpose and power in their midst, then it is reasonable that the group would know the specific reason it exists as a group and this would be determined by time spent alone with God, not by other influences, such as programs and traditions. Dr. Elmer Towns points out that, “Cell groups are most effective when they are established for a purpose.”³⁶⁶

The next question was asked of those who participated in the survey is below:

³⁶⁶ Elmer L. Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 76.

We have identified the specific purpose/mission for our group through prayer and from God's Word, not from our opinions, ideas, preferences or tradition.

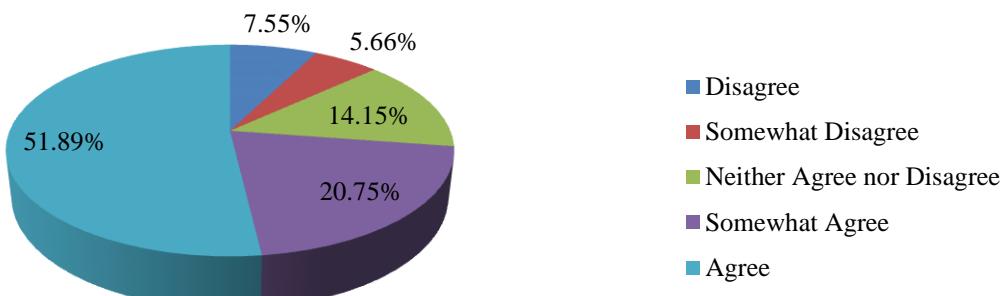


Figure 6.13. Survey Question #28

The findings of the survey indicate roughly 72 percent agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement that they have identified their specific purpose/mission through prayer and God's Word. Those that disagreed or somewhat disagreed totaled roughly 13 percent of respondents.

If one has determined the specific purpose/mission of the group through prayer and God's Word, and Christ is in their midst, then it follows that the group's mission should line up with the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. How do they answer this question?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would your group's mission align with Christ's Great Commission to evangelize the lost and make disciples (1 not at all to 10 complete alignment)?

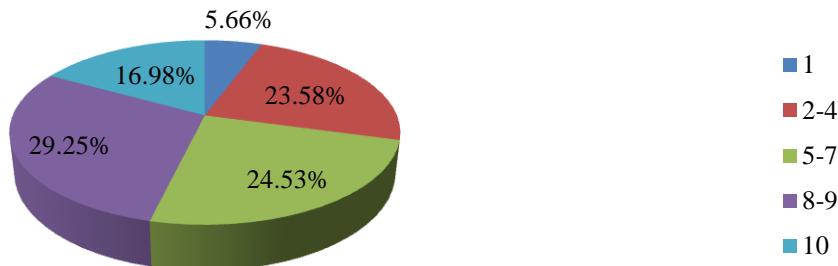


Figure 6.14. Survey Question #27

Even though 72 percent of the respondents stated that they agreed that the specific mission/purpose of the group was determined through prayer and God's Word, only 46 percent agreed that their small group mission aligned with Christ's Great Commission. Those who disagreed or somewhat disagreed totaled 29 percent, more than double that of the previous question. This disparity in the answers (numbers 27 & 28) is worth exploring, but is not within the parameters of this paper.

The last question pertains to seeing Christ at work in their midst. Do the respondents see, in their opinion, the miraculous work of Christ in their group's midst?

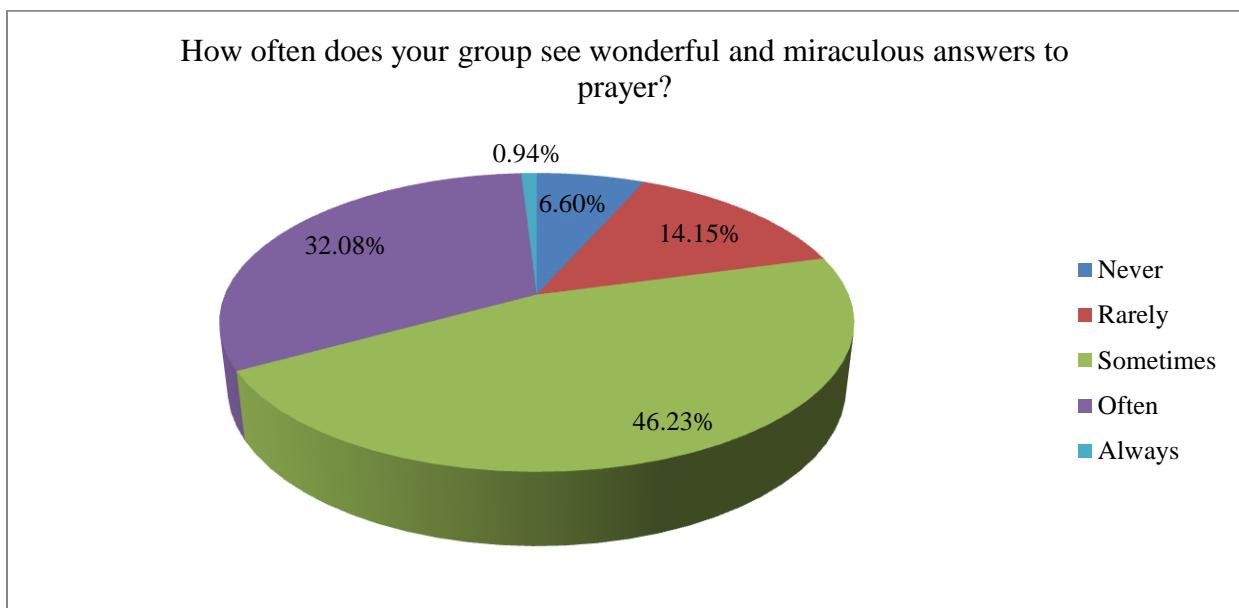


Figure 6.15. Survey Question #24

Only 33 percent responded that they see Christ work in this capacity always and often. By contrast, 20 percent stated that they never or rarely see Christ at work in their midst this way.

Evangelism

Continuing with the theme of the Great Commission and the presence of Christ in the group, several of the questions focused on evangelism and those coming to Christ as a result of the group's efforts and prayers. G. W. Icenogle comments on the importance of small groups in evangelism when he wrote, "Small groups are, in fact, a significant part of God's great redemptive plan."³⁶⁷

Scott Boren also writes on this theme and comments, "Jesus instructs individuals and the church to 'go' and demonstrate God's love to unchurched friends, neighbors, co-workers and family members. There is an Outward call to share the good news."³⁶⁸ Egli and Marable add, "In outward focused groups the leader repeatedly reminds members to bring friends and family members to small group meetings, fun events, and special church activities."³⁶⁹

Dave Earley states, "Every time I have practiced the habit of inviting someone every week, the group has grown. Every time I have not consistently invited new people to come, the group has not grown."³⁷⁰ How did those surveyed do in this aspect of their small group life? There were seven questions that pertained to this topic. The first is a general question about inviting people to the small group. No distinction is made between believers that go to the same church or those who are unchurched.

³⁶⁷ Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry*, 15.

³⁶⁸ Boren, *The ABC's of Making Cell Groups Work*, 12.

³⁶⁹ Egli and Marable, *Small Groups, Big Impact*, 38.

³⁷⁰ Dave Earley, *The 8 Habits of Effective Small Group Leaders* (Houston, TX: Cell Group Resources, 2001), 36.

In the time that you have attended your small group, how many people have you personally invited to attend your small group meeting or small group event?

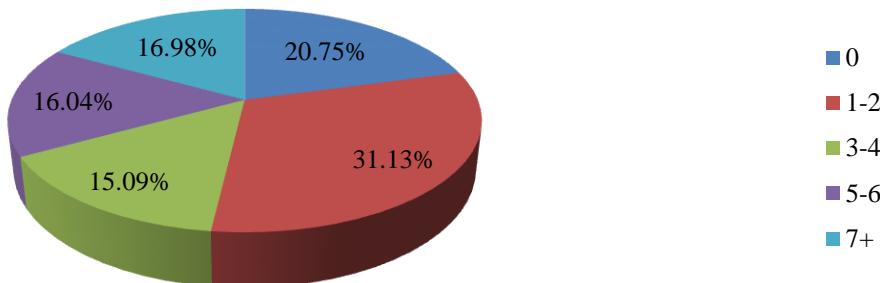


Figure 6.16. Survey Question #40

Almost 80 percent said they have invited someone to attend the group since they began attending the group. No distinction was made as to whether a person who responded to the survey had been in the group for a short period of time or for a long time. Those who had never invited someone to attend totaled roughly 20 percent.

The next question goes along with the prior question about inviting people. This question asks how many new people have visited their small group or small group event in the last year.

In the last 12 months, how many new people have visited your small group meeting or small group event?

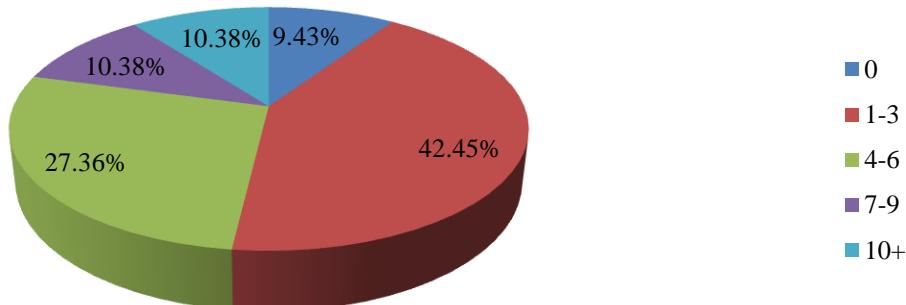


Figure 6.17. Survey Question #41

Over 90 percent of the respondents stated that they have had at least one visitor to the group in the last year. It is not known if all of these visitors were a direct result of an invitation from a group member or not, but it is reasonable to acknowledge that a good portion of them visited because of an invitation. Randall Neighbour makes an important observation about inviting people to a small group or small group event, “I’ve discovered it takes six to eight separate invitations before an unchurched friend will visit my small group.”³⁷¹

The next question follows the prior one with the focus on visitors. It simply asks if those in the small groups surveyed made a habit of following up with visitors.

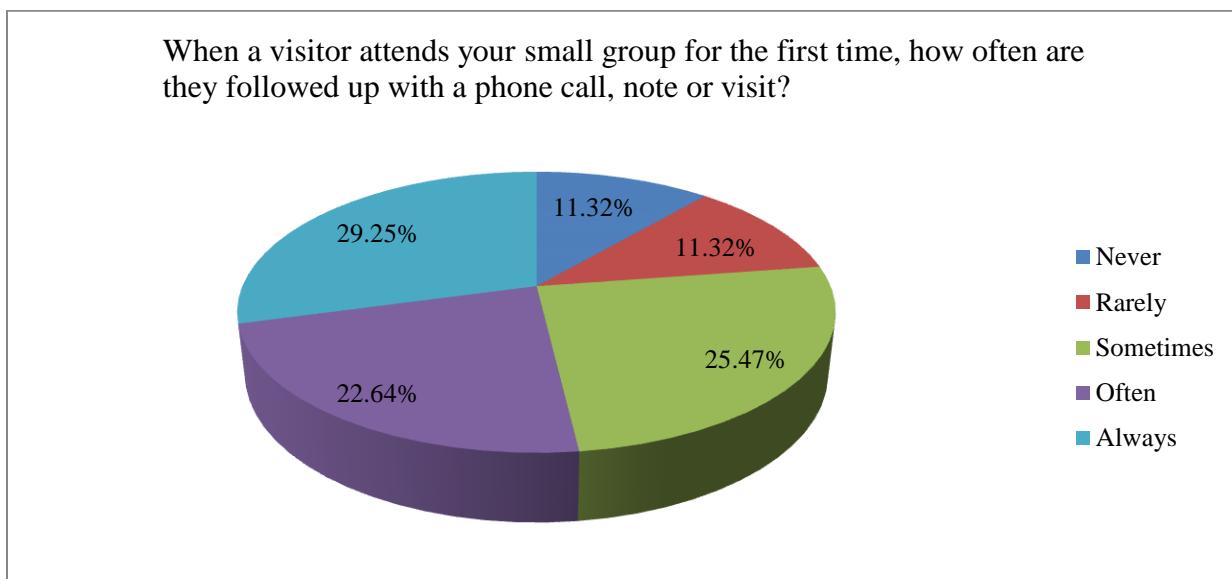


Figure 6.18. Survey Question #38

Amazingly, only 51 percent of those surveyed answered this question either “always” or “often.” Even more surprising is that 22 percent answered “never” or “rarely.” One can ask the question if 80 percent of the people surveyed invited someone to the group, why would only 51 percent actually follow up with visitors. The author has found that, without any effort, small

³⁷¹ Neighbour, *Community Life* 101, 93.

groups naturally become inward focused and closed. It takes purpose and intention to be outward focused and open. This is an example of how some groups may say they are outward and open, but their actions betray their words. It is important to make sure words and actions align, and if groups are interested in inviting others to join and be a part of their family, then actions such as a simple follow up will communicate that far better than words.

The next two questions pertain to praying for the lost that have yet to receive Christ. Randall Neighbour comments on the importance of prayer for the small group when he writes, “When we begin to build a community based on prayer, we learn how our small group can build the kingdom of God in partnership with Him. Trying to create a powerful small group without prayer is just like building your house upon the sand.”³⁷² How did the members of these small groups do in the area of prayer for the lost?

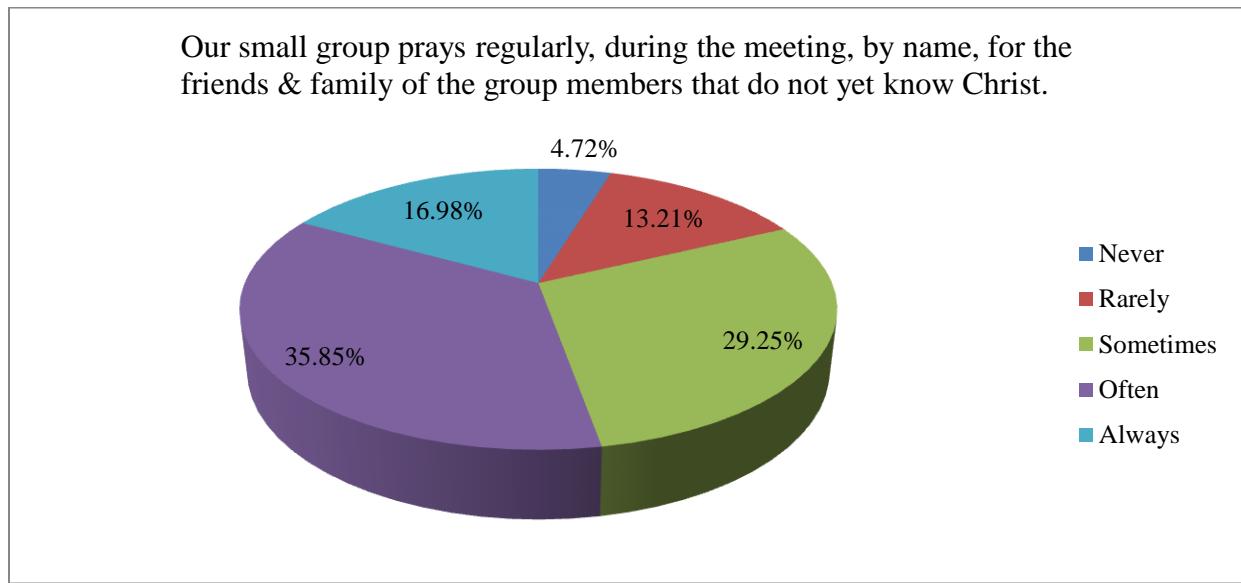


Figure 6.19. Survey Question #39

³⁷² Neighbour, *Community Life 101*, 40.

Of those surveyed, 52 percent responded that either “always” or “often,” their group prays for the lost. Contrast that with the almost 18 percent who stated that they “rarely” or “never” pray for the lost. A variation of the question was asked in the survey.

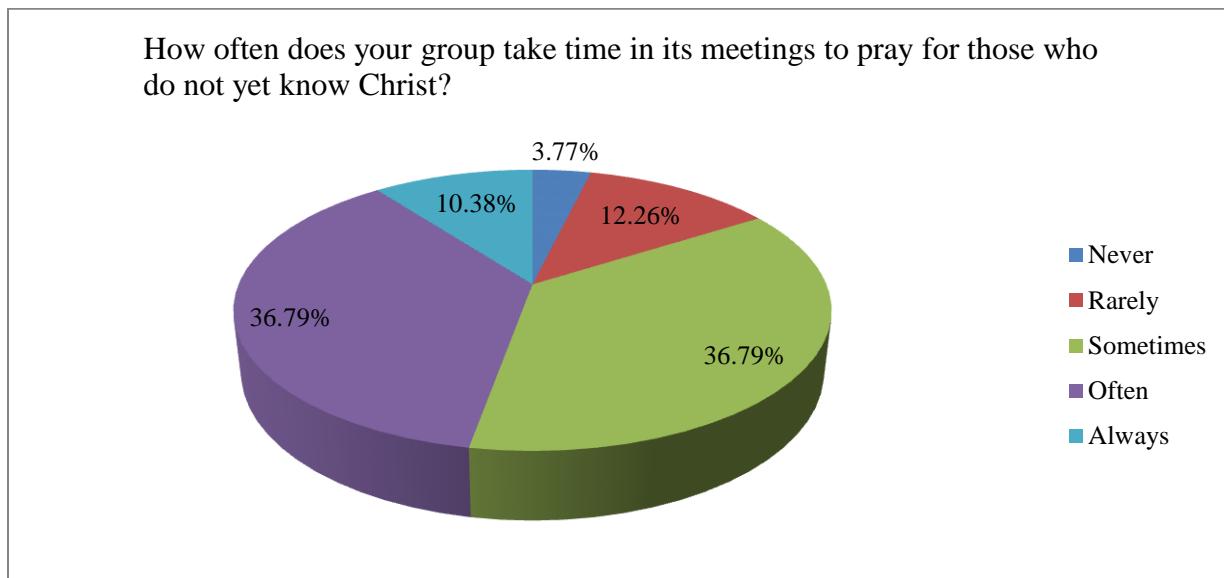


Figure 6.20. Survey Question #36

The response to the question is similar to the last question, with 47 percent answering either “always” or “often,” and 16 percent responding “never” or “rarely.”

The next question is where “the rubber meets the road”. It does not focus on how groups are reaching out to others, but if; in fact, the group members have seen anyone come to Christ as a result of the small group. What this question evaluates is what Peterson describes in his book, *Living Proof*. “This kind of evangelism can hardly be called an activity in which one engages on certain occasions. It is life. Living itself becomes evangelistic. We draw non-Christians into our lives and step into theirs. As the relationship expands, so does the gospel.”³⁷³

³⁷³ Jim Petersen, *Living Proof* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1989), 120.

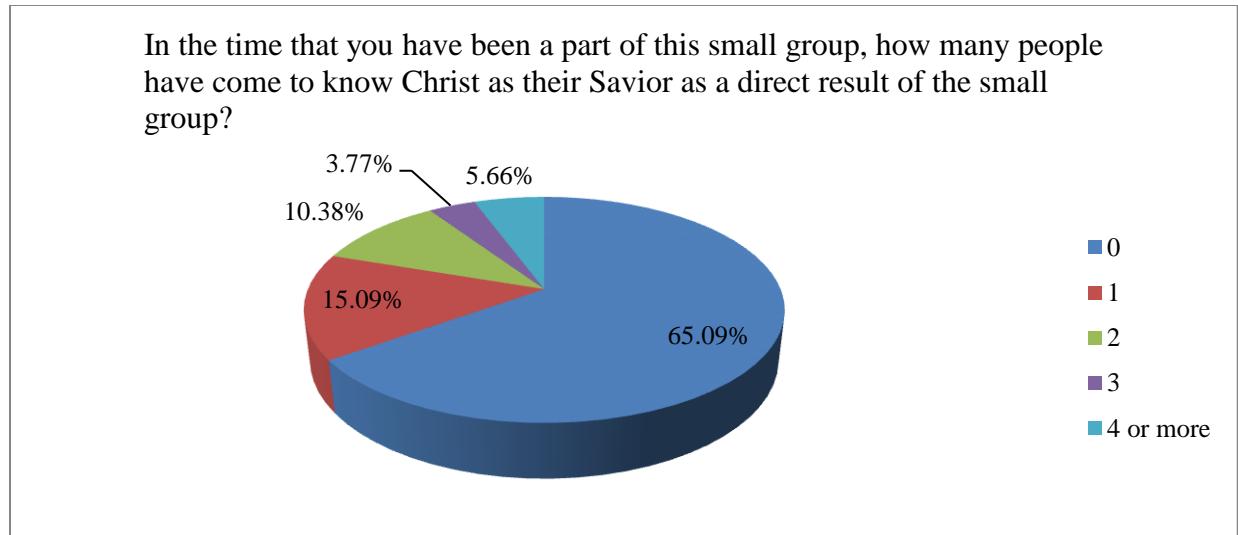


Figure 6.21. Survey Question #5

The good news is that 35 percent have seen at least one person come to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior as a result of the group praying, reaching out to the individual, or both. The not-so-good news is that, at an almost 2:1 ratio (65 percent), the majority of those attending a small group may pray, but actually never see anyone come to Christ as a result of the small group's prayers and actions.

The last question in this category asks if the group members have put feet to their prayers and actually found ways to reach out to the lost. Scott Boren describes the importance of this when he states, “Jesus instructs individuals and the church to ‘go’ and demonstrate God’s love to unchurched friends, neighbors, co-workers and family members. There is an outward call to share the good news.”³⁷⁴ Mack adds, “Healthy small groups serve and share their faith, not one or the other.”³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ Boren, *The ABC's of Making Cell Groups Work*, 12.

³⁷⁵ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 122.

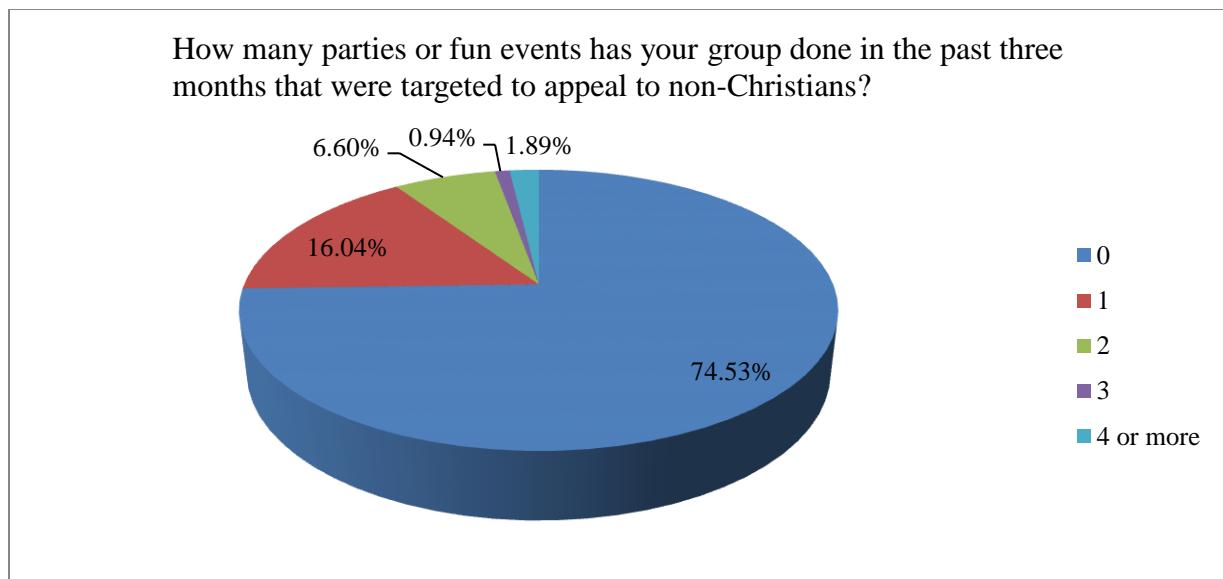


Figure 6.22. Survey Question #37

While approximately 25 percent of the group members responded that they have done at least one outreach in the last three months, almost 75 percent stated that their groups have not put together any activity with the purpose of reaching the lost.

Summary

This dissertation has explained the biblical principles of small group ministry that need to be addressed if the church is to see a halt, or even a reversal, in the decline of the church in the United States. The first chapter was a candid assessment of the health of the church in the United States. Despite all the small group materials that promise church health and growth, the data shows that church attendance continues to decline.

The second chapter highlights the truth of the adage, “If you ask the wrong question, you are sure to get the wrong answer.” The data in chapter one infers that in small group ministry today, the wrong questions are being asked. Much of the interpretation of biblical passages on small groups is actually eisegesis rather than sound exegesis of the text. This is due, in part; to

the interpreter imposing his/her own ideas into the text rather than letting the text speak for itself.

Part of it is due to focusing on “how” instead of asking “why?”

The third chapter emphasizes that the focus needs to be on the “why.” Dr. Neighbour explains that this means that “theology breeds methodology.” Understanding that small group theology is primarily ontological and not primarily existential or pragmatic is essential to laying the proper foundation for small group ministry.

The fourth chapter connects small groups to the New Testament church and explains the biblical role of small groups and the church and their interaction with one another.

The fifth chapter was an overview of the history of small groups. When biblical principles were applied properly, small groups played a vital role in many of the revivals that took place throughout the centuries.

In this last chapter, some of the biblical principles in earlier chapters are evaluated in a variety of church and small group settings. The results are measured to determine how well these participating small group members are doing at applying biblical principles to their ministry context, and to also demonstrate areas of potential improvement.

Final Thoughts

Michael Mack makes an observation about the word “missional”. “Missional is a very popular trend-setting concept for some Christian writers and speakers. It’s a powerful word that describes the focus of the church or small groups or even us as individuals. The way I like to define it is simply, ‘God’s mission is our mission.’ . . . The fact is, many small groups in America are not missional.”³⁷⁶ In evaluating the results of the survey, there are things to be

³⁷⁶ Mack, *Small Group Vital Signs*, 25-26.

encouraged about, but also things that should cause one to pause. Churches and pastors and leaders should take a “Selah” moment and consider how they are approaching small group ministry.

James MacDonald makes an observation that is worth noting, “Eventually everyone vacates church where God is not obviously present and working. Getting people back to church is pointless unless God comes back first . . .”³⁷⁷ Has pragmatism and “doing what works” replaced God’s presence, even in small groups? Towns, Stetzer and Bird offer advice that churches need to hear: “We believe the answer is to look to Jesus and not to models.”³⁷⁸

MacDonald continues, “The ark of God represented the presence of God, and Eli died on the spot when he realized in a moment the implications of its loss. Do we have that sense of what is lost when God’s glory departs? Are you even remotely as aware as Eli of what is lost when we live and worship apart from God’s manifest presence?”³⁷⁹ Then, he makes his point abundantly clear – “Instead of seeing ourselves as people trying to connect with people, let’s see the church as people trying to connect with God and help others do the same.”³⁸⁰ Small groups should be primarily focused on connecting with God and helping others to do the same.

There are those that say that fellowship with group members, or that Bible study and prayer, and so on, are the most important. These are indeed all good things. But they are not the best. Jesus gives guidance as to what is the best. It is found in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”³⁸¹ Verses 31

³⁷⁷ MacDonald, *Vertical Church*, under “People Are Desperate,” Logos Bible Software.

³⁷⁸ Towns, Stetzer, and Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, 21

³⁷⁹ MacDonald, *Vertical Church*, under “What If I Don’t - Ichabod,” Logos Bible Software.

³⁸⁰ MacDonald, *Vertical Church*, under “Make The Vertical Move First,” Logos Bible Software.

³⁸¹ Matt. 6:33.

and 32 give context to this statement, “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’”³² For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”³⁸² Jesus told the people in Matthew 6 that God knows all of their needs, and if they put the kingdom first, then God would take care of all of their other concerns. By application, what the author calls the “Matthew 6:33 principle”, if a small group or church aligns itself with Jesus’ purpose and priority, all the other things (i.e., fellowship, Bible study, and growth) will be added, and actually be more fulfilling, than if a small group or church focuses on one of those “other things”. Neighbour makes this observation, “The community of the Godhead is never fully revealed through organization, but through an organism.”³⁸³

Henry Blackaby writes, “Our world is not being attracted to the Christ we serve because they are not seeing Him at work in our lives. They see us doing good things for God and comment, ‘That’s nice, but it’s not my thing.’ The world is passing us by because they do not want to get involved in what they see in our lives. We are not giving them opportunities to encounter God. They are seeing only us. Let the world watch God at work, and He will attract people to himself.”³⁸⁴ As we focus on Christ and His presence, purpose and power in our midst, then “If we live in community, we truly become a place where people are drawn to us and to Christ.”³⁸⁵ Towns, Stetzer and Bird have put in words this author’s heartfelt prayer for the reader: “We ask that you be willing to hold the models loosely and Jesus firmly.”³⁸⁶

³⁸² Matt. 6:31–32.

³⁸³ Neighbour, *Christ's Basic Bodies*, 26.

³⁸⁴ Blackaby, King, and Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, 143-144.

³⁸⁵ Towns, Stetzer, and Bird, *11 Innovations in the Local Church*, 50.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 19.

Appendix A

Survey Questions - Small Group Survey

1. Are you a small group leader, assistant leader or small group member?

Small Group Leader _____

Small Group Assistant Leader _____

Small Group Member _____

2. What is the name of your group? (Examples: Young Married Sunday School, Parenting Class, Smith Community Group, etc.)

3. What is the name of the church that you attend?

Background

4. How long have you been a part of this group?

Less than 1 year _____

1-2 years _____

3-4 years _____

5-7 years _____

8+ years _____

5. In the time that you have been a part of this small group, how many people have come to know Christ as their Savior as a direct result of the small group?

0 _____

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 or more _____

6. In the time that you have been a part of this small group, how many new leaders have been produced?

0 _____

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 or more _____

7. In the time that you have been a part of this small group, how many new groups have been formed out of this group (in other words, how many times has this small group multiplied)?

0 _____

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 or more _____

8. How would you classify your small group?

Sunday School _____

Bible Study _____

Missional Group _____

Community Group _____

Other _____

9. What is the average attendance of your group?

3-6 _____

7-10 _____

11-14 _____

15-19 _____

20+ _____

10. How many small group trainings have you personally attended since you have been a part of this small group?

0 _____

1-2 _____

3-4 _____

5-6 _____

7+ _____

11. How many days a week do you have a quiet (devotional) time with the Lord?

0 days _____

1-2 days _____

3-4 days _____

5-6 days _____

6-7 days _____

12. How much time do you spend in daily devotions (Bible reading/prayer)?

0-5 minutes _____

6-15 minutes _____

16-30 minutes _____

31-45 minutes _____

46+ minutes _____

13. How many days each week do you spend time praying for other members in your group?

0 days _____

1-2 days _____

3-4 days _____

5-6 days _____

6-7 days _____

14. How many days each week do you pray for the salvation of unbelievers?

0 days _____

1-2 days _____

3-4 days _____

5-6 days _____

6-7 days _____

15. I pray regularly, by name, for the friends/family members of my small group that do not yet know Christ.

Never _____

Rarely _____

Sometimes _____

Often _____

Always _____

16. How many times in the average four week span does your small group meet?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 (but we take a summer break) _____

4 _____

17. How many minutes does your small group meeting last?

45-59 minutes _____

60-74 minutes _____

75-90 minutes _____

91-120 minutes _____

120+ minutes _____

18. What best describes the curriculum that you use in your small group?

We study the Bible verse by verse _____

We use curriculum _____

We study a book (Christian authors such as Francis Chan, Beth Moore, etc.) _____

We discuss the sermon _____

We do not have any curriculum _____

19. During the teaching/discussing/facilitating time, which of these best describes how your group meeting is conducted?

One person teaches _____

One leads the discussion _____

One facilitates _____

We have a group discussion with no leader _____

20. How many minutes does your small group spend in teaching/discussing/facilitating?

0-5 minutes _____

6-15 minutes _____

16-30 minutes _____

31-45 minutes _____

46+ minutes _____

21. What percentage of the time is the leader speaking during the
teaching/discussing/facilitating time of the meeting?

0-15% _____

16-25% _____

26-49% _____

50-75% _____

75%+ _____

22. How many minutes does your small group spend in worship in its meeting?

0-4 minutes _____

5-9 minutes _____

10-14 minutes _____

15-19 minutes _____

20+ minutes _____

23. How many minutes does your small group spend in prayer in its meeting?

0-4 minutes _____

5-9 minutes _____

10-14 minutes _____

15-19 minutes _____

20+ minutes _____

24. How often does your group see wonderful and miraculous answers to prayer?

Never _____

Rarely _____

Sometimes _____

Often _____

Always _____

25. How many minutes does your small group spend in fellowship time?

0-5 minutes _____

6-15 minutes _____

16-30 minutes _____

31-45 minutes _____

46+ minutes _____

26. In our meeting, we consciously recognize that Christ is in our midst.

Disagree _____

Somewhat Disagree _____

Neither Agree nor Disagree _____

Somewhat Agree _____

Agree _____

27. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would your group's mission align with Christ's Great Commission to evangelize the lost and make disciples (1 not at all to 10 complete alignment)?

1 _____

2-4 _____

5-7 _____

8-9 _____

10 _____

28. We have identified the specific purpose/mission for our group through prayer and from God's Word, not from our opinions, ideas, preferences or tradition.

Disagree _____

Somewhat Disagree _____

Neither Agree nor Disagree _____

Somewhat Agree _____

Agree _____

29. Our group is primarily focused on Christ and His presence, purpose and power (rather than being focused primarily on content, curriculum, or other things).

Disagree _____

Somewhat Disagree _____

Neither Agree nor Disagree _____

Somewhat Agree _____

Agree _____

30. It is very evident to see the transforming power of Christ at work in the lives of our small group members.

Disagree _____

Somewhat Disagree _____

Neither Agree nor Disagree _____

Somewhat Agree _____

Agree _____

31. Our group members feel responsible to help each other with personal needs and struggles.

Disagree _____

Somewhat Disagree _____

Neither Agree nor Disagree _____

Somewhat Agree _____

Agree _____

32. How many parties or fun activities has your group enjoyed together in the past three months?

0 _____

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 or more _____

33. Our group does life together (for example, we get together with others to care for, encourage, pray for, or listen to one another, or just to hang out or play together) outside of meetings.

Disagree _____

Somewhat Disagree _____

Neither Agree nor Disagree _____

Somewhat Agree _____

Agree _____

34. People in our group are like _____ to one another.

Strangers _____

Acquaintances _____

Friends _____

Close Friends _____

Family _____

35. How often do you communicate with small group members by phone, email, cards, or letter in order to encourage them?

Never _____

Rarely _____

Sometimes _____

Often _____

Always _____

36. How often does your group take time in its meetings to pray for those who do not yet know Christ?

Never _____

Rarely _____

Sometimes _____

Often _____

Always _____

37. How many parties or fun events has your group done in the past three months that were targeted to appeal to non-Christians?

0 _____

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 or more _____

38. When a visitor attends your small group for the first time, how often are they followed up with a phone call, note or visit?

Never _____

Rarely _____

Sometimes _____

Often _____

Always _____

39. Our small group prays regularly, during the meeting, by name, for the friends & family of the group members that do not yet know Christ.

Never _____

Rarely _____

Sometimes _____

Often _____

Always _____

40. In the time that you have attended your small group, how many people have you personally invited to attend your small group meeting or small group event?

0 _____

1-2 _____

3-4 _____

5-6 _____

7+ _____

41. In the last 12 months, how many new people have visited your small group meeting or small group event?

0 _____

1-3 _____

4-6 _____

7-9 _____

10+ _____

42. What percentage of adults in your group do you involve in leading parts of the small group meeting?

0% _____

25% _____

50% _____

75% _____

100% _____

43. What percentage of your group members do you expect to lead a small group at some point in the future?

0% _____

25% _____

50% _____

75% _____

100% _____

44. Our small group leader meets regularly with his/her interns, assistant leaders and/or core team.

Disagree _____

Somewhat Disagree _____

Neither Agree nor Disagree _____

Somewhat Agree _____

Agree _____

45. Does your small group have a clear, dated goal for when it will multiply or grow into a new group?

No _____

Goal, no date _____

Yes, both goal and date _____

46. How often do your prayers for your small group include a prayer for the multiplication of leaders?

Never _____

Rarely _____

Sometimes _____

Often _____

Always _____

47. Our small group coach/Sunday School Superintendent/small group pastor meets regularly with our small group leader.

Disagree _____

Somewhat Disagree _____

Neither Agree nor Disagree _____

Somewhat Agree _____

Agree _____

48. In the past 12 months, how many times has the small group coach/Sunday School Superintendent/small group pastor visited your small group?

0 _____

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 or more _____

49. Does your small group have an assistant leader, an intern, or a Core Team?

Assistant Leader or Intern _____

Core Team _____

None _____

50. How many individuals in your group serve as interns, assistants, or are part of a Core Team right now?

0 _____

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 or more _____

Note: The survey questions are a combination of the author's, and:

1. Michael Mack's *Small Group Vital Signs*.
2. Jim Egli's *Upward, Inward, Outward, Forward*.
3. Jim Egli's and Dwight Marable's *Small Groups Big Impact*.

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VITA

Shawn M. Barr

PERSONAL

Born: October 9, 1965
Married: Debora Barr, March 7, 2003.
Children: Jared Michael, born February 20, 2004.

EDUCATIONAL

B.A., Baptist Bible College, 1988.
M.A.R., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992.
D.MIN., Liberty University School of Divinity, 2016.

MINISTERIAL

Ordination: October 20, 2009, Calvary Chapel Melbourne, West Melbourne, FL.

PROFESSIONAL

Youth Director, Grace Baptist Church, Hollywood, FL 1998-2001
Outreach Director, Crosspointe Church, Palm Bay, FL 2003-2005
Associate Pastor, Calvary Chapel Melbourne, West Melbourne, FL 2006-2013
Senior Pastor, Noelridge Park Church, Cedar Rapids, IA 2013-present

February 27, 2014

Shawn M. Barr IRB Exemption 1806.022714: Factors that Influence Healthy Small Groups

Dear Shawn,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and that no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101 (b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and that any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption, or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D. Professor, IRB Chair Counseling
(434) 592-4054

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