

05.09.2020 AN EXCITING WAY TO GET INVOLVED

Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest'. Matthew 9:37, 38

This week our study is on small group ministry within the church. It would be well for us to look at the New Testament evidence for small group ministry.

In the book of Acts we find that members met in large groups e.g. the Temple or in small groups 'from house to house' (Acts 2:46). Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had exhorted them both "publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). There were several home churches in Rome (Romans 16: 4, 10, 11, 14, 15,) and probably in Corinth as well.

From this, we can infer that there would have been good reasons for home churches apart from the fact that many thousands were converted and would need a large building to hold them all. In Jerusalem, where the converts met at the Temple, Solomon's Porch was capable of holding large groups of people. Until about 150 AD there is no evidence of church buildings. One of the problems with church buildings even today is that members tend to view the building as the church.

An impersonal and superficial atmosphere could arise if we only hold only very large meetings. Small group ministry helps to encourage community within the church by fostering closer relationships between members.

It is essential however, to base these small group ministries on Biblical principles. The church's great enemy Satan, is very successful at leading small groups astray, hence the church must be vigilant and committed to following Biblical principles when establishing small groups within the larger church body.

Purpose:

1. To make disciples i.e. not just to know, but to obey Jesus' teachings. According to Matthew 28:18-20, **discipleship is not about teaching people Jesus' teachings, but teaching people how to obey Jesus' teachings.**
2. To encourage each member to grow in discipleship – to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ; to be available to the Holy Spirit, thus **becoming spiritual Christians**, not carnal or worldly Christians.
3. To recognise their spiritual gift/s.
4. To praise and thank God for the filling of the Spirit, and to commit themselves anew to being used by the Spirit.
"The Holy Spirit cannot live out His life within us if we do not give Him our lives to live in."

Leaders:

Spiritual criteria must be used to select leaders e.g. the qualifications of a deacon (I Timothy 3:8-13) could be a good starting point. Acts 6:3 describes deacons as being full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, as well as men of good reputation and faith.

1. Leaders should be good shepherds i.e. people should be willing to follow them, because they recognise the quality of their character and knowledge.
2. Leaders themselves require 'equipping for the ministry' Ephesians 4:11, 12. The popular idea that 'if you can read, you can lead' is not true when it comes to spiritual leadership, since the leader's primary goal is to enhance discipleship and faithfulness to Christ among the members of the group.
3. They must be allowed to exercise authority and to run the group – (see I Corinthians 16:16; Hebrews 13:17; I Thessalonians 5:14).
4. They should be able to maintain discipline within the group. Some people are attracted to small groups for the wrong reasons – they come to exploit others, to promote their particular theology or doctrine or simply to use the group to become the centre of attention. The Bible provides advice on how to deal with such situations - members who are willing to damage others or themselves are to be confronted in love about their attitude and/or actions (see I Thessalonians 5:14; Matthew 18:15).

Pitfalls:

Satan is expert at tempting people to change what begins as a spiritual exercise into a worldly, self-centred exercise. Therefore we must be vigilant when the church has small group ministry to prevent any of the following:

1. Small groups can deteriorate into 'cliques'.
2. They can become talking shops and deteriorate into gossip sessions.
3. They can be satisfied with meeting up regularly and doing nothing about going out into the community and making disciples.
4. *"The problem with small groups isn't that they pool the group's collective ignorance; it's that they pool the group's collective disobedience."* If the members focus on their spiritual problems and get only sympathy from the other members, there is a real risk that they will be lulled into continuing their disobedience.
5. The small group ministry becomes another church 'programme' where people meet to comment on the Bible, but are uncomfortable with praying for real needs of people, and who go home unchallenged, uncommitted and unchanged.

New Testament Principles and Examples:

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." Matthew 18:20

He (Christ) went up on the mountain and called to Him those He Himself wanted. And they came to Him. Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons. Mark 3:13-15

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all...but one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11

Whether in the Temple or in a house group, the early church members *'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . 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 favour with all the people'* Acts 2:42, 46, 47. Studying the Word, fellowship, hospitality and prayer should be a daily aspect of our communal life, whether we meet in person or not.

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. Acts 2:44-45. In our small groups, we need to know each other well enough to know the needs, and we need to be aware what God has given us to share in sacrifice and generosity to others.

Then awe (fear) came upon every soul...Acts 2:43. As we live in sacrificial fellowship with each other, we will have a greater revelation of God; His love and power and glory.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2:47. As we exalt Christ in our churches and small groups and love each other as Christ loves us, we become attractive communities and God Himself will make our love, joy and worship contagious.

"Small groups don't create disciples. Disciples create disciples."

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Acts 20:27

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. Galatians 6:1, 2

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. Ephesians 4:15, 16

Prayer is Essential...And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. Acts 4:31 (See also Acts 12:12)

Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God. Ephesians 5:17-21

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 1 John 4:11-13

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. Hebrews 10:24, 25

'The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members, but for unbelievers. If in one place there are only two or three who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers. **Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, each gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others. Let them reveal Christ-like forbearance and patience, speaking no hasty words, using the talent of speech to build one another up in the most holy faith. Let them labour in Christ-like love for those outside the fold, forgetting self in their endeavour to help others. As they work and pray in Christ's name, their numbers will increase;** for the Saviour says: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven." Matthew 18:19'. *Testimonies Vol 7. P 22*

Conclusion:

Throughout the New Testament we find that the local church played an important part in evangelism of the local community. Above all, the members must have a true understanding of God, that He is Friend, Saviour, our Righteousness, our High Priest and our Vindicator. Then we will be able to share with others the truth about God. If we ourselves are not convinced of any of the above about Christ, our gospel will be a partial gospel. Does that mean we do not witness? Not at all - we tell what we know. And we must spend time with Jesus asking Him to reveal more of Himself to us.

Secondly, the church must recognise that it is placed in the world for the salvation of the world. It is not a club for cultural Christians or Adventists. It is a place where sinners find a home where they are accepted as children of God and loved and welcomed as such. The opposite extreme which is popular but wrong, is to believe that the church itself must reflect worldliness to a certain extent to attract the people of the world. This was not true of Christ and it must not be true of the church. We are to be in the world as salt and light, but not of the world.

In our families and in the church we must reflect the community found within the Godhead - the three Persons united in purpose and love. We must demonstrate to the world the unconditional, unending, self-giving love of God.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" John 13:34, 35.