

Engage

Small Groups: Engage in Christ

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SMALL GROUPS: ENGAGE IN CHRIST **John 17: 20-26**

God, we pray that Jesus would be at the center of our lives, of this church, of our community with each other, and the ramifications of that would impact nations for the glory of His name. It's in His name we pray, Amen.

Well, if you have your Bibles, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open with me to John 17. There is something I did in the first service that I forgot to do during our time earlier, and today, many of you know, is kind of "Promotion Sunday" for kids, children, students moving up, and that means that today, we have kindergartners who are here in corporate worship with us for the first time.

So, if you are a kindergartner, we want to invite you to stand, and we want to welcome you to corporate worship. Let's welcome them together. It's great, looking at your faces, because everybody is looking around for them, and nobody can see them because...but they're here, and so, just trust me on that; they're here.

It's also a day, and I mentioned this earlier, that we are heading into a new picture. These next four weeks, we're going to walk through a series called "Engage," and we're going to think about biblical community and what it means to be the church, and specifically, I want us to think about small groups, and the role small groups play in the church.

What we're going to do today is we're going to dive into John 17, which, if you'll remember, if you were here earlier this year, we spent six weeks looking at what it means to make disciples. We have seen, over the last year, that we are designed as His church, God's church, to impact the world for the glory of His name, and He's given us a strategy for how that looks. It's called disciple-making, "make disciples", and that is a command. It's not something that some of us are called to and not called to. If we have trusted in Christ, then we are commanded to make disciples of all nations.

So, what I want us to do this morning is I want us to pick up in the same text that we studied disciple-making in earlier this year, and I want us to see the implications of this text for what this looks like for us as a community of faith called the church. I want us to begin to connect the dots between how my making disciples of all nations, how your making disciples of all nations is intended to happen in the context of a local church.

I want you to read with me starting in John 17:20. This is a prayer that Jesus is praying. The predominant focus of His praying is for His disciples, whom He's about to leave. He's about to go to the cross. When you get to verse 20, there's a shift, and He begins to pray, not just for the disciples then, but for all disciples of all time, all those who would follow Christ, which includes us today.

Look at verse 20, and Jesus prays this,

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you've sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them, and that I myself may be in them."

Why Small Groups?

Now, we're going to focus especially on verses 20 to 23, and we're going to let Jesus' prayer there give us a picture of really what God had designed for His people all the way back at the beginning of creation. As we begin to think about small groups as a church, I want to show you five reasons why I believe small groups need to be significant in the body of believers called the church, and why they need to be significant at The Church at Brook Hills. I want to show you those this morning, then we're going to unpack some of these more specifically in the weeks to come, but five reasons...and you've got them there in your notes...why small groups.

The pattern of our Creator ...

Number one, because of the pattern of our Creator. What's really interesting when you come to this prayer that Jesus is praying for all those who will believe in Him through the disciples. He says...listen to this, in verse 21, *"...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."*

Now, this is really interesting. That statement is just loaded theologically. "Just as you are in me and I am in you." What we've got to realize is that from the very beginning of Scripture, God is singular and plural at the same time. This is a conversation between God the Son and God the Father. We know that God the Spirit is in the picture as well. We've got one God in three persons all over Scripture, and that's huge for understanding why Jesus is praying this right here.

Hold your place here in John 17 and go back with me to Genesis 1, the very first book in the Bible. Look at Genesis 1:26. I want us to look at the creation of man. All the way back to the left, the first book in the Bible, Genesis 1. Look with me at verse 26, and I want us to see the language that introduces God from the very beginning of Scripture, when He created us.

Listen to this, Genesis 1:26. It says, *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...'"* Now, let's just pause right there. Did you catch that? That's a little weird. *"God said..."* Okay, singular. *"God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...'"* Three times you've got a plural pronoun to refer to one God. This is the teaching of Scripture from

the very beginning. There is one God who is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor. At the same time, He is three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Even in this picture, you look at Genesis 1:2, it says, "*The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*" You've obviously got God the Father here, interacting with Adam and Eve, but you also come to the book where we're studying, John 1:1-3, and it says, "*In the beginning was the Word...*" and the Word is referring to Jesus there. "The Word was with God, and the Word was God, and through Him all things were made." So, John 1:1-3 tells us that Jesus was in this picture, too.

So, in the very beginning of Scripture, what you've got is one God, three persons. What that means is, God, in His very makeup, His very character, is a relational being. Before man was even created, you had God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, relating to each other in community.

We see the rest of Scripture; different points where they are relating to each other, and when Jesus is baptized, Matthew 3:16-18, you see all three: God the Father, God the Holy Spirit, and God the Son working in conjunction together. That's the picture we see throughout Scripture. I won't pretend to be able to explain that. There's all kinds of analogies people use to try to explain the Trinity. "You know, it's like, ice and water and steam." Let's just not try to come up some pictures to try to explain away the mystery of our God. There are some things that we just don't understand about our God completely and totally. It does not mean we throw our brains out the door when we come to Scripture, but it's, at the same time, that we realize that we are finite, and He is infinite. He is one God in three persons, and as a result, the picture is that God is community in the way He relates to each other, and we see that displayed here in John 17, as Jesus is praying to the Father...God the Son, praying to God the Father, and saying, "I want them to be one, just as we are one."

So, the plea, the prayer for unity in John 17 is based on the very character of God. However, here's where it gets even better. When Jesus prays, He prays, "I want to give them the glory you gave me. So, just as I am in you, and you are in me, I want them to be in me as well." What we've got here is an incredible picture in John 17 of the fact that we have been invited to join in the mystery of divine community; that we've been brought into this thing. That, just as Jesus relates to the Father, as the Father relates to the Son, to the Spirit, just as they relate to each other, we're invited to be a part of this thing in relationship with God. This is a mammoth, incredible truth.

Think about it with me. You share life with your Creator, God. I share life with my Creator, God. Through Christ, we share life with Him, and as a result...think of the implications for our unity with each other. That means you and I share life together. That's the picture from the very beginning of Scripture, and it's the way God has designed it. God desires for His glory that He puts in us to be the foundation of our community in this world. He designs for His glory, His image put in us, for that to be the foundation for our community in this world.

Now, this is huge. This is not some manufactured, contrived unity that we have in the church, that we have with each other. This is a personal unity, a unity of nature, the fact that the glory of Christ dwells in you, and the glory of Christ dwells in me. That's what provides unity.

This is not based on externals. When you think about our world today, and try and promote unity among different people, there's all kinds of external things we try to unify around.

Maybe you're united with people at your job, and your job unites you in at least some ways. Maybe it's different skills that unite you and other people. Maybe it's different passions that unite you and other people, or different gifts that you have, or different...maybe you've got the same socioeconomic level as other people, and that's what kind of unites you together. You enjoy doing the same things, all external things.

What Scripture is teaching here is that there is an eternal glory that God has entrusted to us in the Son of God, Jesus Christ's glory that He's put in us, that unites all of us together. It's an incredible picture of unity. The foundation...and this is why...this is why we can be one family, from every nation, and every tribe, and every people, and every language across this planet, united together across all socioeconomic levels, and united together across jobs or skills or passions because the glory of Christ is the foundation for our unity with each other.

Not only that, but God desires for our community...just flip it around here, our community to be the reflection of His glory in the world. That's what Jesus is praying in John 17, "I pray that they may be one, just as you and I are one, so that the world will believe that you have sent me." I want you to feel the weight of that statement with me. Jesus is acknowledging that His glory would be reflected in the way His church related to each other, the way His people related to each other. This is huge. A lost world cannot see God, but a lost world can see Christians, can see the church. What Jesus is saying is very heavy here. If the world sees Christians loving and caring for each other, then they will believe that God is love. However, if the world sees Christians fighting and bickering with one another, then they will reject the gospel message. They'll reject it all together.

That's why Francis Schaeffer, one of my favorite writers, said,

Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful. Christian community is the final apologetic. I am convinced that our increasingly relativistic world, increasingly pluralistic and skeptical culture that we live in, that the greatest apologetic, the greatest defense for the Christian faith is a church that loves and cares and sacrifices for each other like Christ has designed us to.

This is really important. He desires for the community to be the reflection, His reflection of His glory in the world. Now, we're sitting here talking about unity and community and coming together and uniting together, and I know there are people all across this room that are thinking, "You know, it sounds good, but it's just not possible. I mean, can the church, can Christians really unite together? It's a little idealistic, isn't it?" We think that, I'm guessing, because a lot of our backgrounds, and many of us, maybe, if not all of us, have in the past seen numerous instances, and some of this very up close and personal, of disunity in this church, and strife in the church, and very painful disunity in the church. We've all seen one church split into another; another church goes down the road and starts, and they call themselves a Unity Baptist Church, of all names. We've got First Baptist, Second Baptist, Third Baptist, and 27th Baptist Church right down the street there. The 27th Methodist Church.

"It's just idealistic, Dave; it's not going to happen." Before we say that, though, I want us to realize that if we say that's idealistic, and it's not possible, then what we are saying is we're saying to Jesus, in the middle of this prayer, "Jesus, it sounds like a great dream, but it's just not a reality, so you don't need to pray for it. Jesus, I know you're about to go to the cross, but this is idealistic fancy. It's not possible."

Ladies and gentlemen, it is possible. Jesus died to make it possible. Jesus believed it was possible. He wouldn't have prayed for it if He didn't think it could happen, if He didn't think it was His Father's will. It is entirely possible. To be united as a people of God, no question it's possible. The question is, are we going to settle for saying, "Well, that's just too idealistic; it'll never happen"? Or are we going to pursue this kind of unity around the glory of Christ with everything we've got?

Don't miss it. To tolerate disunity, or to in any way promote disunity in the people of God, around the glory of Christ, is to be fundamentally at odds with the very character of God Himself. For two people, in whom the glory of Christ dwells to be at enmity with each other, when they are sharing life with the same God, makes God look schizophrenic. But He's not. He brings His children together. That is the whole purpose of why Jesus is praying this, "that they may be one as we are one."

That doesn't mean we throw out truth, and we throw out anything that would unite us together just so we can all get along. That's not the picture. We have to unite around something, but what we unite around is the glory of Christ, the truth of Christ, the mercy of Christ, the love of Christ, and the character of Christ that is put into each of us. This needs to be taken very seriously in the church. It's why we walk this life together, because of the pattern of our Creator, because we want to display His glory.

The plan of creation ...

Now, let's stay here in Genesis 1 and 2 for a second, and let's look at the second one, the plan of creation. The plan of creation. When you come to Genesis 1, let's read verse 27 together. God has had this conversation, "*Let us make man in our image...*" So, what does He do? Look at verse 27, "*God created man in his own image, in the image of God, he created him; male and female, he created them.*" Verse 28, "*God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.'*"

So, what happens is God creates man in His own image. Now, what does that mean? We're drawn to that at this point in Genesis 1. When you study the rest of the chapter and before this, you see that all the things God created, the animals and the plants, it said He created them according to their own kinds. However, man He created different from every other kind. Man He created in His image.

What does that mean? Obviously, it doesn't mean that God looks like you or me. John 4 makes clear that God is Spirit. So, what does it mean to be made in the image of God, for us to have the image of God? I think two primary truths unfold in Genesis 1 and 2 for what it means to be made in His image. Number one, God created us to enjoy life in Him...to enjoy life in Him. From the very beginning of how we were created, we see a picture of the fact that we were created to relate to Him, and He blessed us, and all throughout Genesis 2, you get to verse 4, and you basically see what some people have thought, "Well, this is a whole second creation story. What is this?" Well, it's not a whole new creation story. It's the same creation story told from a different perspective, and it's basically focusing on the relationship between God and man and woman.

All throughout Genesis 2, you see man and woman enjoying God and walking with God. You get to the very end of the chapter, and it says, "*The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*" They were enjoying life in God, and everything was good, right? Well, not exactly. Not everything was good. Genesis 3 is when sin comes into the world, but even before sin came into the world, there was something that was not good. Did you realize that?

Look at Genesis 2:18 with me. Listen to what it says. In the middle of Genesis 2, it says, *"The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'"* Now, that kind of strikes us when we get to the middle of Genesis 2 because up until this point, everything God created...God saw what he made on the first day, and He said it was good. The second day, God saw what He had made, and it was good. Third day, good. Fourth day, good. Everything is all good. You get to the end of creating man, and it says at the end of the Genesis 1, it was very good. Everything was good.

However, then you get to verse 18, and it says, *"The LORD God said..."* Now in this picture, you've got Adam, but you don't have Eve yet. *"The LORD God said, 'It is not good..."* Now, what is that about? Does that mean God likes women better than men? Is that what He's saying here? What is not good about this picture? What's not good is that man is alone.

Now, don't miss this. Man is in perfect relationship with His Creator right now. No sin in the world whatsoever. However, there's still something missing. You catch that? We were created to enjoy life in Him, but that's not all it means to be made in His image. We were created as relational beings, which means we were created, not just to enjoy life in Him, but to experience life with each other. That is good, for man not to be alone, but to have someone with Him. So, God creates woman. God created us to enjoy life in Him and to experience life with each other.

I think we miss this sometimes, even in the church, and I've said it before. When people talk about loneliness they feel and they experience, even in the church, we oftentimes say something like...or I'll say something like, "You know, God has created us all with a God-shaped void in our lives that is only intended to be filled by Him. So, we will be lonely apart from letting Him fill that void in our life." I believe that's true. All over Scripture, I believe that's true.

However, at the same time, it seems, based on Genesis 2, that we're also created with this human-shaped void in us, so to speak, that God has created us with, that He desires to fill with relationships with other people. This is a void that your money just can't fill. No matter how many achievements you have, they can't fill it. Your job can't fill it, and your busyness can't fill it. No matter how many books you read, you can't fill it. There's something in us, in our DNA, so to speak, that only relationships with others can fill. That's what Genesis 2 is teaching.

Listen to some practical pictures of that. There was a Harvard study that was done that tracked 7,000 lives over a period of nine years. Listen to this...7,000 lives over 9 years...and they were basically studying people's health as it related to their relationships, their social connections. Listen to this: The study found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections. Three times more likely to die. They even found, listen to this, that people who had bad health habits...smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use...but strong social ties...bad health habits, but strong social ties, they lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits, but were isolated.

One writer said...basically, what they were saying is, "It's better to eat Twinkies with friends than to eat broccoli alone." Some of you "Amened" that. The Harvard researcher, that's not what he had said, but the Harvard researcher did say that if you belong to no groups, but you decide to join one...people who belong to no groups and decide to join one...listen to this...you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half. Isn't that interesting? Join a small group because your life depends on it this morning. I mean, that is fuel for this pastor right here, okay? Join a small group because your life is dependent on it.

Listen to this: Another study, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 276 volunteers were infected with a virus that produces the common cold. 276 people volunteered to be infected with this virus that produces the common cold. People with strong emotional connections did four times better fighting off illness than those who were more isolated. These people, people with strong relational connections, were less susceptible to colds, had less viruses, and produced significantly less...now, this is what it said; the study said this...produced significantly less mucus than relationally isolated subjects. I'm not making this up. This is what this study said. If you join a small group, you will have less snot.

Maybe, just maybe, God has created us and designed us to need each other. Maybe there is something in us that craves experiencing life together. No matter how deep of a shot that is to our pride that says, "We can do this on our own", I think Scripture teaches differently. God designed us to enjoy life in Him and to experience life with other. So, we know we need community. We see community in who God is, and we need community in how we're created.

The precedent of Christ ...

Now, come back with me to John 17, and I want us to begin to think about the precedent of Christ that He set, because when He prays this prayer in John 17...He is praying for a small group...the predominant focus in His prayers is for a small group of men, twelve disciples, that He had spent the majority of His life with. Now, we know that Jesus' goal, His desire, was the whole world to come to know His Father's love. We know that. In fact, you look through John 17, especially the last half of this, you will see Jesus mention the word "world" over ten times. The world is on His heart. He wants the world to know the Father's love.

However, what's interesting is the way He would bring the world to know the Father's love was through pouring His life into these twelve guys. Don't miss it. Jesus' method for reaching the multitudes was a small group of men. That's the precedent that Christ set. He wants to reach the multitudes and the masses, and He says, "I'm going to do it through a small group of men." This was Jesus' strategy. It was a small-group strategy.

You come to John 17, you read through this chapter, not one time does He mention one miracle He performed. Not one time does He mention the multitudes or the masses of people who followed Him. However, forty times...forty times He mentions the men that God had given Him out of the world, that He had poured His life into. What does that say to us? Jesus had a strategy, and it revolved around these guys, a small group of twelve, and I would even say, a small group of twelve that was split down into small groups beyond that.

You've got it in your notes there. I want you to look at it with me. We're not going to have time to look at all these different passages, but you go to Matthew 10, Mark 3, Luke 6, and Acts 1, you will see in each of those texts...you will see a listing of the disciples. Each time you see them listed, you'll see the names that are in bold mentioned at the exact same point, and the others under them kind of jumbled around. It's really interesting. I would encourage you, go back in your own time in the Word this week and just circle, maybe, those three names, because they're always at the same place.

Every time you see the disciples listed, you see Peter at the top. Peter was the ringleader, so to speak. He was the guy who was always stepping out, the guy with the foot-shaped mouth. It was Peter; that's him. He was always at the front. He also said some pretty sharp things. Then, what happens is that after you see Peter mentioned, you have Andrew, James, and John mentioned underneath him, in different ways, at different times. All these guys,

pretty dynamic, impulsive guys. You don't get the nickname, "Sons of Thunder", for nothing. These guys would run after things. They're very ambitious.

Then, you'd see Philip. You'd see his name mentioned over and over again. Below him, in those different listings, you'd see Bartholomew and Thomas and Matthew mentioned in different ways. Philip, leading a group of...when you look at the makeup of these guys, pretty philosophical men. Then, you get down to James, son of Alphaeus, and you see him mentioned in the same place, and you see under him just a whole group of political revolutionaries: Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas Iscariot.

These guys, even the twelve, seemed to have been even subdivided into smaller groups, and we know that for sure from the testimony of Jesus' life. There were times often when He would pull aside Peter, James, and John, and sometimes Andrew, but most often, Peter, James, and John. He would take those three guys to do things that nobody else did. They went up on the mountain for the transfiguration. They would go into this person's home to see this person rise from the dead or be healed of their sickness. Jesus would oftentimes have conversations with just that small group of guys.

So, Jesus...don't miss this...Jesus, God in the flesh, wanting to make the glory of the Father known in the whole world, chose 12 guys, and then brought it down to even smaller, to a group of three other guys and said, "This is going to be the method that I use for changing the world." Isn't that weird? That's unusual. I mean, there are businessmen and women all across this room. Does this look like the best organizational structure to change the world? Are these the most potential, likely candidates for changing the world?

Somewhere along the way, Jesus got the idea that the most effective strategy for turning the world upside down for the glory of His Father was through a small group of men, and I've just got to believe that He knew what He was doing. I've got to believe that no matter how much business sense we have, 2,000 years later, that we still don't have a better strategy than this. I am convinced, ladies and gentlemen, and you've got it on the back side of your notes, that people, not programs, are God's method for winning the world to Himself. People, not programs, are God's method for winning the world to Himself. That was the picture; that was what Jesus did, don't miss it, from one to three to twelve. By the time you get to Acts 1, you've got 120 people, and in the next chapter, you've got thousands. The next chapter, thousands and thousands, and eventually millions and millions.

Eugene Peterson said this; I love this quote: "Jesus invested 90 percent of His time with twelve Jewish men so that He could reach all Americans." Think about that with me. "Jesus invested 90 percent of His time with twelve Jewish men so that He could reach all Americans." You say, "What do you mean, Dave? Americans? We weren't around at that point." Exactly. Jesus lived for the multitudes through a few men, and He knew, He poured His life into these guys. They would reproduce spiritual life in others through walking together, sharing life together, and reproduce spiritual in others more and more and more. 2,000 years later, you and I would be sitting here, singing the praises of Jesus Christ and God the Father. That is the picture. It was a small group, and it wasn't this revolutionary program He came up with. It wasn't all these crowds that He drew to Himself. He never built ushering in His kingdom on manipulating the crowds and bringing out armies and doing this or that.

In fact, whenever the crowds started to follow Him, He'd start talking about how they needed to drink His blood and eat His body, and they'd just go running away. The disciples, they're rolling their eyes, "Not the drink-your-blood speech again." However, He'd do it over and over again. In John 6, when He does that, everybody leaves, everybody except for the

disciples. He said, "Are you going to leave, too?" They said, "Who else are we going to go to? People think we're nuts already, we're stuck with you." They said, "To whom else should we go? You are the Christ. You are the Son of the Living God. We're with you."

Now, if twelve guys did that in John 6, and by Acts 17 they had turned the world upside down for the glory of Christ, what would happen if 4,000 people did that and said, "I'm going to give myself to your strategy. I'm going to pour myself into people and not new programs, and the result is going to be that we're going to make the glory of the Father known across this planet." That was Jesus' strategy: People, not programs.

We've got to guard this, because even small groups can become a program if we're not careful. However, the beauty of it is, in order for the New Testament church to grow, they didn't have to build larger buildings and pour personnel and resources into all new events and programs. Instead, they loved people. They shared the Word with people. They taught the Word to people. They served the world together and somehow figured out that Jesus knew what He was talking about. I pray that it would be the case in the church today. That was the precedent of Christ. He showed us why small groups are important.

The practice of the early church ...

How did that lead to what happened in the early church? I want you to see the practice in the early church, and I want to take you on a little tour. This is John, the end of the Gospels. Go with me over to Acts 2:46, and what I want to do is I just want to show you in a few verses the practice of the early church, and how the early church put this into action.

I'm convinced at this point, with the model that Jesus has set and the way He did ministry on this earth, that small groups...this is the point where I come to it, and I just don't think small groups are an option. I think they're necessary in the body of Christ at this point. If this is what Jesus did, then we need to rise up and say, "Okay, how can we do this?"

Look at Acts 2:46. Let's know what the early church did. This is the passage that we studied last Fall, and we looked at why it was important in the early church, but look at the picture here. Verse 46, *"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their..."* What? *"...in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."* How did they do that without a worship center? They did it by realizing that worship happens in our homes, and disciple-making happens in our homes. They met from house to house.

Fast forward to Acts 12. I'm just going to show you a few...Acts 12, look at verse 12. This is a time when Peter was in prison. "The church was earnestly praying to God for him" is what it says. However, how was the church praying? Did they gather together and organize a prayer service at the church? No, listen to verse 12. *"When this had dawned on [Peter], he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying."* Praying in the house together. They're doing church in their homes.

Fast forward to Acts 20. I'll just show you one more in the book of Acts. Acts 20:8. It's one of my favorite stories in the New Testament because it reminds me that Paul was also a long-winded preacher. I don't know why you think that's funny, but look in verse 7. Listen to this: *"On the first day of the week..."* Acts 20:7, *"...first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight."* See, be thankful, all right?

Verse 8, *"There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting."* They're meeting in this room together. They get together at this place. They don't meet out in public, even, sometimes. They're meeting in this room. Even when Paul, all throughout these missionary journeys he goes on, he'll go into the synagogue and preach, but most often he'll get kicked out, and he'll have to start meeting in homes and different places, different meeting rooms that they can find.

Let me show you two more examples. Keep going to the right and go to Romans. Look at Romans. Go all the way to Romans 16, very last part of Romans. I want to show you, just the first two letters after the book of Acts and how they emphasize this. Look at Romans 16. We almost browsed over this because it doesn't seem like that big a deal to us, but it's very different than the way we do church often. Listen to Romans 16:5. He's talking about Priscilla and Aquila, and he says, *"Greet also the church that meets at their..."* What? *"...their house."* The church meets at a house.

Now, go one more book over. Go to the end of 1 Corinthians. Look at 1 Corinthians 16:19, and we're going to see this thing repeated again. This is the picture of the New Testament church that we're getting. Look at this...don't miss this...1 Corinthians 16:19, *"The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house."*

Now, here's the deal. When we see Jesus in John 17 praying, "I have given them the glory that you gave me," that doesn't seem like a big deal to us when we hear that today, but it was a huge deal because, up until that point in John 17, everything in the Old Testament picture was built around encountering the glory of God, where? At the temple. You have to go to the temple to encounter the glory of God. You want to see the glory of God, you want to experience the glory of God, then you go to the temple.

However, then what happens is, Jesus prays, "I'm going to give my glory to them, and my glory's going to be in them." So, as a result, when you get to the book of Acts and the letters that follow, it's not about going to the temple to encounter the glory of God. Now the glory of God dwells in the hearts and lives of this people called the church, and wherever they meet together, whether it's in a home or a random meeting room, there you've got the glory of God dwelling. It's an amazing picture.

The problem was, it didn't take long to go back to the old way of doing things. This is an oversimplification of church history, I know, but about 250 A.D., Cyprian of Carthage begins to say that we need to distinguish in the church between clergy and laity. We'll have normal Christians who are lay people, and we'll have clergy who are the "Super Christians", who really lead in the mission. As a result, a few years later, in 313 A.D., Constantine legalizes Christianity and opens the way for churches to build buildings for the clergy to work in.

So, now the clergy have a place to work. You progress further, and you come into monasticism, and now we create a place for the clergy to live, isolated from everybody else. You fast forward even to more recent history, and you come to the Industrial Revolution, and now the clergy run a business called the church. You even fast forward to today, and you hear people all across the place in our church culture, talking about what church you go to, going to church, when we fail to realize that every time those words come out of our mouths, we miss the entire point of the New Testament.

Go to church? Who are you? You're the church. Do we really think this building makes us a church? We are the church, ladies and gentlemen. We don't have to have externals to make

us the church. The glory of Christ dwells in each and every one of us. We are the church, and we need...we need to change the way we talk about the church.

I know...I'll be the first to admit, phrases like this come out of my mouth all the time, and my poor wife...this has really just been convicting for me. So, the other day we were driving along the road, and it's just not easy being a pastor's wife. She was...we were driving past a building with the word "Church" in front of it, and so she says to Caleb and says, "Look, Caleb, there's a church." I was like, "It's not a church." I said, "Do you realize how theologically unbiblical that statement is?" She's like, "Just telling our kid, you know, what that is, and he's okay." "I know. If you want to say, 'There's the church,' you point to me, and you point to you. You point to the people around. We have a relationship with Christ. They are the church." She was like, "Okay. Back off."

So, here's what I want us to do. I really...this...we speak so unbiblically about the church, and we need to work on this. I really, really believe we do. I don't think it's just a matter of semantics. I think we've come to think of the church as this building, and this is terribly misguided. So, I want to encourage us to start to think, every time we say "the church," that we use the church in the right way, that we talk about the people of God, okay? We've got freedom to...maybe not quite as sharply as I rebuked my poor wife...to say, when somebody says, "Hey, are we going to go to church Sunday?" You say, "You know, actually, you don't go to church; you are the church," and to begin to change the way we talk about church. Does that sound all right?

I'll go ahead and let you know, I know I'll say things in front of us that, you know...just call me out on it. Just yell out, "You're the church." Okay? Just let me have it.

However, I really think this is key, because here's the deal: The Church at Brook Hills, if we are confined to a building, we'll never impact the world for the glory of Christ. Or, if the church is a place in a geographic location, we'll never experience...never experience what God has designed for us as His people. Because if everything, even small groups, will have to meet at the church...well, if that's the case, then we have to build more small-group space everywhere. Well, what if, though...what if we don't have a space problem because there is small-group space represented in homes all across this room where the church can meet, where the church can gather.

Now, 2,000 people don't have to go there, but five, ten, fifteen, twenty can...will be the church in your home. What an incredible picture. No walls on that kind of church. You're impacting the world now, and that leads us to a couple of thoughts about the early church we're not going to be able to unpack completely, but I just...I want to make sure these are out there, because they're the teachings of the New Testament.

Small groups, believers gathering together in homes, were key to their sanctification. They were key to their sanctification. The bulk of New Testament teaching...now the sanctification, that's a two dollar theological word, obviously, that means "holiness" or "growing in Christ." The way the New Testament is written, the way the New Testament teaches us to be holy is predominantly through, what? All these books are mostly, what? They're letters. Letters written to whom? Bodies of believers. Everything about how to be holy and how to grow in the likeness of Christ is written in corporate context to the Church in Ephesus, to the Church in Corinth. This is how you grow in Christ.

Romans 6:1-23, an exhortation, encouragement to holiness, all in a corporate context to the Church in Rome. The last half of Ephesians, Ephesians 4:17 or 18 and following. What you've got is a picture of challenging the church to holiness. In Hebrews 10:19-25, you've

got this warning that is stern in the book of Hebrews that says, "Don't give up meeting with others because you need to spur one another on towards Christ." Don't miss it: The teaching of the New Testament is this, "You will stall in your walk with Christ. In your journey with God, you will stall if you are not growing with other believers." Christianity was never intended to be lived in isolation. Never. Man, how easy we miss this. This is your big burden because we know the way we've designed...even this whole picture, it's possible for people to come into this room, sit here, sing and study the Word, and walk out of here completely anonymous and completely detached from people.

You know, I'd even take it to the other end of the extreme. It's possible to be involved in every single thing this church does, these people do, called The Church at Brook Hills, to be active in doing this, and this, and this, and to get so busy that along the way, you're relationally isolated from everybody, and you feel lonely, even amidst the busyness of the church. Do you think that's possible? If that's the case, we will stunt our growth in Christ. We need each other. We don't just need personal prayer and personal worship and personal study. We need it corporately to grow in the image of Christ.

Small groups were key to their sanctification and were crucial to their multiplication. They were crucial to their multiplication. In order to expand and to multiply from house to house...isn't that a great picture? From house to house to house to house? That's why I remember...I remember that one of the first times...first two times I was with house churches in Asia, in settings where it's illegal for people to build buildings, and so they have to meet from home to home to home. I was with two house churches the first time I went there. By the time I had gone back, five months later, they had grown to eight house churches. They had quadrupled. They were multiplying. Within a month, they sent an e-mail back to me. They said, "David, we've led over 100 people in our villages to faith in Christ. What do we do now?" What a great problem. They were multiplying, and they were multiplying without all the external things that we sometimes become so dependent on. That was the practice of the early church.

The potential of the church today ...

All that leads us to just think with me this morning about the potential of the church today. If this has been the pattern of our Creator from the very beginning, and His design in creation, and this is what Christ modeled for us, and this is what the early church was doing, just think with me. I think one of the overarching truths in John 17 is this: Biblical community and biblical mission are inseparable. They go together.

God has designed it so that we would experience life and community together. Please don't miss this. This is where it all comes down. God has designed it so that we, in this room, will experience life, community together in a way that accomplishes His mission.

So, how do those two things come together? I think that is the crux of what it means to make disciples. It means that we share life with each other in our journeys with Christ, and we do it in a way that we're sharing the Word and showing the Word and teaching the Word and serving the world together. We experience community as we participate in mission together. They go together.

So, if that happens in disciple-making, then we need to ask ourselves...we want to give ourselves to the most-effective avenue for disciple-making to occur, bottom line. If that's the case, biblical community, biblical mission inseparable, then we want to give ourselves the most-effective avenue for disciple-making to occur. When you think about small groups, biblically, theologically, practically think about small groups, number one, they are biblical. Jesus did them; the early church did them. They met together, walked together. There's

only so much influence you can have in a class, so to speak, of fifty people. It's not completely sharing life...or more...that you have when you walk together with small groups. I mean, Jesus went from twelve down to three; it was important to Him biblically.

Small groups are simple. I think we have such a tendency to complicate things in the church. If we're not careful, we will follow after everybody's agenda in the church except for God's agenda in the church, and we've got to guard that with everything we've got. The beauty of it is, you don't have to have more money and more buildings to develop relationships and to love people and to make disciples. You're not dependent on those things anymore. That means that small groups are reproducible.

If our impact as The Church at Brook Hills...if our impact as a church is dependent on how many people we can get inside this building for a couple hours a week, then we will never impact the world for the glory of Christ. However, if our impact as a church is built upon how many of us from this building can go out and make disciples across Birmingham and in all nations, then there is no limit to what God will do to use us to show His glory. Small groups are reproducible, and small groups are cross-cultural. Whether it's in house churches in Asia, where it's illegal to gather together, or in Birmingham, where it's popular to gather together, small groups can make disciples cross-culturally.

All that leads to this: We want to give ourselves to the most intentional advancement of the gospel to the whole world. I'll be honest with you as your pastor. I want you and I to experience the depths of what biblical community God has designed us for. However, that's not even the primary reason I want us to do small groups. I want us to do small groups because I want us to advance the gospel to the whole world, and I just don't think the New Testament church would stand for the lack of intentional gospel advancement that has become status quo for many of us in the church today. So, I want to urge you to be a part of small groups that are making disciples. If not for your own sake, for the sake of people who have never heard the name of Jesus.

So What Now?

This week ...

So, what now? Here are two challenges for you. So, we start off this series and move into the next few weeks, challenge number one is this week, begin considering how you will get involved in a small group of the church. In your Celebration Guide, there was a pull-out portion that says on the front, "You know who you are. Get down with the new lingo." I want to draw your attention to that. Next week, you're going to begin to have the opportunity to get involved in a small group. I just want you, over the next week, to begin thinking and praying through what that might look like in your life, in your family's life, in your marriage. What would that look like? I hope that over the next few weeks, whether through the Word, or through some of these dramas, we'll just kind of dispel some of the thoughts that are out there whenever we hear the possibility of getting involved in a small group.

I'll be honest. I can't guarantee that every single person's small group experience over the next couple of months will be flawless and absolutely perfect. I can't guarantee that. I don't think anybody can. However, I can guarantee it's worth it in the end, in light of what we've seen in Scripture. I want you to begin considering what that might look like in your life.

Today ...

Second, I want to give you a challenge today, and that's a challenge that I want to give to every member of The Church at Brook Hills, and to be a member of this church is to have united in covenant with this church, to be walking with this church, accomplishing the mission of the church, and this challenge is for every member. I want to challenge you this morning to step up and lead a small group. Without exception, I know there are all kinds of things that come to your mind when you hear that. "Well, I'm not a good teacher. That's just not my deal." While I recognize completely that in Scripture there is a special gift that is given to teachers, I also recognize that in the Great Commission, every single follower of Jesus Christ in this room is commanded to go and be baptized and to teach. That means simply sharing what Christ is teaching you with others.

You don't have to...this is not teaching a class of 150 people or lecture style. This is sharing the Word with people, teaching them what Christ is teaching you. We want to equip you to do teaching that every single one of us, as a believer, is designed to do.

Many of us think, when you hear, "Well, step up and lead a small group," you think, "You know, I'm just...I'm at a point where I need to learn and not lead. I just need to receive for a while." That sounds good, until you realize that the best way to receive is by leading, and the best way to learn is by leading. So, if you really want to learn, then that would be the answer for you, stepping up and leading a small group. Because as soon as you step up and take responsibility for leading others in disciple-making, what does it cause you to do? I have to do this in my own life, like really. We think at that point, "Well, I'm just not...I'm just not where I need to be yet." I think that's a lie from the Adversary.

When will we be where we need to be? When are you going to arrive at the place where now you are fully a mature follower of Christ, and now you can lead a small group? Can I be honest with you? I'm not there yet. If we continue to wait until we are there, we'll continue to let the mission of Christ bypass us. People say all the time, "This is a big church. This is a lot of people. How can I...how am I needed? How would I be used?" This is exactly how. It's not about having this position or that position. This is the primary position at The Church at Brook Hills, making disciples of all nations.

So, I want to encourage you, especially those of you who have been involved in some form of small group over the last year, two years, many of you many more years, who have been sitting and participating in a small group, it's time for you to step up and lead.

I want to encourage you. There are so many small groups, and so many of you gifted by the Holy Spirit of God with so many different gifts, equipped with the Word of God, and commissioned by the power of God to make disciples of all nations, that have let the lies of the Adversary keep you on the sidelines. I want to invite you to resist being a spectator any longer and to rise up and be a participant in the mission, leading out His church to make disciples of all nations. That's my challenge for you.

If you would be willing to take that challenge...I know you don't know all the details what that involves at this point, but if you'd at least be willing to say, "Okay, I'm open to this possibility," then I want to invite you to take that Celebration Guide, that tear-off portion...on the back, there's an area for prayer requests...I want to invite you just to write the word "lead" on the back of there. There's a table out in the back. You can get more information if you want at the Connect table, but there's an opportunity.

I want to make this as easy as possible for you, to just write "lead" on the back of that prayer request card, if you'd at least like to find out more information, open to finding out

more information about that. Make sure to put your name on the other side. Don't turn it in anonymously. That would be the ultimate cop out, all right? "God, if you really want me to do it, you'll show them who I am." Well, let's just...let's go ahead and take care of that for Him.

God, we praise you for inviting us into the divine community, and for creating us to enjoy you and to experience life with each other. God, we want to know this kind of community as your church, and we want to accomplish the mission you've put in front of us. So, we pray over these next few weeks, as we talk about small groups, as we get involved in them, as people all across this faith family rise up and say, "I want to lead out in this mission," God, I pray that you would show yourself strong on behalf of your people, and you would use us to make disciples of all nations, and that, just as a group of twelve guys in the New Testament turned the world upside down, I pray that there would be a multitude of groups like that all across this church, who will rise up and shake the nations for your glory, shake Birmingham for your glory. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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