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SECTION ONE

PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF SMALL GROUPS

Philosophy may sound like a boring topic, but philosophy is a crucial issue with which everyone must grapple. Put simply, philosophy seeks to answer the question we have been asking since before we could read: why? Today we are going to seek to answer a “why” question: Why do we have small groups? Why not just have another standard teaching format? Whenever our church gathers, there should be intentionality behind our meeting. For this reason, we will begin by examining the biblical basis for small groups, and then give some practical instructions about how to make the small group program at Colonial Hills Baptist Church the most profitable.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Are small groups biblical? Or are they merely a modern, trendy, novel practice? At Colonial, our small groups focus on connection and edification, so in the following section we will work through examples in the New Testament of why meeting for teaching in small groups is crucial and why it is important to regularly connect with other believers.

Jesus and Small Groups: A Model of Teaching

Jesus frequently taught large crowds, but he also spent much time in smaller, interactive settings with his disciples. These times gave him a chance to pull out what his disciples were thinking and then guide them. We normally see Christ doing discipleship in what we might call a small group setting. Two passages in particular highlight a number of these points.

Matthew 16:13-23 – Peter’s Confession and Rebuke

- Small groups impress the necessity of personal understanding – “whom do men say that I am? ...whom do ye say that I am?” It can be easy to sit back and listen to sermons week in and week out and walk away with only a fuzzy understanding of what is being

preached (or sadly for some, virtually no understanding at all). One of the benefits of small groups is that by asking people questions and waiting for their response, we communicate to them that they are expected to know God's Word, not just the preacher.

- Small groups allow for the joy of discovery – “blessed art thou, Simon!” It is a well-known tool of the trade among educators that when people figure something out on their own, they become more excited about it and are much more likely to remember it. Lessons that progress by asking people questions allow people to learn how to study the Bible on their own and give them the joy of discovery.
- Small groups give the opportunity for both success and failure – “blessed art thou . . . get thee behind me Satan!” Matthew 16 includes one of the sharpest 180 degree turns in Christ's teaching ministry. Peter goes from receiving the highest earthly commendation Christ gives to one of His followers to receiving the harshest condemnation Christ gives to one of His true followers. This would not have happened had Peter simply been listening to one of Christ's messages and gone home. People have wrong thinking about Scripture all the time, and as difficult as it might be, gently correcting wrong responses in a group can greatly assist in spiritual growth and probably won't happen when people are sitting in a pew and not given a chance to speak.

John 14:1-24 – The Last Supper

- Small groups allow the teacher to get a better read on the group – “let not your hearts be troubled” Jesus was surrounded by His twelve closest friends, and as He told them about His upcoming death, He could tell they were unsettled. When you meet in small groups, what the group is thinking is a lot more obvious than if you are preaching to a crowd. Sitting across the table from someone and watching their reaction to what you say gives you a much better insight into what they are really thinking and feeling than simply standing behind a pulpit or a lectern and losing them in a sea of faces.
- Small groups allow for misunderstandings to be clarified – “we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?” Christ makes a statement, apparently assuming His disciples

knew what He was talking about. They stopped Him: “Wait, Lord, go back, we missed something.” Now, I say apparently because obviously the Son of God knew what was going on in their hearts, but He wanted to push them and point out that they were lagging behind. They should have known this. But Jesus brought this up in a small group atmosphere in which His disciples had the opportunity to stop Him and ask for clarification.

- Small groups allow for honest dialogue. This whole chapter is a fascinating back and forth between Christ and His followers. He asks them questions and they ask Him questions. This back and forth pushes the disciples further than they’d like to be pushed, but Christ knew this was necessary with what was about to take place. This is discipleship. It is Christ training His disciples and holding them to a higher standard. This form of discipleship takes place in a unique way in small groups, in a way that it can’t happen the same way seated in an auditorium.

None of this intended to belittle a typical preaching or teaching ministry. Christ had a public teaching ministry, and the pattern and charge of preaching runs throughout both the Old and the New Testament. People need the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. But this brief study of Christ and His disciples argues that they need more. They need opportunities to ask questions, to be challenged, corrected, encouraged, and pushed to know God and His expectations of them better. For these reasons, a small group ministry is an important part of a healthy church.

The Letters of the New Testament: A Call for Connection

Small groups allow not only for interactive teaching, but also provide an avenue for fulfilling the “one anothers” of Scripture. Churches can, admittedly do this through a number of avenues, and in a healthy church this happens regularly even without a formal program. But for churches that are seeking to intentionally give opportunities for these commands to be fulfilled, small groups are a helpful option. Larger churches can result in people feel disconnected from others. The temptation to come to church, sing, listen to the preaching, and leave without any real interaction is a temptation for many. Small groups help larger congregations have an opportunity to connect with other believers and can be an avenue for fulfilling the mutual obligations the New Testament puts on us.

Believers are called to fellowship (Acts 2:42). The word that is often translated as “fellowship” in the New Testament has the idea of sharing and partnering together. The early church shared their resources, their identity, and even their very lives with one another. Another way to think of the concept of fellowship is that of “belonging.” As Christians, we belong to each other and that should manifest itself in dozens of practical ways. We are called to share our very lives with one another, and this radical belonging requires us to connect with one another.

Believers are called brothers all throughout the New Testament. In a culture where “bro” is a casual term used with complete strangers, the power of the image of a brother can easily be lost on the modern American. But in Roman times, for a wealthy noble to call his slave a brother was unthinkable. This term speaks to the incredibly close relationship that believers have with one another, and the fact that in God’s eyes we are a new family. Does church feel like a joyful family reunion every Sunday? Small groups are a helpful way to build this kind of a family unity.

Believers are called to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). This requires us connecting with one another to learn what others are going through. The church is a body. When one member hurts, the whole body should hurt with it (1 Cor 12:26). How then do we learn when other members are hurting? Again, while there are numerous ways this can happen, and it is best when done naturally, small groups can be an effective way to meet this goal.

GOALS

There is no one way to run small groups. Small groups are a tool that can have various focuses or emphases. For Colonial, we have found that the following goals have been most helpful for us as we plan out our small group program.

Connection

- **Our primary goal for our Sunday morning small groups is to connect people with each other in prayer and around the Word of God.**
- As a teacher or group leader, it is critical that you understand this vision yourself and do your part to communicate it to others.

Edification

- The lessons will cover books of the Bible, doctrines of the faith, and themes from throughout Scripture.
- The goal of this time is to teach people how to study God’s Word, not simply to teach them the content of the lesson.
- A strong focus will be on making personal, real-life applications from the lesson to one’s personal life.

FORMAT

Schedule

9:00-9:05 Announcements

9:05-9:20 Prayer requests and testimonies

9:20-9:55 Lesson Time

- A warning bell will sound at 9:50. Choir members are dismissed at this time.
- A second bell will sound at 9:55. You should wrap up by this time.

DISCUSSION

The heart of our small group Bible studies is the questions sprinkled throughout the lesson. The goal is for there to be more questions than you have time to work through, so that you can pick the questions that best fit your presentation of the lesson and your unique group. Feel free to add your own questions to the mix, but seek above all else to get people at your table talking.

PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS

Clarify the schedule. Let people know what we are doing (“We will be taking the first 10-15 minutes for prayer requests and testimonies”). This can help keep people from being frustrated that we are “wasting precious teaching time” on small talk. We want our small groups to be a time of connection! To that end we are including a time to connect.

Stick to the schedule. Don't tell people you will take 10-15 minutes for prayer requests and prayer only to then take 20. This will cause legitimate frustration for some.

Stay focused. Strive to keep the opening focused on what God is doing in the lives of those at the table, and not just empty chatter time.

Use the KJV. While Colonial is not King James only, we do use the King James in all our services. Some of our members have strong feelings about the use of the King James Version, and so to avoid making this matter an issue, we ask that everyone teaching or leading at a table use the KJV.

Be early. Show up several minutes early and engage people before the class starts. Our desire is that people look forward to their small groups and enjoy fellowship with one another so much that they show up early so they can spend even more time together!

End promptly. Respecting people's time is an important part of keeping good momentum with your group. You may be fascinated by the material and wish you could keep going for hours, but not everyone at your table will feel the same way. Keeping firm opening and closing times will be a big help long term in creating buy-in for your table.

Partner together. Group leaders, pray for your teacher. Teachers, stay involved in the lives of those at your table. Group leaders, read through the lesson so you are ready to contribute during "dead times." Partner together with a spirit of enthusiasm to use well the opportunity God has given you.

Pray, pray, pray! Ask that God would grow you and those at your table so that you know and love him better, and so that you have a growing love for his body, the church.

SECTION TWO

HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER

Teaching a small group is a skill, just like playing a sport or an instrument, or for that matter speaking publicly. The more you do it, the better you will get at it. Some will be tempted to just talk the whole time because that is what they are comfortable with. Don't do it! Take the hard path and seek God's help to learn how to lead a group of believers who have the Holy Spirit into talking about the Word of God together.

FORMAT

This is designed to be a small group Bible study, not a sermon or teaching time. Our goal is for people to connect with one another by discussing, not sports or politics or even their personal lives, but God's Word.

What is a successful table?

Since our goal is connection and getting people to learn to study and think through the Bible on the own, the goal goes beyond a mere knowledge of the content of the lesson. But how do you know if you have accomplished those things? Here are 3 ways to measure your success as a small group leader:

How little you are talking. The less you are talking, the more your group is talking. Your goal should be to say as little as possible. Obviously, you will still say more than anyone at the table, but you should be facilitating conversation rather than dominating it. Aim to talk 60% or less of the time.

How many people at the table have contributed. Getting everyone to participate (especially those who are typically quiet) is a sign of a successful table leader. This does not mean that quiet types come to dominate the conversation, but getting them to contribute once or twice a lesson should be the goal of every table leader.

How much you have learned from your table. Even after studying the lesson, praying through it, and attending the training lesson, you

should benefit from the input of others at your table. Come ready to teach, but also come ready to learn. Having a genuine desire to learn from the insights of others will demonstrate to your table a humility and an eagerness to learn that can be contagious.

How do I accomplish this?

Asking the right questions. A huge part of leading a small group well means asking the right questions. Read through the lesson a few times and think through which questions make the most sense to you and fit in the overall flow as you understand it. *Feel free to ask your own questions!*

Don't fear silence. The first time you ask a question you will likely get a bunch of blank stares. That's okay. Count to 10 before answering. It may be awkward. Pretend to be oblivious. Smile naively. Your group will eventually get the idea: either we answer the question or there will be another awkward silence. Some people need time to process their thoughts before answering and won't have something ready in 4 seconds. Others will have their thinking spurred by a comment their peer makes. Don't be afraid to wait.

Dealing with distractions. It's possible you will have someone go off on a random tangent or say something off the wall. If that happens, don't panic. Follow these guidelines:

- If the person is taking a long a time to answer a question, look for a time to jump in. Thank them for their contribution, summarize and repeat the most helpful part(s), and move forward.
- If someone is dominating the table, approach them after the lesson one on one. Thank them for their feedback, but let them know you want to hear others and some people just need more time to think and process. Reassure them that you are glad they are tracking and participating.
- If someone says something wrong, try to find one part of what they said that is true and highlight that. If they say something dangerously wrong ("Yeah, the Bible is good, but it's not the only source of authority") you may need to gently correct them ("Well, let's be careful there. If we start down the path of saying there are occasions when the Bible might not apply, in the end we become the ultimate deciders of right and wrong, and God's

Word bends to what we think, not the other way around!). Try to do this as kindly as possible. Realize that not every little error needs to be corrected (e.g. “And just so you know, you got the wrong reference. That’s 1 Corinthians 13, not 2 Corinthians 13”), but that at times silence can be seen as approval and something will need to be said.

Much of this will come down to a wisdom issue. Ask God to give you discernment of what to say and when and trust him for that wisdom!

SECTION THREE

HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE LEADER

SMALL GROUP SHEPHERDS

John 13:35 - By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

Small Group Shepherds (Group Leaders) must seek to encourage the members of their small group to be faithful to the Lord, to their church family and to one another. This can only be done by setting an example and by sharing words of encouragement.

As You Arrive

1. Be on time.
2. Make sure that your table and chairs are ready for your group.
3. Take attendance.
4. Greet and register any new folks as they arrive.
5. Encourage your group members to enjoy some refreshment (coffee and donuts) will be served.

Planning 15 Dynamic Minutes of Connection

1. Set people at ease by reminding them that the “Lesson Time” will begin by 9:20 and then be punctual.
2. Gathering prayer requests (Ideas).
 - You may begin by asking for prayer requests.
 - You may find that folks in your group have mentioned a situation or a burden that they are facing even before your group time begins. If so, be sure to remember their burden and either ask someone in the group to pray for the need or lead in prayer yourself.

- Provide ¼ sheet of paper and encourage your group to take the next minute to write down a request.
 - Put together a rotation of the members of your group for focused prayer. For instance, you could say, “Bill, we want to make you our special focus for prayer next week. So, think about some specific burdens that you would like for us to consider with you in prayer.” Then – ask Bill to share his needs next week and ask someone to pray for Bill.
 - Teach your group to pray by teaching them A.C.T.S.
 - Someone prays a prayer of Adoration – ask them to pray a passage of adoration from the Psalms.
 - Someone prays a prayer of Confession – ask them to pray a passage that is filled with confession.
 - Someone prays a prayer of Thanksgiving – see passages like Psalm 103.
 - Someone prays a prayer of Supplication – asking for specific burdens of group members.
 - Bring the church prayer sheet that is printed every Wednesday and assign some requests.
 - Bring Missionary Prayer Cards and introduce your Small Group to a missionary in need of prayer.
3. Sharing Testimonies – while testimonies may be shared spontaneously, you can also “Assign” testimonies ahead of time.
- Ask a member of your group to share their testimony of salvation.
 - Ask group members to share testimony based on a specific question:
 - What is your favorite passage in the Bible?
 - Up to now – what is the most amazing answer to prayer you have ever seen?

- Other than your salvation – what is the most important decision you have ever made in your life?
- Is there a prayer request that you carried to the Lord for over a year before God answered?
- Etc.
- Bring in a “special guest” from within your department to share a testimony at your table.

4. Promoting Activities.

- Don’t promote an activity that you do not plan to attend.
- Ask your group for activity ideas for your department.
- Remember that we purposefully schedule 2 weekends each year for Department Activities and that connection for your group is weekly. Hosting an activity specifically for your small group is not expected.

5. Check-up on your group members.

- Put together a text chain and send a group text with words of encouragement.
- Call or text your group members regularly.
- Invite newcomers to sit with you in the morning service if they were not invited by others.
- Call those who are absent.

6. Think outside the box.

- Select a specific need in the church family or from our missionary family to make have as your small group’s prayer focus.
- Select a missionary with whom you want your group to communicate.
- INVITE, INVITE, INVITE – There are those who not attending Small Group. Find them and invite them.

