

Growth Groups

Why Growth Groups?

Acts 2:42-47

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Scripture

It can never be said that Adele Gaboury's neighbors were less than responsible. When her front lawn grew hip-high, they had a local boy mow it down. When her pipes froze and burst, they turned the water off. When the mail spilled out the front door, they called the police. The only thing they didn't do was to check and see how Adele was doing. She wasn't doing well. She was dead.

Police finally climbed her crumbling brick stoop, broke in the side door of her little blue house, and found what they believed to be the 73-year-old woman's skeletal remains, where they had lain, perhaps for as long as four years!

"It's not really a friendly neighborhood," said Eileen Dugan, 70, once a close friend of Gaboury's, whose house sits 20 feet from the dead woman's house. "I'm as much to blame as anyone. She was alone and needed someone to talk to, but I was working two jobs and was tired of her coming over at all hours. Eventually I stopped answering the door."¹

I find this story unbelievable. How can someone be so disconnected? How can a person die and others not know about it?

Yet we are a society that is becoming increasingly disconnected from each other. For example, a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, released in June 2006, revealed that Americans have less people they can confide in than past generations.

In 1985, the average American had 3 people in whom to confide. In 2004, that number dropped to 2. Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10 percent in 1985 to 24.6 percent in 2004.²

¹ Sally Jacobs, "Years After Neighbors Last Saw Her, Worcester Woman Found Dead," *Boston Globe* (10-27-93).

² Janet Kornblum, "Study: 25 Percent of Americans Have No One to Confide In," *USA Today* (6-23-06).

God designed us to be in a relationship with him, and also with one another. Today I would like to examine one of the most remarkable groups ever documented, and answer the question, “Why Growth Groups?” That is, why should you participate in a Growth Group? Let us read Acts 2:42-47:

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Introduction

Set in 72 BC, the 2004 television miniseries *Spartacus* follows the adventures of a former slave who leads an army of freed slaves against the tyrannical Roman legions. In one scene, Spartacus and his followers are hiding out in a secluded forest because the Roman army is hunting them. Spartacus says the time has come for decisive action, but his followers are unsure and even selfish.

One man, Crixus, says, “I go where I go. No man tells Crixus what to do anymore.”

Spartacus calls for Crixus to come and stand next to him.

“This is Crixus the Gaul—maybe the strongest man among us,” Spartacus says. “Still, he’s only one man.”

Spartacus hands Crixus a single arrow, saying, “Can you bend this?”

Crixus easily breaks it and throws it to the ground.

Then Spartacus hands Crixus a stack of arrows that are bound

together, saying, “Now break all of these.”

Crixus takes the arrows but is unable to break them, eventually throwing them to the ground in frustration.

“We are like the arrows,” Spartacus says. “Separately we’re weak, but together we’re invincible. That’s why the Romans worked so hard to divide us tribe-by-tribe and country-by-country. We’re one tribe, then?”

“Yes!” the crowd roars.

“Is that your will?”

“Yes!”³

As I mentioned earlier, God designed us for relationships—with himself, and also with one another. By ourselves we are weak. But together we can accomplish a great deal.

Lesson

Before we begin talking about why we need to be in Growth Groups, let me define what I mean by a “Growth Group.” A Growth Group, broadly speaking, provides a place for believers to mature in Christ through a discipling relationship. Offering more than just a time of fellowship, the Growth Group setting encourages the development of meaningful friendships by offering a time of Bible study, prayer, accountability, and personal application.

So, why Growth Groups? Because:

1. God used Growth Groups in the Old Testament,
2. God used Growth Groups in the New Testament, and
3. God uses Growth Groups today.

I. God Used Growth Groups in the Old Testament

First, God used Growth Groups in the Old Testament.

Growth Groups, also known sometimes as Small Groups, were not discovered by the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church!

³ *Spartacus* (USA Network, 2004), directed by Robert Dornhelm.

It may be overly dramatic to say that God himself lives as a small group. The Trinity is three persons in one God. There is a divine relationship between the three persons of the Godhead.

After God created Adam, we read in Genesis 2:18, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” So God created Eve and brought her to Adam. God designed us to be in a relationship with him and also with one another.

God often worked through family groups and other forms of small groups to establish his purposes.

For example, God used Noah’s family of eight to demonstrate to the world his desire for his people to be righteous (Genesis 17:1). It is through this family group that God established his covenant with his people (Genesis 9:8-9).

Later, after God delivered his people out of Egypt, he began building a new nation structured around small groups. In Exodus 18 we see how God, through Moses, divided people into groups of tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands. This division into small groups enabled individuals to receive better justice and care.

Other parts of the Old Testament show us the same pattern of God working through small groups of people to meet their needs and equip them for acting out his purposes (Numbers 2, 13; Nehemiah 3; Daniel 1:3-7).

II. God Used Growth Groups in the New Testament

Second, God used Growth Groups in the New Testament.

Jesus brought together a small group of twelve men. During the next three years he spent many hours with this small group of disciples teaching and demonstrating God’s glory to them. In his prayer for his disciples in John 17:6-8 we can better understand Jesus’ role as leader of this small group: “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is

from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.”

Jesus’ role was to reveal the Father to these people and to call them to be his community in the world. Jesus even prays in John 17:18, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Jesus’ mission was to glorify God by his life. So too, his community was to glorify God by its words and deeds.

Following Jesus’ ascension we see the historical fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer for the disciples. As a result of Peter’s Pentecost speech, the church grew in one day from 120 people (Acts 1:15) to over 3,000 people (Acts 2:41). How were all these people who had just believed in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord going to grow in their faith and become ambassadors for the gospel?

After this sudden population explosion in the early church, the members could no longer effectively continue to meet only in a large group. As God had directed Moses during the Exodus to divide his people into small units of tens and fifties, God led the early church to meet in smaller units. In Acts 2:46 we see that the Jerusalem church was divided into two mutually supportive meetings—a large group meeting and small group meetings: “And day by day, attending the temple together (the large group meetings) and breaking bread in their homes (the small group meetings), they received their food with glad and generous hearts.”

They expressed their unity by meeting regularly as an entire fellowship. They also developed a more intimate community by meeting in smaller units. These smaller units were most likely composed of individuals who lived close to one another and who met together in each other’s homes.

In Acts 2:42-47 we learn that there are five purposes for these small groups.

A. *We Were Formed for God’s Family (2:42, 43, 46b)*

First, we were formed for God’s family.

Notice that the 1st century Christians were **devoted to the fellowship** (2:42). That means just what it says: they were committed, dedicated, faithful, and loyal to their new Christian family.

Furthermore, **all who believed were together** (2:44). They spent a lot of time with one another. **And breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts** (2:46b).

It was Christmas morning in 1998. Russ Robinson and his family climbed into their motor home. They were leaving the frigid winter climate of Chicago for the warmth of Phoenix, Arizona. Russ and his wife took turns driving all day and into the night. While cruising along in the darkness of a rural interstate highway, the headlights suddenly revealed a woman, dressed in black, walking in the middle of the road. Russ swerved, but it was too late. The motor home crashed into the woman. Her head hit the windshield. Her body smashed into the right side of the vehicle, tossing her into the ditch.

Later, it was discovered that the woman had been drunk and was attempting to commit suicide. Despite the horrific collision, she survived. Russ was devastated. He pulled off the road, dialed 911, and nearly went into shock. Seconds later, he phoned a friend in his small group. Then his wife called someone in her group. The two groups gathered to pray.

Russ writes: “Their prayer support helped me begin the road to emotional recovery. My community listened during long conversations while I tried to process confusing emotions. When I wrestled with God—seeking to make sense of the experience—people offered reassurance and other help. I needed people to pray with and for me, and I came to know what it was to have someone ‘weep with those who weep’ (Romans 12:15). I experienced how the body of Christ can extend real, personal hands to someone in pain.”

Relating his experience to the vital need for Christian community, Russ continues, “You need to invest in community today, so you can reap the benefits during tomorrow’s seasons of depriva-

tion and loss.”⁴

So, the first point to notice is that we were formed for God’s family. This is true for all Christians and not just for some Christians.

B. We Were Created to Become Like Christ (2:42)

Second, we were created to become like Christ.

Bishop J. C. Ryle, the great Anglican Bishop of Liverpool in the 19th century, said, “As the soldier follows his general, as the servant follows his master, as the scholar follows his teacher, as the sheep follows its shepherd, just so ought the professing Christian to follow Christ.”⁵

God has not left us to wonder what a mature Christian looks like. A mature Christian looks more and more like Christ.

And how do we mature in Christlikeness? We do so through God’s Word. We read that the 1st century Church **devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching** (2:42). And that is our purpose too. We also are to devote ourselves to the study of God’s Word so that we become more and more like Christ.

One of the best ways to study God’s Word is to do so in a Growth Group. I became a Christian when I was nineteen years old. Shortly after my conversion I went off to war in Namibia. For about 6 months I was not able to attend worship services (because there were none), and did not have any fellowship with other believers (because I did not know any). I read my Bible diligently but it was tough going. Finally, about a year later I attended the University of Cape Town. I immediately got involved in a Growth Group, and my spiritual group suddenly took off.

Why? Because I was able to interact with others who were also **devoted to the apostles’ teaching**, and they were able to help me grow in my understanding and application of God’s truth.

⁴ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 2001), 39.

⁵ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), 149.

The point is that since you have been created to become like Christ, one of the best ways to do so is by studying God's Word in a Growth Group.

C. We Were Shaped for Serving God (2:45)

Third, we were shaped for serving God.

Someone has said, "No man's life is for his private use."⁶

God has given every Christian at least one spiritual gift (and probably a cluster of similar gifts) in order to serve God's people. This purpose is illustrated in the 1st century Church where we see Christians **selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need (2:45)**. God has given many gifts to his Church, and we are responsible to discover and use the gifts for which God has shaped us.

Arnold Glasgow said, "Make your life a mission—not an intermission."⁷ Your life should be given in the service of God. You should not sit around waiting for the day you meet Christ.

Too many people only go to worship services. They do not think that they have any responsibility to serve God in his church. As Vance Havner said, "Too many are willing to sit at God's table, but not work in his field."⁸

Being involved in a Growth Group is one of the best ways to use your spiritual gifts to serve God.

D. We Were Made for a Mission (2:47)

Fourth, we were made for a mission.

The 1st century Church lived out the purposes for which God had made them. And as a result, **the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (2:47)**. God has made us to know him and to make him known to a lost and dying world.

⁶ Blanchard, 580.

⁷ Blanchard, 581.

⁸ Blanchard, 581.

Jesus described his own mission on one occasion as a mission to reach the lost. He said in Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

Some of you heard Dr. Ravi Zacharias talk about how to reach Muslims with the Gospel. The bottom line of all that he said was that while apologetics was important, love was even more important. One of the best ways to express love is in the context of a Growth Group. In that context we can welcome and love new members into the group, and that will be a powerful apologetic to introduce the Gospel.

You and I were made for a mission. We were made to know Christ and to make him known.

E. We Were Planned for God’s Pleasure (2:42, 47a)

And finally, we were planned for God’s pleasure.

In a very real sense, this is our ultimate and supreme purpose. “Man’s chief end [or purpose] is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever,” as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says.

The 1st century Church was **devoted to the breaking of bread and the prayers** (2:42). Moreover, they were **praising God and having favor with all the people** (2:47a). Here is a glimpse of God’s people glorifying and magnifying him, because they understood that we were planned for God’s pleasure. And it is in pleasing God that we find true satisfaction in our souls.

John Piper put it this way: “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him, and we are most satisfied in him in worship.”⁹ That is a wonderful statement! Think about it for a moment. When we are truly delighted and satisfied in God, he is glorified. And we find most satisfaction in God when we are worshiping him.

God has planned us for his pleasure. The reason any one of us exists is to please God. Participating in a Growth Group will

⁹ Blanchard, 684.

help you to worship and please God better.

III. God Uses Growth Groups Today

And third, God uses Growth Groups today.

As we have seen, God has been using small groups since the beginning of time to fulfill his purposes. From Genesis to today, God has placed his people into small groups. The early church offers us a clear model. The cultivation of the Scriptures provided the small group's sustenance. The response to this cultivation led them to worship their God. This worship took place in a community of believers who, instead of looking out for their own selfish interests, based their existence on a common sharing of God's grace, a sharing of needs among themselves and a sharing with others outside the church. A central part of sharing with others was the mission to present Christ as Savior and Lord.

Those early church small groups certainly developed many problems. (Just read 1 Corinthians). But these communities of small groups also had a unique quality that we can certainly learn from. Elton Trueblood in *The Incendiary Fellowship* sums up the essence of the early church and of contemporary small groups: "The church consists of consciously inadequate persons who gather because they are weak and scatter to serve because unity with each other and Christ has made them bold."

Conclusion

All Christians want to grow in Christ. One way to grow in Christ is the way God has ordained from Genesis. And that is to be part of a Growth Group. I urge you to consider getting involved in Growth Group here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church. In this Growth Group you will experience the five essential components of a Growth Group: membership, maturity, ministry, mission, and magnification. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

O Lord our God, you have made us for relationship with you and also with one another.

We are implementing Growth Groups here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church. Glorify yourself and strengthen your people as we participate in Growth Groups.

May the Growth Groups prove to be a blessing to all who participate.

And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.