

What's the Big Deal About Small Groups?
Pastor Joe Oakley
GFC 8-28-16

We're in short series called What's the Big Deal? Last week I preached on What's the Big Deal About Church? Today I'm speaking on What's the Big Deal About Small Groups?

Small groups are something you hear us talking about a lot. We are encouraging you to sign up for one today after church. Why? What's the big deal?

Our church is full of all kinds of people from all walks of life. There are people with spiritual issues, emotional issues, family issues, relationship issues, financial issues, work issues and addictions or life controlling problems like anger, fear or lust. There are people who are lonely or grieving or hurting. And there are people who are happy and fulfilled.

It can be overwhelming to minister to all these people when their needs are so different. We can't preach to every need every week. We're not even aware of all the needs. So – how do we minister to all these different needs simultaneously?

This problem is not new. It's been faced by the church since the book of Acts. There were major needs in the first church in Jerusalem – but the church was able to meet those needs. Acts 2:42–47 tells us how they did it:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Wow! The secret of the growth of the New Testament church included not just obvious things like teaching and signs and wonders and worship and prayer – but also fellowship and meeting needs in small groups.

1- Small groups are a big deal because they were a big deal to the early church

As a result of their faith and fellowship, people were filled with awe, peoples' needs were being met and people came to faith by witnessing the church in action.

That's because the early church had 20/20 vision. I'm basing that on Acts 20:20 where Paul said:

I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house...

It is crystal clear that Christian ministry does not just happen in church services, but also in homes and in small groups. Small groups are a big deal to us today because they were a big deal to the early church.

2- Small groups are a big deal because they were a big deal to Jesus

Jesus had a small group. There were twelve people in His group. They were called the disciples.

Some people think they don't need a small group. But if you are a Christian - you are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ - and Jesus had a small group.

If small groups were the way of making and growing disciples in the New Testament, could it be that the same method could be used today? That's why we are taking this biblical truth and starting groups that would minister to different needs. Small groups were and are a big deal to Jesus!

3- Small groups are a big deal because you need a place to belong.

Oh I know, I've said it before too - "I don't need anybody." But we all need relationships and friendships.

Did you know that it is unbiblical to say we don't need anyone else? The fact is - God created us to need each other! We see this in Genesis when God created everything and called it good. However, in Genesis 2:18, for the first time God said something was not good.

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

This is an amazing announcement considering the following:

- Adam lived in a perfect world - No crime, no pollution, no disease, no war, and no sin. This was all good.
- Adam possessed everything he could possibly need or want. Everything in the garden was his to use and enjoy. This was good.
- Adam had an exalted position. He ruled over everything. He was at the top of the ladder with no competition. This was all good.
- Adam enjoyed an intimate relationship with God. He walked and talked in perfect fellowship with God. This was all good.

Yet! In the midst of all the goodness, God said it was not good for man to be alone. Why? Because God created man with the need for human relationship. We are Biblically incorrect when we say: "God is all we need." If God is all you need then do you need to eat? Do you need water? Or do you need to sleep? God created us with certain needs: for food, water, sleep, oxygen... and other people. 1 Corinthians 12:20-21 says:

But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

God created the church as a body whose members need each other. Although it is incorrect to say God is all we need; it is correct to say that God is the One who meets our needs. However, He designed it so He meets some needs through other people. That requires us to be in loving relationships!

It's hard for us to build lasting relationships in our society. We want to facilitate that process – and part of that process is small groups. We want to help you because it is not good for you to be alone! Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

I see three things here that relationships provide:
 Picking each other up when one is down
 Protection – and
 The warmth of relationship

Scripture constantly underscores the importance of relationships. In fact, the greatest commandment is to love God and love people. This is why I see small groups as a priority for every Christian and every church. Building relationships isn't practical in a crowd of 200 or 2,000. Only in small groups can we develop relationships.

4- Small groups are a big deal because you need prayer and support

Effective small groups pray together and pray for each other. And who couldn't use 6-7 people praying for them on a weekly basis? By being part of a small group, you're agreeing to be prayed for!

In your life, you will face setbacks, distractions, mistakes, relational drama, and doubt, just to name a few. Maybe you're in the middle of one of those times right now. Whatever you're facing, you need the prayers and support of other people.

The writer of the book of Hebrews knew the importance of finding support in others during tough times. He knew that in order to keep going, stand strong, and persevere, his readers—the early followers of Jesus—needed each other. Hebrews 10:25 says:

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

This verse highlights our need for community with other Christians. Why? So you can grow in your relationship with God. So you can grow as a parent, son, daughter, friend, employee or coach. So you can go through tough times with people who care about you. That's why small groups are such a big deal.

5- Small groups are a big deal because you need healing

All of us have areas that need to be worked on. And there is an element of healing you can receive here when we pray at the altar. But there is a whole other level of healing found in James 5:16:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Small groups are one of the best places for this to happen. That's why for marriage and family issues we have two small groups. For people who are lonely and want to build relationships, we have groups for men and women. In addition, for people struggling with addictions and life-controlling problems we have overcomer's groups to help people deal with problems like alcoholism, financial difficulty, abuse, and sexual issues.

We have a group for men called Conquerors where we are confessing and praying and being made whole in the area of sexual temptation. Guys are opening up to each other and they're getting free. They're experiencing the truth of confessing, praying and healing.

6- Small groups are a big deal because you need to become like Christ

As a believer – you are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Your destiny is to become more and more like Him! But that doesn't happen all by yourself! We won't really change if we are not in relationships with others. Relationships have a way of bringing things out of us that would not be evident any other way.

This reminds me of my early days of ministry when I thought I could change everybody. I was counseling a couple on the verge of divorce. After many weeks of tedious hard work they came in one session and said that they just had the best week of their marriage. My chest swelled up and I thought "Wow, I'm really helping these people."

I asked them why they thought things were going so good. I was expecting them to say my counseling was setting them free. Then my big head got deflated when they said the week was so great because the husband was out of town on business all week.

Beloved, anybody can get along with anybody if they're not around each other. It's easy to seem holy and righteous when we keep ourselves at arm's length from others. But relationships can bring things up and out of us that we aren't aware of any other way. That's why small groups are a big deal!

7- Small groups are a big deal because they provide opportunities for you to be involved, discover your gifts, and use your talents

God has given spiritual gifts to every Christian – including you. He fully expects us to use them. But it's simply not feasible for everyone to use their gifts on a Sunday morning. We can in a small group, though.

Rick Warren said: “God gave me a gift, not for me but for you, and God gave you a gift, not for you but for me. If you don't use your gift, you're depriving me; if I don't use my gift, I'm robbing you.”

8- Small groups are a big deal because they give you an opportunity to minister to others

It's not all about you. It's tempting to think that, but it's just not the truth. Consider this...you may not think you are in great need of friendships, but maybe someone else is. It's not all about you – and your small group can become your place of ministry.

Faith is a personal matter, but it's not a private matter. You are not meant to keep it to yourself. There are no “lone ranger” Christians. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. We're meant to go through life together.

9- Small groups are a big deal because they provide a way to share Christ with others

It may be that some of your friends who don't know the Lord wouldn't be caught dead in a church. But those same people may be open to an invitation to a casual Bible discussion in a home or office setting.

In a small group, your unbelieving friend can ask questions and express honest doubts without feeling "put on the spot". When your friend sees the love and honesty of your group, it will make him more receptive to the Good News.

10- Small groups are a big deal because we all need help in crisis times

Life is hard, and being a Christian doesn't automatically fix every problem in your life. We have pressures at home, work or school. There are times we need others to help us through life's difficulties.

The good news is that there are people going through the same things as you. You don't have to be alone and you can rely on others to help you. There are times we can't do it alone. We need God and we need His people.

Remember the "The Miracle on the Hudson" when US Airways flight 1549 took off from LaGuardia Airport, hit a flock of birds which disabled both engines and then crash landed into the Hudson River. What could have resulted in the death of 155 passengers and crew instead resulted in not one single fatality. Why? Pilot Chesley Sullenberger was hailed a hero for safely landing the plane. But he's not the only hero.

It took the efforts of the crew to get everyone off the plane safely.
 It took the joint effort of hundreds of emergency responders.
 It took boats and ferries to pick the people up.
 It took helicopter pilots and scuba divers.
 It took EMT's on the scene, ambulance drivers and hospitals.

Here's some other agencies involved in saving these 155 people:
 NY and NJ police and fire department
 U.S. Coast Guard and the NY Port Authority
 The Office of Emergency Management
 The American Red Cross and the Salvation Army
 It took all these people working together to save 155 lives.

Lives were saved because people helped people. Not one life was lost because everyone worked together. What a picture of what the body of Christ should be. We really do need each other. God never meant for you to go it alone in the Christian life. Some things are so tough we cannot make it through alone!

When we experience tragedy in life, when we feel helpless and stranded when we feel like we're crashing... we need others.
 Our small group is our emergency rescue team.
 They are the people that will work together to help us.
 When we are lost they are our Salvation Army.
 When we are wounded they are our Paramedics.
 When we are drowning they are our Coast Guard.
 When we are in need of food and shelter they are our Red Cross.

Our small group will pray for us and counsel us and support us. Small groups provide excellent support in times of crisis, change, and stress. Many people in our church could testify that they would not have made it through a difficult time if it hadn't been for the support of the church and their small group.

And the Bible is very clear about how God intends for His people to grow and have their needs met in the church. We will never be able to hire enough professional pastors to meet all the individual needs in our family. God never intended for it to be that way!

Small groups are the biblical model of the Jesus and the early church. And we want to follow their example. “But I hate small groups,” you say. To which I say – come up with the ideal group that you would love to be involved in and start it. Our small group philosophy is called free market ministry. We don’t care what the group is as long as it fulfills some part of our vision, which is to Touch Heaven and Change Earth by experiencing God’s presence, equipping God’s people and extending God’s kingdom.

Types of Experiencing God Groups

Prayer - Praise & Worship – Bible Study

Types of Equipping Groups

Discipleship - Accountability
Marriage / Family
Ministry

Types of Extending the Kingdom Groups

Service / Task – evangelism, feed the poor
Support / Recovery
Leadership development
Fellowship / common interests

Small groups are a big deal because God designed us for community. Community is about more than the neighborhood or town you live in. It’s about friendship. It’s about connecting with other people. Without community, life just isn’t as much fun or fulfilling. And moreover, it’s not what God designed for us. God designed us to live in community.

Have you ever been in a stadium where the home team won at the last second? When the buzzer to end the game sounded, what happened? The crowd went wild, right? The energy released in that moment was electric. You get caught up in it—and you may not even care who won or lost.

Now imagine that same game with one person in the stadium. Not quite the same effect, right? That’s because things are better when they’re done together. When life is lived in community, it’s richer. It’s deeper. It moves you.

So my hope today is that it will move you today to say “Yes – I see the big deal about small groups and I want to get connected.”

That's my invitation to you right now before you leave: small groups are such a big deal that I'm asking you to sign up for one today!

Life is difficult and we need God and each other!

So, let's be the church. Let's build relationships. Let's meet needs. Let's reach out. Together we can touch heaven and change earth.