

The What of Small Groups: Acts 2:42-47
Sunday, September 25th 2016
By Ryan Perry

Read Acts 2:42-47

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Pray

Introduction:

If you were here last week or listened to the message online you know that I talked about why we are jumping into small groups as a major ministry of our church.

I talked about the conversations that I have had with many of you who have felt like real community was/is lacking within our church, and how that is something that we as leaders have also noticed.

Realizing that many of us were feeling that need we also had to ask the question, what is community? Or another way to ask it is, "What is biblical or Christ-centered community and is that something that we really want?"

With those questions in mind I laid out for you our main thesis statement for why we believe small groups are the best thing for our church and how biblical community is lived out within them. Let's review that statement again this morning.

Why Small Groups?

We believe that as we pursue Christ-centered worship, community, service, and multiplication as a church, small groups are and will be a place where individual believers spur one another on in these areas of their Christian lives. Where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we work to grow in our love for God, combat sin, live out gospel truths, and be transformed into the image of Christ as we seek to be salt and light for Christ in a dark world.

This statement brought to light the reality that this type of community is a high cost community. It costs us the things that keep us from opening up to other people. It costs us our self-reliance and the part of ourselves that wants to hide our sin and faults.

Despite this cost, I said that it is totally worth it. It's worth it because this type of community is what we're created for, it allows us to be needy and meet needs, it's for our joy as we are transformed into the image of Christ, and God will use it to proclaim the gospel to lost people. **This means that it can and will be a great commission fulfilling community.**

So now that we have talked about why we believe small groups are important for us as a church I want to take some time this morning to focus on what small groups actually do together. Now, we understand that every group is going to look a little bit different. That's a good thing because we want you guys to develop your groups in a way that will best facilitate deep and meaningful relationships that are centered around Jesus.

However, we do think there are some essentials that we think should be a part of any healthy group. There are six things that I want to focus on this morning and each one is part of what a healthy small group will do together. And these six areas, for the most part, are found within Acts 2:42-47.

1. Small groups devote themselves to the churches teaching. (Acts 2:42)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

One of the marks of the early church was that they devoted themselves to the teaching of the church, and in the context of this verse particularly to the teaching of the apostles. Now we realize that we don't have apostles today, but this verse is generally seen by most commentators as pointing to activities that the church is supposed to do throughout all generations.

So we as God's people are meant to think about, study, and discuss the teachings of God's word. And the emphasis here is on the teaching that happens when we gather as a church. So we work to think about, discuss, and apply what we hear in the sermon on Sunday morning. So our small groups will be given the task of doing sermon review: thinking about, discussing, and applying Sunday's sermon.

There are also some practical reasons for doing this as well. One, it requires us to actually think about what we are hearing every Sunday. If Sunday morning is the greatest amount of Bible teaching that most of us receive in a given week then we should be doing the hard work of thinking about it and asking God how he wants to use it in our lives.

You see, if we are honest, most of us forget what is preached as soon as we leave, yet God wants more from us and He has a greater purpose for what is preached from the pulpit. He wants to use it to transform us, and make us for like Jesus.

Secondly, we realize that people are busy and often we don't have a ton of time to prepare a whole study, so instead of having every group doing separate Bible studies that they have to prepare for, we are all discussing and applying the sermon we just heard.

This means that you don't have something extra to prepare. It also keeps our small groups from becoming Bible studies where we are studying facts about the Bible instead of applying scriptural truths and living in community with one another. **Small groups are not meant to be Bible studies. They are meant for building deep relationships as we help each other apply and live out gospel truths.**

Will sermon review be difficult at times? Yep. Maybe you didn't get anything out of a sermon, or maybe you are unsure if you agree with what is preached, or maybe you were tired that Sunday and you had a hard time paying attention. Either way we can still look at the passage preached and ask, "Lord, how do you want to use this to make me more like Jesus." By God's grace this will make us better listeners and appliers of God's Word.

2. Small groups devote themselves to fellowship and breaking bread together in one another's homes. (Acts 2:42, 46)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,

Now, if I were to say to you that it is important that we have fellowship with each other nobody is going to question it at all. We would say well yeah, we do that when we gather for church, or an event, or a meal.

But if I say to you that, "we are called to have deep communion with one another where we are always working to be in an intimate relationship and community with one another whether we are here or not," you are going to start squirming a little bit. Also, if I add that this should be happening as we invite people into our homes and into our lives we start to squirm a little more.

The reality is that we like to have basic conversations with people that make us feel like we have friends, but these verses in Acts call us to so much more. They are laying out for us a lifestyle of living that can feel uncomfortable for us as Americans who like to isolate ourselves.

But God has given us this example because He knows it is best for us. An example where we actually have fellowship or "Koinonia" with each other. Meaning that we have an intimate communion with one another where we are sharing our lives with one another. I am opening up my life to you as you open your life up to me.

This is part of the transformational process that God has for us where we are able to encourage one another to grow in our love for Jesus as we open our lives to each other. And within the context of Acts 2 this was done as people met in each other's homes and shared meals together.

Again, I realize that this is scary, but I want to make it clear that God wrote this down because He knew it was good for us. And for us here at LEFC, we believe that transformational small groups will only be possible if we are willing to open our homes and our lives to one another.

Are we going to force you to do this, No, but we believe God's word says it is best for us. And it will ultimately be a witness to the world of the kind of close and deep fellowship that they can have in Christ, and others in Christ.

So we believe small groups should have deep meaningful life sharing relationships as we gather in each other's homes and share food together.

3. Small groups devote themselves to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

I don't know about you, but I am super convicted by the last part of this verse. I find so often that I will pray for someone when they ask, but I don't often devote myself to prayer or praying for people.

Now in this verse they could have been gathering to recite specific prayers or at specific times for prayer. Whatever the case maybe, we can see in this verse that God's people gathered to pray. It was a major mark of what they church did as they gathered together in each other homes.

Let me ask you, Is prayer a major mark of your life? Do you pray without ceasing as Paul often writes, and do you often and regularly lift up the prayers and requests of the saints to God that He would move mightily in them? I have to confess that I struggle with that.

Yet we believe that prayer is an essential mark of the church, and what we should be doing when we gather together here and in each other's homes.

As the 2nd century theologian Irenaeus wrote:

The church does not perform anything by means of angelic intervention, or by invocations, or by any other wicked or curious act; but by directing her prayers to the Lord, who has made all things in a pure, sincere, and straightforward spirit, and calling on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, she has been accustomed to work miracles, for the advantage of mankind.

God moved in amazing ways in the life of the early church and its people because they were a praying church. They devoted themselves to communing with their heavenly Father and to interceding for one another in a way where they saw God heal people, transform lives, and spread the gospel.

Do we want that for our church and for each other? Do we want what James writes in James 5:16:

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Do we want people to get healed from physical, emotional, and spiritual sickness? Do we want to see God move in power within our church? Then we need to pray.

And we believe that small groups provide an opportunity to focus in on a small number of people who you can labor in prayer for both when you gather and when you are apart.

Our hope is that you will see God move in such powerful ways within your groups that prayer will not just be something you do because you have to, but it will become something that you long for, as you ask God to move in your groups and proclaim your dependence upon Him in prayer.

So small groups will be devoted to prayer.

4. Small groups will devote themselves to meeting needs. (Acts 2:45)

And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

All of us have needs. All of us have times when we really could use some help. All of us have most likely experienced that moment in time when the weight of our circumstances or crisis seemed overwhelming.

Yet, I am floored by the fact that most of us, myself included, refuse to ask for help.

Illustration: I've been in the middle of a basement remodel most of this summer, and even though it has taken me a long time and at times I totally felt in over my head, I totally refused to ask for help. People definitely offered to help, but I didn't take them up on it, and it wasn't until someone really just said **I'm helping**, that I was willing to accept it.

Why is that?

Because I am a prideful man. I forget that I am a man who is needy and somehow I believed that I could make it on my own and I didn't need any help. In so doing, I also forget God's word in Galatians 6:2 which says:

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Meeting needs is what the body of Christ is supposed to do. We are to bear each other's burdens in a way that fulfill the law of Christ. Meaning that as we serve people and meet needs, we are doing what Jesus did. In turn, we honor God and show people what He is like.

As for the early church we see that they were meeting needs freely. These could be monetary issues, relationship issues, physical health issues, spiritual issues, etc... and they were meeting them. And the result of such radical giving and need meeting, as we have read many times in Acts 2:46, was glad hearts. **It was Joy.**

A giving community where we are needy, and we meet other's needs, and in so doing display the love of Christ to one another, is a community that will be full of glad and generous heart. A joyous community.

Small groups devote themselves to meeting needs.

5. Small groups will devote themselves to accountability. (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:24-25)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

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

I know what you're thinking, "**Ahhh, he brought up that "A" word.**" I know accountability is not something that many of us look forward to, but it is something we all need, and it is something that God gives to us because He loves us. Hebrews 12:5-6 says:

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

When we are held accountable for our sin and we receive discipline, That is Go'd love being poured out upon us and it is what is best for us. In fact confessing our sin to one another and being held accountable is one of the things that God may use to heal us whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual. Again, as James said in James 5:16:

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Now look, don't hear me saying that all of your troubles are because of your sin. **I'm not saying that, but I am saying that it is possible that sin is playing a role in whatever you are going through.** It is possible that the root of your spiritual issues and your emotional troubles is unconfessed sin, and God wants to pour out His love and healing upon you as you enjoy the freedom of confessing that sin and walking in the light.

And yes, even physical issues could be a result of sin. That is why Paul tells the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 11 that some are weak, ill, and have died. They were taking Communion in a sinful way, and as a result physical illness and even death came for some. **So the confession of sin is a good thing that is healing for God's people.**

But we must not just confess sin, we must also hold one another accountable for our sin. Again, the word fellowship in Acts 2:42 speaks of an intimacy in our relationships where we open and expose our lives to one another. This is where confession happens. However, Hebrews 10:24 points to the idea that we are to stir up one and challenge one another to grow in Christ. This is accountability.

So on one side we confess our sin and on the other we challenge one another to root out and move beyond our sin. When we do this within our groups we will help each other, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to live a life that bears fruit and is pleasing to God. As Colossians 1:10 says:

so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

And the end result is that God will use this to transform us into the image of Christ and will produce joy in our lives. As Paul writes one verse later in Colossians 1:11:

being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy;

Confessing sin and stirring one another to follow Christ produces fruit that not only pleases God, but produces joy.

So our small group will be devoted to the God-pleasing and joyful work of accountability.

6. Small groups will be devoted to missional living. (Acts 2:46-47)

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

For the early church missional living was really the culmination of their shared life with Christ. As they devoted themselves to the teachings of the church, to intimate fellowship with one another, to confession, prayer, and the meeting of needs the world took notice.

People saw them proclaiming Jesus both in their words and in their actions toward one another and they wanted it. Lost people saw the embodiment of Jesus within these people as they lived life together, and as a result God was saving people.

For us here at LEFC we believe that God wants to do the same thing through our small groups. That is why our mission statement is as follows:

We exist to bring glory to God in all things by making disciples through Christ-centered worship, Christ-centered community, Christ-centered service, and Christ-centered multiplication.

We exist as a church to bring glory through Christ by making disciples, raising up mature believers who fully worship and proclaim and enjoy the fullness of our triune God. And we believe that our small groups will be an integral part in fulfilling that mission.

And within our small groups as we live in deep, meaningful, and accountable community; serve one another by bearing each other's burdens and meeting needs, and as we grow in our love for and worship of Jesus together, the gospel will go forth, people will be saved, and disciples will be made.

And as we make disciples, God will be glorified, the beauty and worth of Christ will be displayed, and we will be a community that has glad and generous as we experience a true foretaste, within our small Christ-centered communities and as we gather as the whole body of Christ, of the eternity that awaits us when Christ returns.

Will it be easy? No. But is it worth? Totally.

And as a reminder before I close in prayer, If you would like to learn more about small groups I will be leading the adult Sunday school class for the next three Sunday's. I will be able to answer questions about small groups and hopefully give you a taste of what they can and will be like. So please join me for that.

Let's pray.