

The Importance of Small Groups

Brynmawr Family Church Sermon
Stuart Wheatman, Sunday 16th October 2011

Introduction

- If you were going to change the world, how would you do it? Bands who want to be successful – out gigging all hours, going on world tours-burn out. Jesus travelled within one country for 3½ years and trained up 12 people, yet those 12 people turned the world upside down! Jesus preached to masses, but spent most of His time and energy with just 12 men. Today we are going to look at the importance of the small group, we will look at 3 reasons why we should commit to small groups.

Read Mark 3:7-19

Small groups was the practise of Jesus and the early Church- v13-14 ('called to Him those He wanted...He appointed twelve')

Jesus' practise-

- Here Jesus chooses 12 – unique number perfect for small groups – divisible by 1,2,3,4 + 6.
- Elsewhere, Jesus specified the home as a base for ministry when going out with the gospel:

Also He said to them, 'In whatever place you enter a house, stay there till you depart from that place.' Mark 6:10

'Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out.' Matt 10:11

- Jesus' small group was effective. It stood up under pressure. The closeness of the 12 to Christ resulted in a loyalty in tough times that only comes from true friendship. Many disciples turned away, but the 12 stayed:

From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve." (John 6:66 – 71)

- The 12 trained up would literally result in the Church being able to 'turn the world upside down':

But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too."

Early Church's practise-

- Temple and house to house -

'Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing **daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house**, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. **And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved**' (Acts 2 : 44 – 47)

(This combination of large and small group, above, is part of the mix leading to the result of more being added).

Saul persecutes Church from house to house:

'As for Saul, he **made havoc of the church, entering every house**, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.' (Acts 8:3)

First Gentiles converted and filled in Cornelius' house:

And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel **to send for you to come to his house** and to hear what you have to say." Acts 10:22

Lydia first contact into Europe. They were based at her house:

'And when she and her household were baptised, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, **come to my house and stay**." So she persuaded us' (Acts 16 : 15)

Paul at Thess.

'Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked **the house of Jason**, and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. **Jason has harbored them**, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king--Jesus." And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go' (Acts 17:1-9)

Paul at Corinth goes to a house after lack of success in the synagogue:

'And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on **I will go to the Gentiles.**" **And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household.** And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptised' (Acts 18:4 – 8)

Aquila + Priscilla had church in the house.

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, **with the church that is in their house**' (1 Cor 16:19)

Nymphas had church in his (her?) house.

'Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and **Nymphas and the church that is in his house**' (Col 4:15)

Application:

- Are we committed to a small group? If Jesus committed to a small group, then so should we, as He is our role-model. Jesus used this practise of small groups to make disciples. He has given the Great Commission to us to also 'make disciples'- Matt 28. Therefore we should use the methods of the Master. If we want to be a disciple and make disciples we will do well to realise this Biblical model and live it out.
- We also have the witness of the early Church. We know it was to be carried on

because this is how it was in Acts. The first Church buildings did not come until a few hundred years later. It has been said that Methodism began to lose its fire when it built its first church building. Are we constrained in any way by buildings? Do we see our house as a place to see discipleship occurring? Do we see worship and fellowship as happening primarily 'in the temple courts' or equally 'from house to house'?

- What aspects of Sundays are we yet to experience in the home (e.g. communion)?

Family happens in small Groups- v14 ('..that they might be with Him')

- **Family means relationship.** Here Jesus wanted a small group to experience continually being in relationship with Him. Christianity is about relationship- with God and each other.
- Nursing Set – 3 years together – hard to break up.
- 12 Disciples modelled on family – 12 tribes = 12 sons of Jacob (Israel). Our Father = God – we are brothers and sisters – look at each other ! In O.T God took hold of a family unit and transforms it into a godly nation. In N.T God takes hold of a similar unit of 12, the apostles, turns them into His family and uses this family to transform the nations. God loves family.
- **Family needs working at.** Families will squabble at times. I love this next quote!:

"Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptised with you will be baptised; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared." **And when the ten heard it, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John**' (Mk 10 : 35-41)

- The 12 were not chosen because they were similar – Tax Collector and Zealots were opposites. John was very deep, philosophical, metaphorical ('light', 'bread', 'way'). He was a man who moved in high circles, known personally by the High Priest (John 18:15). Peter was the opposite- an uneducated man– 'wash my head and face as well' .
- Jesus was frustrated with them at times:

Couldn't cast out demon:

"..so **I implored Your disciples** to cast it out, but they could not." Then Jesus answered and said, "O faithless and perverse generation, **how long shall I be with you and bear with you?** Bring your son here." (Lk 9 : 40-41)

Fire from Heaven on the Samaritans:

'Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" But **He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of.** For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them." And they went to another village' (Lk 9 : 51-56)

Unbelief at calming of storm:

'But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. **But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?"**' (Mk 4:38-40)

Disciples arguing about who was the greatest, rebuking the children, rebuking those casting out demons, rebuking Jesus for going to the cross, denying Christ 3 times, disbelieving the resurrection (Thomas, the men, - 'some doubted'), misunderstanding simple teaching (yeast- Pharisees).

- Jesus had first hand experience of how irritating they could be and so gave a commandment related to this- 'Therefore a new command I give to you – Love one another, as I have loved you.
- **Family brings a sense of belonging.** Despite the irritations, the 12 disciples really had become Jesus' friends:

"When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, "**With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you** before I suffer;" (Lk 22 :14-15)

'Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. **You are My friends** if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; **but I have called you friends**, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you' (Jn 15:13-15)

- A sense of belonging comes when we invest in relationship. This is true of our relationship with God as well as with others. If we really want to feel part of the family of God we need to invest time, effort and patience into it. The gains are well worth it.
- **A good family means transparency.** In large Church meetings it is possible to disappear or hide from others.
One lady told how she took her granddaughter to church for the first time. As they knelt in the tall-sided pew, the little girl whispered, "Who are we hiding from?" It is harder to hide from ourselves or from one another in the smaller group, than in the crowd.
- Reality, vulnerability, taking off masks – '*hypocritos*' = actor in Greek play where the actor would be adept at playing different characters by the flicking on and off of different masks. '*sincere*' = literally 'without wax' means a Greek sculpture which is not cracked and filled with wax to hide the blemish.

Application:

Sometimes can't put 2 people in same group because they don't get on- this is not good. Sort out issues & likes and dislikes, let love cover over and restore relationships or seek to implement loving Church discipline where necessary.

- How much of who we really are have we let the Church know? Be wise about what you share and with whom, but make sure there are those whom you do share with.
- It takes a sacrifice of investment of time to get to truly know people in the Church. Jesus was willing to pay that price for the gains, are we?
- 3 key reasons we can all at times be guilty of for not committing to a small group- being offended at something/one, being fearful of people knowing the real us, or simply wanting to relax and unwind in leisure time. We need to deal with whatever is stopping us from being a real brother/sister to our family. Family time is important- e.g. us in Dan-yr-ogof caves and monkey sanctuary yesterday (mud flinging monkeys).

Growth happens in small groups.v14 ('..that He might send them out to preach')

- Jesus had a goal in choosing the small group- to train them up to be sent out. Small groups are where we experience serious growth. E.g. people coming through addictions are blessed by the small group environment- A.A, Teen Challenge, Victor Outreach etc. Small groups is where we get the muck out and put the good stuff in.
- **Spiritual growth**
John Stott wrote in One People: Clergy and Laity in God's Church: I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that

small groups, Christian family or fellowship groups, are indispensable for our growth into spiritual maturity.

- St. Francis of Assisi used small groups for prayer, training, and service. Small groups were used by the Methodists, Anabaptists, Hutterites, Quakers and Lutherans.
- **Training for growth-**
My Nurse training – I ended up overseeing hundreds of lives on various wards, but started in a small group + mentors – injecting – extracting blood. Jamie Oliver – Ministry of Food- aim was to train a few to teach the many the skills and so to change the eating habits of a whole region in the U.K.
- Jesus trained His selection of a small group of disciples in the supernatural. Later the Apostles led in the supernatural power of God to the thousands, but it started in this small group.
- Jesus first modelled, then delegated tasks to the group. They had first witnessed Him doing miracles, then He expected them to have a go whilst He watched. Later they would do them on their own. There is a saying 'see one, do one, teach one'. Even though Jesus could have done it Himself Jesus trained the disciples through delegation to step out in faith and trust God in the feeding of the 5000- 'You give them something to eat':

But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." (Mt 14:16;)

- Jesus understood the dynamics of the group and split it accordingly for different training purposes:

Disciples sent out in 2's:

'And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power over unclean spirits' (Mk 6:7;)

3 of the 12 had a particularly close relationship with Jesus and so had unique training experiences– Peter, James & John:

Transfiguration:

And He said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.' Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them' (Mk 9 :1-2)

Dead Girl:

'As soon as Jesus heard the word that was spoken, He said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not be afraid; only believe." And He permitted no one to follow Him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James. Then He came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and saw a tumult and those who wept and wailed loudly. When He came in, He said to them, "Why make this commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping." And they ridiculed Him. But when He had put them all outside, He took the father and the mother of the child, and those who were with Him, and entered where the child was lying. Then He took the child by the hand, and said to her, "Talitha, cumi," which is translated, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." (Mk 5 :36-41)

- In our small groups there will be some we are naturally closer to than others. God will link us to certain individuals. Who are those God has closely linked us with to influence and be an influence to? Who are our Peter, James and Johns? What are we doing to train them/be trained by them?
- **Growth of gifts.** Small groups are an ideal environment to learn to use our gifts to bless others. There is more room for experimentation than during a larger gathering. We all have gifts. If those gifts are not present when the Church meets then the group suffers –Ephesians says we build one another up - as each part

does its work. We are a body, and if a part does not function we become disabled. Therefore, be prepared to grow + use gifts to bless others in a small group.

- **Growth through accountability & support** – not being a loose cannon. The Methodist revival led by John Wesley was primarily based on the use of small groups for mutual confession to one another (James 5:16), to give encouragement and support in overcoming temptation and in developing a Christian style of life. They would be led by lay people which met weekly to report on their spiritual progress, needs, and problems, and to receive support and prayer. John Wesley described the small groups of early Methodism in the following way:
“... a company of [persons] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another (Proverbs 27:17).

- **Numerical Growth**

Jesus trained 12. The 12 covered the globe between them according to tradition.

- In Calvin's time, the 16th century, France nearly became a Protestant nation because so many French people were meeting together in Protestant Bible study groups. The Methodist revival under John and Charles Wesley in the 1700's, where at least 10% of English people were awakened to God, was primarily based upon the use of small groups where people meet together each week to report their spiritual progress.
- Robert Coleman's 'The Master Plan of Evangelism'. First published in 1963, this short book has sold 3 million copies. In the book Robert Coleman argues that Jesus' plan to reach the masses was to concentrate on the few. Billy Graham said of it, "Few books have had as great an impact on the cause of world evangelization in our generation as Robert Coleman's The Master Plan of Evangelism." Billy Graham says he would follow Jesus' example if he were a pastor:

"It is not without great significance that the leading evangelist in the world today, Dr. Billy Graham recognized the tremendous potential of this plan when used properly in the church. In response to the question, 'If you were the pastor of a large church in a principle city, what would be your plan of action?' Mr. Graham replied, 'I think one of the first things I would do would be to get a small group of eight or ten or twelve people around me that would meet a few hours a week and pay the price! It would cost them something in time and effort. I would share with them everything I have, over a period of years. Then, I would actually have twelve ministers among the lay people who could in turn take eight or ten or twelve people and teach them. I know one or two churches that are doing this and it is revolutionizing the church. Christ, I think, set the pattern. He spent most of his time with twelve men. He didn't spend it with a great crowd. In fact, every time he had a great crowd it seems to me there weren't many results. The great results, it seems to me, came in this personal interview and in the time he spent with the twelve."

- Hold up an Apple –how many apples am I holding? Innumerable- each seed within it is a potential apple tree. We are a Church from a home group and we have multiplied. Home groups can become Church plants.
- Mastering the small group is a key to growth. The largest church in the world, Dr. Yonggi Cho's church in Seoul, Korea, with several hundred thousand members, is built on the house and cell group principle. The small group "Group of Twelve" (G12) approach in Colombia has grown from 600 cell groups to about 50,000 in four years. In Cuba, where new church construction is still forbidden, the Assemblies of God has grown from 9,000 to over 100,000 in ten years and has more than 2,000 house churches. Newfrontiers started in 1973 in Nigel Ring's house and present day is near 850 Churches in over 60 nations (read about the start of Newfrontiers from it's magazine volume 4, issue 3, page 7).
- Our relative-Philip Murdoch practises the principles of small groups and G12. He is part of Pastor Larry Stockstill's 12. He planted a Church in Rio in 2000 (we went to

opening service- there was 1 visitor, I played bass guitar!) This Church is part of a Network called Surge. Through this network Philip and his associates have planted over 520 churches since 2000 and funded over 250. These churches have been very successful with over 92% still meeting and growing to this day. These churches were planted with partnerships with regional leaders throughout Brazil. This may well be one of the largest interdenominational church planting projects in Brazil. Their church plants have primarily been focused on the least reached portions of Brazil however they have also planted churches in Chile and Argentina. Surge church planting network began over ten years ago as a vision for planting and multiplying churches all over the world on an unprecedented scale. The strategy was born in the heart of Pastor Larry Stockstill (Bethany World Prayer Centre, Baton Rouge) upon hearing of the Gideons' strategy for distributing bibles to every home on earth. They divided the world into twelve zones and appointed a trusted man over each zone to oversee the effort in his region. Pastor Larry applied this principle to church planting, and partnered with key apostolic leaders in twelve zones around the world with the goal of planting a church among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. The initiative took shape as the Global 12 Project in the year 2000. Beginning with the single church planted in El Salvador that year, they began to see an amazing level of multiplication. By 2009, over 2,000 churches were planted in a single year. The total number of churches planted around the world since the inception of the Global 12 Project has exceeded 20,000!

- **Application -**

'And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. Do not forsake meeting together as some are in the habit of doing' (Heb10:24-25)

- **Vision –** According to those who study church growth, research has shown that seven smaller groups for every hundred people attending Sunday worship, is the minimum required for growth. We are only as strong as our small groups. We can only truly grow as a Church as we grow our small groups. We will be looking to multiply the existing homegroup into one more homegroup around November time (details will follow). We will then continue to grow until we can further multiply. Eventually church plants will come from homegroups.

Conclusion

- Small Groups was the practise of Jesus and the early Church
- Family happens in small Groups
- Growth happens in small groups

Song

One Shall Tell Another