



"Community and the Small Group"

Idea: Community happens best in smaller groups

Intro: This summer we are examining the concept of biblical community. We have defined community as "a unified body of individuals" or *one-together*. In our study we have discovered that community exists and is desired in this world because creation follows the pattern of its Creator. God is a communal being who exists in three distinct Persons as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They dwell together in perfect community, equal in being but subordinate in role.

The Bible testifies that the Triune God created all that there is; therefore, creation bears His mark of community. What we see, then, in the universe is that every part has its counterpart, and this is most beautifully seen in the creation of mankind. Adam was the very first human created. God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him (Gen 2:7). God also fashioned the woman Eve from Adam's rib, and the two of them became a perfect reflection of the glorious community existing within the Godhead. Adam and Eve

enjoyed the beauty and responsibility of overseeing God's creation without any shame (Gen 2:25).

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve's perfect community with God and with one another was destroyed when they sinned against the Lord by eating from the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve died spiritually and later died physically. Despite their rebellion, God still pursued them. God covered Adam and Eve's sin and spoke of a Messiah who would come to put an end to sin. God furthered that promise in the call of Abram and the establishment of Israel as He called out a people to Himself through whom the Messiah would come. The promised Messiah came in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. God the Son came to man. He lived a perfectly holy life, and He offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of all humanity. The work, which Jesus accomplished on the cross and in the grave, made possible the restoration of man to the community for which he was created.

Individuals who repent of sin and place their faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ are brought into the household of God. They become part of the community of faith called the church, sharing a common life in Christ. They dwell in *community*. The believers who make up the church are a unified body of individuals who are one together in Jesus Christ.

The early church presents a beautiful picture of what this community looks like. Last week we learned from Luke's depiction of the early church in Acts 2 that the early New Testament church understood and embraced community. They recognized that it was Christ alone who had brought them near to God. Their belief in the gospel message ushered them into eternal community with the Godhead and with other believers. Jesus's disciples and those who were closely connected to him became the genesis of a multiplicity of small groups who met in the temple courts and homes throughout the city of Jerusalem. The early church became a community of communities who were interconnected and interdependent

following Pentecost.

In response to the community they now enjoyed, the members of the early church devoted themselves to the Lord, to certain spiritual disciplines, and to one another. We also see that the early church's strong sense of community resulted in their advancement of Christ's kingdom. Following the ascension of Christ, Peter and the disciples remained in Jerusalem awaiting the coming of God's Spirit who came ten days later, filling the body of Christ with power just as Jesus had said in Acts 1:8. The church immediately began to proclaim the greatness of God in the languages of those who were in Jerusalem for the Feast. The people were in awe of what was happening, so Peter stood up with the eleven disciples and preached the gospel to the people in Jerusalem. The result that day was that 3,000 people placed their faith in Jesus and followed Him in baptism. The Kingdom took a huge step forward that day as the community exemplified by the church validated the preached message.

Last Sunday we looked at the spiritual disciplines of the early church in Acts 2 and how they fostered kingdom advancement. Today, we're going to again look at Acts 2, but we're to examine it through the lens of the small group.

Read Acts 2:41-47.

Inquiry: Verse 46 points out that the early church met in both a large corporate setting and in smaller group gatherings. We see in this passage that the church expressed their community through the small group. In the power of the Spirit the early church worshiped, fellowshiped, ministered, prayed, and met together in small groups as a community of faith. This is significant because as we have discovered God created humanity to be in community with Himself and with other humans. It is also significant because we learn from their actions that community happens best in smaller groups. We see here that worship, instruction, and participation in the congregation is essential, but so is worship, instruction, and

participation in a small group of believers.

Admittedly, little biblical material specifically addresses the modern behavioral concept and practice of small groups. However, the Bible is full of comment, observation, reflection, and admonition about the need for good human relationships where God is an integral presence. Scripture was written out of, to, and for human community. Humanity naturally gravitates toward grouping, and Scripture naturally points to the need for healthy human groups, large and small. As G. W. Icenogle says, “The small group is the rudimentary and simple version of the more complex human community called forth by God.”

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are members of the Church universal. In other words, we are members of the Body of Christ with those from the past, those in the present, and those to come in the future. As believers in Christ, we are also to be members of Christ’s church locally. The precedent set forth by the early church calls believers to be united to the local church. Therefore, we are members of the universal church ranging in the billions of people. And we are to be members of the local church, which can range from the hundreds to the thousands. The biblical community and life transformation, which God desires in us, is not easily expressed through such large groups. Thus, there is a need for believers to dwell together in smaller groupings. Jesus, Himself, modeled this as He dwelled in community with both large and small groups of people. He was together with the 120. (We can think of them as the church.) He was in community His twelve disciples (small group). And He was in community with Peter, James, and John (discipleship group).

This morning, we are going to examine the need and philosophy of small groups here at RLBC. Then, next Sunday we will close out this OneTogether series by examining an even smaller grouping of believers, the discipleship group.

Let's begin our study of the small group by looking at what it is and is not.

The small group is not:

- A class/lecture.
- A program.
- A therapy session.
- A social event.

The small group is:

- A community of believers.
- An opportunity for spiritual development.
- An opportunity for mission.
- A strategy.

With a better understanding of what is and is not a small group, let's now articulate the concept of the small group at RLBC.

1. Purpose of the Small Group

Our small group ministry is not a *program* that we have attached to an already overcrowded church schedule. It is not some *organization* that we need to maintain. Our small group ministry is a *strategy*. It's a plan – a way for the church to do the work of the Great Commission. It is our *strategy* for making disciples of Christ.

When we understand that the small group ministry is a *strategy* and not just an *organization*, our small group ministry becomes a seven-day-a-week plan for involving people in seeking the kingdom of God and fulfilling the Great Commission, rather than a one-day-a-week study period. The small group ministry is the church organized to do the work of the Great Commission. Understanding this makes you realize that you are not filling a position, but you are part of a great strategy!

At Red Lane we are developing missional followers of Christ, and our small group ministry is the foundational strategy of our church for developing missional followers of Christ. Our desire is to move people from the crowd to the group, where they will grow, and then to service. We want to see people connect, grow, and go.

2. Process of the Small Group

In our small groups the process we use to accomplish our purpose consists of three aspects.

1) Missional Living

Our expectation is for every group member to be a missionary where they work, live, and play. Our desire is for every member to obediently seek to fulfill the Great Commission. Jesus' strategy for reaching the world is simple. It was to get a whole lot of little versions of Him infiltrating every nook and cranny of society by reproducing Himself in and through His people in every place throughout the world.

Missional living is when a follower of Christ is willing to live their life passionately pursuing the lost. The goal of every small group leader is for every member of their group to allow the gospel to be the greatest motivation in their life. Imagine the impact on our world if all followers of Christ answered questions about their occupation in this way: "What do I do? I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, on mission for Him, cleverly disguised as a _____." In a sense, every follower of Christ is a tent-making missionary.

Evangelism, then, is primary in our small groups because you can't assimilate people you don't reach. And you can't involve people you don't

reach. You can't build strong, healthy relationships with people you don't reach. In essence without reaching people you cannot even have small groups.

2) Transformational Teaching

It is critical that small group leaders remember they are teaching people, not lessons. There is a big difference! As a leader and teacher of God's Word, are you merely communicating information and facts, or are you truly investing in the lives of the members both in and out of group time? We are talking about the difference between teaching for *information* and teaching for *transformation*. Here are some characteristics of leaders who teach to transform:

- They teach with the awareness of God's calling to teach.
- They love and affirm people they teach.
- They are aware of the needs of those they teach and are concerned about their spiritual growth.
- They believe in the transforming power of the Word of God and the importance of every teaching session.
- They seek the best ways to communicate the truths of God's Word.
- They teach in a variety of ways and use those approaches that best suit those in their group.
- They are experiencing the truths of God's Word in their own lives and teach from that personal experience. It's incarnational.
- They are committed to personal preparation, which includes preparing their own hearts and minds to teach and preparing to lead each teaching session.
- Their lives "teach the lesson" by example.

- They realize that regardless of how skilled they are, their true power comes from the Holy Spirit.
- They believe that Bible teaching is not an end in itself and that they must lead those they teach to continue learning and living the truth beyond the group time.

In transformational teaching we never settle for merely getting through the lesson each week. Instead, we resolve to teach in a way that impacts people for eternity. The same is equally true of the small group member. You should never approach the group time with the idea of simply getting through the Bible lesson. Be resolved to allow the Word to transform you. And be resolved to expect the Word to transform others.

3) Biblical Community

Discipleship happens in the context of relationships. It is within biblical community that a follower of Christ will best experience spiritual growth. What does biblical community look like? Here are some characteristics:

- *Biblical community is a place of partnership in the gospel.* We are not alone on our journey of faith. Biblical community is a place where we do missional-life together. It is within biblical community that followers of Christ find encouragement and support for living a gospel-centered life.
- *Biblical community provides accountability for progress.* It is in the context of biblical community that we receive the encouragement and, when

necessary, the gentle rebuke we need to progress in our faith.

- *Biblical community protects us.* We are a family, and families protect each other. In biblical community we watch out for one another and care for each other.
- *Biblical community provides grace when we falter.* It is within a biblical community that a follower of Christ will find grace when they mess up. A biblical community is a safe place where followers of Christ can share their failures, hurts, and struggles, with the assurance that those in that community will offer love, support, and grace when needed.

The three things that each of our small groups should strive after are missional living, transformational teaching, and biblical community. That is what a successful group produces.

3. Plan of the Small Group

Small groups function as mini-churches in our church. Therefore, small group leaders function as mini-pastors in our church who shepherd people.

We structure for growth. There is an expectation that new people will consistently be added to the group. There is also a sharing of responsibilities. The leader isn't expected to do everything. He or she works to discover, develop, and deploy others within the group to share in the work. Groups will never grow to their full potential if the small group leader has to shoulder all the work. And the members of the group will never develop, as they should, if the group leader doesn't share responsibilities with others. So along with the small group leader, there needs to be an assistant leader,

care group leader, outreach leader, and hospitality leaders. One of the group's goals is to ensure that members and guests are properly ministered to.

We structure for multiplication. Our small groups are structured in such a way that the leadership responsibilities are shared. They are shared for two reasons. First, one leader cannot effectively oversee every aspect of a small group. Second, the sharing of responsibilities gives others an opportunity to develop as a leader.

Therefore, we structure our small groups for growth around our process. We structure around missional living, transformational teaching, and biblical community. In our structure, the teacher is the leader. He or she then enlists others within the group to lead in the other areas.

We desire to see multiplication in our small groups. We want our groups to consistently birth new groups. Our structure assists this goal by giving group members opportunities to lead. Therefore, when a group is ready to birth it most often will birth out one of its care groups.

Conclusion: The early church was devoted to the apostle's teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer. They worked to fulfill the Great Commission, that of making disciples, by dwelling together in community both in a corporate setting and in small groups. They model for us how to live out Paul's command to Timothy.

2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. – 2 Timothy 2:2

They worked to replicate their faith in others who would replicate their faith in others. We need community with other

believers in the church setting, the small group setting, and as we will discuss next Sunday the discipleship group setting.