

# “In Remembrance”

*A thought from Pastor Gabe Skillo.*



*“If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ”*

I Timothy 4:1-6, 11

## SMALL GROUPS

### ARE SUNDAY SCHOOL AND SMALL GROUPS THE SAME THING?

Why don't we have small groups? Are they a Biblical model? What started the small group movement? What is the difference between small groups and Sunday school?

Small groups have been defined as, "a micro-community of 3 to 12 Jesus followers doing the Christian life deeply together." Many churches have replaced the model of Sunday school with small group. Off the definition, small groups seem to be a good thing; however, the concern comes when one looks into the effects of the small group. The basic idea of a small group is that, instead of meeting at church like Sunday school, a small group of people would meet on a different day or time away from church.

The term “small group” was first used by the Calvary Episcopal Church in the 1920s to 1930s. However, its beginnings date back to an early experiment in a small-group community in the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C. in about 1946. A woman named Elizabeth O'Connor speaks of her church's beginnings in her book *Call to Commitment*. This book explained her view on how the church viewed itself and how it was obvious that this movement was not about forms, structures, or numbers; it was about a paradigm (shift) in how the church viewed itself. The only problem is that it is written from a viewpoint of what culture wants (or our “own age” would want), rather than first checking on God's Biblical formula for church. The church that is true to its mission, O'Connor stated, “will be experimenting, pioneering, blazing new paths, seeking how to speak the reconciling Work of God to its own age. It cannot do this if it is held captive by the structures of another day or is slave to its own structure.” However, she forgets that the structure of the church is first defined in the Bible. The Bible must first be our authority for faith and practice. New ideas and methods are wonderful as long as they don't contradict what the Bible said first. O'Connor wrote many books; one of which was entitled *For Lesbian Parents*. This book teaches lesbian mothers how to parent effectively. Sadly, rather than telling the mothers to repent and to get saved, it focuses on abstract, rather than biblical truths. For example, it teaches children how to respond to teasing, rather than on how to live according to the Word of God. It's eye opening that the same person who wrote a book training lesbian mothers also wrote a book redefining church. Sadly, Christians have followed.

A man named Ralph Neighbour, who is a strong proponent of the cell-church (small group) model, was planting churches in New York. He decided to go down to Washington, D.C. to see Church of the Saviour. He said, “I saw the people of God operating a coffeehouse where everyone was a minister. I began to understand that my theology didn't fit the traditional church.” He found a few other men who felt the same way, and he moved to Houston to

plant an experimental church following the small group pattern. The problem is that Neighbour, along with many others, had to throw away theology so that he could “fit the traditional church.” If we throw away what the Bible defines, we are in trouble.

Lyman Coleman, an author and proponent of small groups said, “In the early day, the small group movement was primarily an underground movement. The established church didn’t want anything to do with it. Also, small groups were often an alternative watering hole for those who had become disenchanted with the established church or had been turned away from the church because they didn’t have their lives together.” Coleman recounts how the small group idea was first tested in the 1940s and 1950s and how it developed through the anti-establishmentarianism of the 1960s. With that said, the small group movement was started by people opposing the establishment of the church, which Jesus Christ founded. Those who were “disenchanted” with the church or were un-submissive to its Biblical teachings were the founders and forefathers of the small group movement of today. Today we see many Christians embracing this act of rebellion and calling it biblical or even Christian. Coleman himself has even said that small groups are, “a tepid term that theologically has absolutely no teeth.” The word tepid actually means: lukewarm. It reminds me of the verse in Revelation 3:15-16 where Jesus is speaking of the end times church of Laodicea. “*I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.*” As one of the founders of the small group movement has admitted, the small groups are lukewarm (tepid), to say the least. Perhaps, in God’s foreknowledge, God knew that small groups would come some 2000 years later.

Some may say and argue that the early Christians had church in small groups. That’s fine and even Biblical. However, many churches today are small too. The question is not whether or not a group is small, but if they are following a Biblical pattern. Furthermore, the pattern of a small group is not that it’s just a small group of people. That pattern is to cut the church up into small units (cell groups or cell-church) and keep them small.

So, what are some of the problems with small groups:

1. Small groups are typically done on an off-day (i.e. not on Sunday), and away from the church. The church is a body and therefore should operate as one. I Corinthians 12:18, 20 says, “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. But now are they many members, yet but one body.”
2. Small groups many/most times replace church attendance.
3. Small groups remove Christians from the influence of their Pastor. In Hebrews 13:17 it states (in reference to Pastors), “*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account.*” It would be difficult for a Christian to submit to Pastoral leadership if they don’t even know him.
4. Small groups make another man (or a group of men) the pastor instead of having one Biblical pastor. See number 3. The primary influence becomes the small group discussion leader.

5. Small groups open up a group discussion where anyone states what they believe or how they interpret a particular portion of scripture. This essentially removes the concept of preaching. The Bible explains in I Corinthians 1:21b that God used Pastors to preach His Word; He still does today. This scripture says, “*it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.*”
6. Small groups remove Christians from the big picture of seeing lives changed and God moving through the church. Throughout the Bible we see God’s people experiencing something together, and, in return, God gets ahold of them together.
7. Small groups promote a mentality to find a group that you get along with, rather than to learn to love all the brethren and to dwell together in unity. Romans 12:18 says, “*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.*”
8. Small groups defeat the purpose of Christ building His church. Matthew 16:18b shows us that Jesus founded the church and it will be built. It states, “*upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*”
9. Small groups attract those who have, as stated above, become “disenchanted” with the church or who have become unsubmitive to its leadership. Instead of the Christian making things right with the church/Pastor they go out the back door and run from their problems.
10. Small groups are very ecumenical (coming together of all faiths and churches). Rather than standing for specific and correct Bible doctrine, many teach a watered-down message that would fit anyone’s beliefs. In 1 Timothy 4:1, Paul charges Timothy to without compromise, “*Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.*”
11. Small groups are promoted as a time of fellowship, which is Biblical. However, most times the small group turns into mostly fellowship with very minimal Bible study. Christians need precise Bible teaching. We need more “*meat*” of the Word instead of a little Biblical “*milk*” with a bunch of fellowship. In Isaiah 28: 9-10 it states, “*Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little:”*
12. Small groups usually equate to less church (or no church) instead of more church. The average committed Christian goes to church two times a month. If small groups are part of that statistic, then they never go to church. The Bible tells us in Hebrews 10:25 to go to church “*so much the more*”; it doesn’t say “*so much the less.*”
13. Small groups require a time away from the scheduled church time. So, either a Christian must be faithful to attend two separate times/days, or they must choose between the two.
14. The whole reason for small groups is to get people to interact and feel comfortable in a smaller group rather than in the church. With that in mind, small groups remove people from the opportunity to do ministry in the local church and provides an excuse because they are less capable or more unlearned than others. It says in I Corinthians 12:22, “*Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more*

*feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.”*

15. Small groups segment people away from the church and divide them. Acts 2:1 shows that early Christians were together in one place when God did something big. It says, “*And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.*”
16. Small groups remove the people from the direct vision of the Pastor. Proverbs 29:18a says, “*Where there is no vision, the people perish:*”.
17. Small groups, when replaced with church, lessen the importance of church even in one’s appearance. Certainly, God deserves us to dress appropriately when we come together in service to Him. However, the small group movement removes respect towards God in one’s physical appearance. They do this because it is a more relaxed setting. All one has to do to see the importance of appearance is study the dress requirement for the Levites when they cared for the house and duties of God.

The main discussion that arises when churches have small groups is that they need more fellowship among believers. Fellowship is good and Biblical, but it is not a substitute for church. Small groups have become a tool for people to skip out of church. Many times, the church itself doesn’t care that people are skipping the church service because they take attendance of the small groups. When the focus turns into numbers rather than generating true disciples of Christ it doesn’t really matter if they don’t attend the “church”, as long as they are in a small group.

It’s important to remember that the reason most churches are implementing small groups is because churches of most denominations and church attendance is in decline. However, this boils down to one main factor – Christians not following the great commission. If Christians were to continue to fulfill the great commission by unashamedly teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, there wouldn’t be a need to have small groups. Instead of re-inventing the wheel in an unbiblical manner, Christians need to return to Christianity 101. Rather than redefining church and the model that Jesus Christ founded, let us continue in the church setting and to be influenced by the preaching of the Word of God under a man of God.

Proverbs 22:28, “*Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set.*”