

Why Small Groups?: Part 1

Acts 2:42-47

September 18th, 2016

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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:

As I begin a two part series today on “*The Why and What of Small Groups?*” Today will be about the why and next week will be about the what. In some ways I have made my task doubly hard. I say doubly hard because I am preaching on a topic that many of us have preconceived ideas about or we memories that are either good or bad. Secondly, I have picked a passage of scripture that many of us have very strong feelings about in relation to how it should apply to the church today.

So realizing that I have made my task difficult, I want to call all of us to come to the idea of small groups, and Acts 2:42-47 with an open heart and open mind ready to receive what God has for us this morning and next Sunday.

However, before I talk about either of these things I want to tell you about a conversation that I have had with people many times over the past two years. It starts out like this:

“We love La Crescent Free because it teaches the word of God.” In fact I had one person refer to the teaching here as a big piece of meat that you can just keep chewing on. **That’s a good thing by the way.** It’s the next sentence in this recurring conversation however that I find interesting; *“but were not very good at community.”*

Now, if this were just one or two people saying this it could be easy to dismiss, but it has been person after person that I have had this conversation with. So we as elders have not only heard you but we have also sensed this same need.

We live in a time where very little authentic community happens face to face, and community in many ways has been reduced to talking to people through a computer or phone over Facebook, text message, Twitter, Instagram, or Snap Chat. This is a growing trend in our culture that is not going away. So the need for genuine person to person community, especially within the church, is at an all-time high.

But here's the question: When we say we want community do we want community that makes us feel good about having friends or do we want biblical community? Another way to say it is "do we want Burger King Community (have it your way), or do we want Biblical community in the way the Bible talks about it?"

I asked this question because if all you want is feel good community where people tell you how great you are, then you aren't going to want our small groups. **But you are also going to have to admit that you don't want biblical community either.**

So bearing that in mind I want to begin by laying out our thesis statement for small groups and why we believe small groups is the best thing for our church.

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.

Do you feel the weightiness of that statement? Do you feel it rubbing up against your sense of American individualism? I do.

You mean people are going to be pushing me to worship and serve Jesus more than I do now? You mean I am going to be challenged to live in deep community and relationship with other people even when it's hard? I'm going to have to selflessly serve others within my group, community, and church? Are you saying that this will be a place where we intentionally challenge one another to engage lost people with the gospel?

YES!!!!

In fact one of the verses, beyond those ones in Acts 2, that we used in forming this statement is Hebrews 10:24 which says: "***And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,***"

Now this might seem like a cute little verse of scripture that's calling us to love each other and be good. But the words "**stir up**" actually point to something much more **violent**. **It literally means to spur, provoke, or incite.**

We are to spur or provoke each other to grow in these areas of our Christian lives. This means that God is literally calling us to get up in each other's business. To get to know each other in a deep and meaningful way that allows us to do the hard and often messy work of selflessly loving and serving each other even when it is inconvenient to us. And to get to know each other in a way where we can challenge one another to live for Jesus and proclaim the gospel even when the rest of the world is doing the opposite.

Now, if you're freaked out at this point and totally want to leave I get it.

Your starting to realize what this means for your life. **“So you're saying that our small groups are going to be a place where people are going to hold me accountable for how I am actually loving Jesus and living for Him?”**

Yes!

As Ephesians 4:15-16 says: *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

The call of scripture is that we are to speak the truth of God's Word to one another. Even when it hard, unpleasant, or uncomfortable, we have the duty of speaking truth and helping each other become more like Christ.

We are the body of Christ here at LEFC, and part of what each of us is called to do is to make sure that each part is working properly.

This means that we help each other grow in our worship and treasuring of Christ, we help each other resist and fight sin, and we love and serve others selflessly as Jesus has served us. In doing these things we will not only display the glory of God in Christ to each other, but it will also be displayed to those outside of these walls.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 3:20-21: *Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

We as a church are meant to display God's glory, His brilliance, His beauty, and the essence of who He is. And we do that as we challenge one another to be like Jesus. And we believe that here at LEFC the best context for that is within small group communities where we are able to do life together, get messy, and spur one another on in our love for and obedience to Jesus.

This is what I would call high cost community; it will cost you a lot. It will cost you your self-reliance; that part of you that thinks they don't need help. It will cost you your self-sufficiency; that part of you that keeps people at arm's length because you think you don't need them.

It will cost you your self-protection; that self-preserving part of you that is afraid of being hurt or rejected. It will cost you your self-importance; the part of you that tends to think of yourself as better than others. It will cost you your self-will; the part of you that puts your wants and needs before others.

And you might be sitting here going, *“Oh no, if that’s the kind of community your talking about I’m not sure that I’m ready to be that open or real, and I am not sure that I want others holding me accountable and talking to me about my sin and how I need to grow. I’m not sure that I want to let have to care for other people in that way, and I’m not sure that I can handle their problems and struggles. This feels like way too much work and I don’t want it.”*

But when we say that, and run away from this type of community, we miss two things that God is screaming at us through his word. We miss that we are actually created for community, and we miss the amazing benefits that God has in store for us through this type of community.

We were created for community:

Genesis 1:26-27 says: ***Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”***

If you didn’t already realize it, this is the account of God making humankind. And one of the most amazing things that we learn about God in this passage is that He exists in perfect community with Himself. As verse 26 says: ***Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...*** This is our triune God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working and existing in perfect and complete harmony and community with Himself.

And it is within the context of that community that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit decide to make humankind (us) in their image. Human beings are made to image God, and reflect His likeness. That’s why we all want community, because it is hard wired into our DNA. It is part of our makeup, to want a place where we are fully known by others we fully know them.

So when I am talking about these small groups and what we believe they should be like, know that God created you for this type of community, it is the real longing of your heart. However, sin has gotten in the way, and has caused us to doubt and not trust what is true about God, ourselves, and what God desires for us in community.

We in turn don’t often believe God’s promises and we don’t trust His goodness. Like Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 we eat the fruit because we tend to think our way is better than God’s.

But thanks be to God that we serve a Savior who has paid the penalty for our unbelief and our mistrust and has not only broken down the dividing wall between us and God but has broken down the dividing wall of hostility that keeps man apart from one another. As Ephesians 2:14 says:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...

Now the main context of this verse is talking about the divide that existed between Jews and gentiles, but it applies to all human relationships as well. We are no longer separate and we are made one in Christ.

So even though our unbelief drives us away from community with God and with one another, because of Christ we can now have real, authentic, and lasting fellowship with God and His people. **By the power of the Holy Spirit because of the finished work of Christ we can come together to experience the real life changing community that transforms us and makes us look more and more like Jesus.**

So even though you might feel like this type of community seems hard and almost impossible I want you to know that because of Christ it is possible. The longings of our hearts for real and genuine community can be met, and by the power of the Holy Spirit we come to love and enjoy it because it is what we are created for.

Which then brings us to the benefits of biblical community.

Benefits of biblical community:

Let's look once again at 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.

Do you see what God wants for us within the context of biblical community? Do you see the goodness that God has for each one of us here? Do you feel at least a little part of your soul going "yes I want this?"

Now I realize that many of you may look at this passage and say, well that was a unique experience for the first century church, but that doesn't apply to the church today.

And there are ways that I would probably agree with you. But I love what Francis Chan had to say when he said,

“If Acts 2:42-47 doesn't have any relevance for how we were supposed to do church today then why did God even have Luke write it down.”

So yeah, I can get behind the fact that this may not be exactly how our church community works today, but I do think there are significant things that we can apply from these verses.

Also, next week I will walk through these verses again as we take a look at the six things that we desire our small groups to focus on.

But for now I want to look at these verses and see the benefits that God has for us within the context of what I will call “genuine Christ-centered community.”

1. Genuine Christ-centered community is a place where our needs will be met and we will meet the needs of others. (Acts 2:44-45)

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.

The first church was a place where people were so overcome by Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit that they didn't really care about their stuff. And as a result they were selling it and giving stuff away so they could help each other out and meet whatever needs arose.

Now again, this may not exactly be our experience today nor is God calling us to sell all of our stuff, but God still has something great for us in this. He wants us to understand that real biblical community is a place where we can be needy.

We can have physical, financial, spiritual, and emotional needs and we can and should make those needs known within a real and authentic community of believers. And the response of the community to those needs should be to gladly bear our burdens because that's the work we have been given by Christ. As Galatians 6:2 says:

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

Christ has called us to meet one another's needs and in so doing we are serving one another as Christ has served us. He met us in our need and so we meet one another in our needs as we point one another to the one who perfectly satisfies despite our needs.

2. God has joy in store for us within genuine Christ-centered community. (Acts 2:46-47a)

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.

Within the context of these small groups, as we begin to live real life together; meaning that we spur one another on in our relationships with Jesus, meet each other's needs, and seek to spend quality time building relationships centered around Jesus, the results will be glad and generous hearts.

This means that God has your joy in mind when He talks about biblical community. He wants us to stir one another up, speak the truth in love together, pray for one another, and meet each other's needs because he knows that it will make us glad.

And a community that is glad and joyful in Jesus, is a community that finds its greatest satisfaction in Jesus, and in turn will also be a community that genuinely praises Jesus. As we find our fullness of joy and satisfaction in Christ we will fervently praise and worship our God, not only as individuals, but also as a corporate body.

So God has joy planned for you within these communities. Will we always be happy? No. Does that mean that this community will still be hard like I said earlier? Yes. But it's a reminder that it is worth it.

3. Genuine Christ-centered community proclaims the gospel to lost people. (Acts 2:47b)

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

To me, this is one of the most amazing verses in all of scripture. This church was living together in such a way that the outside world understood that they were different, and wanted what they had. And as they lived their life together, in the temple and in their neighborhoods people were getting saved.

This means that when we live within a Christ-centered community where we intentionally live our lives together, where we meet each other's needs both big and small, and where we truly seek to be real with one another and grow with Jesus together, people outside of the church are going to see what we have and they are going to want it.

And as we live life together, serve one another, and receive the joy that God has for us through this community, our natural response is going to be a desire to reach out and tell others about Jesus. God in turn will use our communities to spread the truth of the gospel to and to save and change lives forever.

Does this kind of community seem lofty and hard to attain? Does this almost feel like a pipe dream that will never come true? Does this seem like more work than you probably feel like you want to put in? Is it going to take a lot of time, probably years to achieve this kind of community? Does this scare the heck out of you because it is costly? **The answer to all of those is yes.**

But if we are saved by the blood of Christ, who has broken down this dividing wall of hostility that exists between us, and if his amazing Holy Spirit lives within us to empower us and direct us, and if this is the type of community that we see laid out in scripture for us, then we must conclude that it is possible, it is what we need, it is for our good and joy, for our progress in faith, to transform us into the image of Christ, and it will result in the gospel going forth and lives being changed.

As I said, next week I will be preaching on what small groups do as I walk through the six main objectives for these groups. But for now let's go to the Lord in prayer and ask that He would begin to prepare us for living our lives together within an authentic Christ-centered community.

Let's pray.