A Theology of Small Groups

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Whenever the practical precedes the theological, a danger exists. When the foundation laid in a discussion is a “good” idea based on the experience of human beings, the discussion of God’s ideas found in Scripture and in his interaction with the church is either ignored completely or used secondarily to support the original idea. Blindly following such practical ideas without giving attention to the questions and challenges of God’s word will void the idea of the life and success of God’s eternal purposes. This article offers questions and challenges to the good, practical idea of small groups in the work of the church by studying larger theological issues which are able to give increased substance to the vision and purpose of small groups.

One “proof” for beginning small groups in a congregation must be summarily dismissed. The church today should not have small groups simply because the early church had them. The empty argument of historical imitation has been rejected in discussions about the covering of women’s heads, foot-washing, supernatural gifts of the Spirit, and other subjects. If God’s purposes continue throughout time and small groups fit into those purposes, then they will naturally continue when God’s eternal purposes are examined and followed. However, one cannot make the connection that they did it then; therefore, God must have always wanted congregations to have small groups. The mention of small groups within Scripture simply becomes prooftexts for practicalism rather than the foundational word for the church’s purpose, life, and ministry.

How can Scripture, then, take its place at the beginning of the discussion? Scripture attests to the story of God and his interaction with the world which he created. The story must not simply give answers to human inquiry, but it must also establish the questions. The purpose of

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1 John W. Ellas (Church Growth through Groups: Strategies for Varying Levels of Christian Community [Searcy, Arkansas: Resource Publications, 1990] 125–28) seems to prefer small groups meeting in homes simply because that is what happened before the reign of Constantine.
theology is to interact with the story to discover the right questions, and a theological discussion of small groups will attempt to find the right questions to which small groups would or would not be a right answer.

Presently, several writers are beginning to ask theological questions about the biblical concept of community and the place of small groups within it, which deserve to be recognized and discussed for what they really are—only the beginning questions of a proper theological discussion of small groups.

Small Groups and a Theology of Community

A theological basis for community will take into account the biblical story. Any basis for community must begin with God. God is trinity in community. He created male and female in community, who would increase their community through children. He established his community Israel. He redefined that community through Jesus Christ to accept the entire world and all peoples. The mandates of God for human behavior are directed toward life in his community. God will someday bring together his entire community which spans both distance and time, and he will establish a new Jerusalem for his people to dwell. In essence, God is the author and perfecter of community. He establishes its boundaries, its identity, its membership, and its future.²

Developing a theology of community does present a problem. The problem is not its discovery of God as author and perfecter of community, but an incorrect use of that discovery. A pragmatist interprets the theology as what to do: If God builds community, then we, as his disciples, need to build community.³ One who studies personal development interprets the theology as what to become: God has shown us that, in order to become fully ourselves, we must risk handing ourselves over to a community of

³ Robert Banks, thinking practically, joins his theology of God as embodiment and creator of community with his definition of community: “My own working definition of community . . . is of a group of people who seek to develop a Christianly informed ‘common’ life, through regular verbal and nonverbal ‘communication,’ leading to the development of real ‘communion’ with one another and God” (“The Biblical Approach,” 19). Jeffrey Arnold also takes the pragmatic approach in terms of “Building the Church,” The Big Book on Small Groups (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 27–38.
people who will help us grow. Instead, a biblical concept of community calls us to identify what we already are: God has established his community, and he has made us a part of it.

If God is the designer of all community, then how can human beings propose to create community by meeting in a certain place within a group of a certain size, knowing that God’s community of people exists whether the assembled group is large or small, whether people know one another or not? God’s community is not humankind’s initiative, existing only as people place membership, grow closer, and engage in fellowship; instead, God’s community surrounds and claims people, and they begin to participate in the life of God’s fellowship. God’s people are not mandated to be in community; it is a prerequisite to all mandates that one is already in the community of God.

Therefore, if developing community is not a reason for initiating small groups, or any other function of the church, then what would be a theology of small groups that would assume an existing community of God? In essence, the right question should begin with God’s community,

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4 While denying that community is not made for what an individual can extract from it, Julie A. Gorman still places the person as the deciding factor for God’s decision to make community: “I do not lose my identity when in community—I find it. I am uniquely me in the presence of others who need me to complement and fulfill the total picture we become together. Neither of us takes on the other’s identity. Together we become what we could not become alone. It is God’s unique plan that such be so” (“Close Encounters—The Real Thing,” Christian Education Journal [Spring 1993] 15). See also Jeffrey Arnold, “Making Disciples,” in The Big Book, 13–26.


6 Vincent P. Branick (The House Church in the Writings of Paul [Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989] 134–36) sees a negative change in the church and its theology after house churches disappeared and larger congregations were established with buildings. Small groups will not receive the desired rationale by simply regretting the Constantinian shift in church history and the establishment of large churches.

7 God’s community is simply called to participate in what he has already started, says Paul D. Hanson, The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986) 467.

not individuals who want to be in community—not why should individuals join a small group, but why should a smaller group come out of the larger, already existing community? Why should a part separate from the whole? The right question suggests studying the theological issue of election, or calling, as God chooses and empowers his community.

**Small Groups and a Theology of Election**

The biblical story cannot be told by dismissing the concept of election. God has always set apart people in order to accomplish his desire of reconciling the entire creation to himself. God chooses nations, individuals, and specific groups, following certain election themes. In order to find the value of small groups, one must determine how they fit within God’s overall process of election and also how they fill a specific place in that process.

God first chooses a specific nation which will be his community. The initial call is to Abraham: “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen 12:2). The call is fulfilled as the Israelites grow in captivity in Egypt and God rescues them to be his own: “You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Exod 19:5). The election does not show God’s singular love for Israel, but a love for the entire world: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3); “Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod 19:5–6). Israel fulfilled its role, grudgingly, when God developed his church to include both Jews and Gentiles (Gal 3:28) with the same promise: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). The community of the church is waiting for its purpose to become entirely fulfilled according to the prophecy:

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations (Rev 21:24–26).

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God elects his larger community, whether the nation of Israel or the church, in order that he might bless the entire world.

God not only elects large communities, but he also calls individuals out of his community: Isaiah (Isa 6), Nehemiah (Neh 1 and 2), Paul (Gal 1:15–16), and many others. Jesus himself is called God's chosen (Luke 9:35), and accompanying his election is a vision of how he blesses his larger community of Israel and, as the fulfillment of Israel, the entire world: "My eyes have seen your salvation . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30–32). Fulfilling his word, God vindicated the crucified Jesus and made him "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Rev 19:16).

In addition to electing entire communities and individuals, God also calls forth smaller groups according to his plan. An OT example is the choosing of the Levitical tribe to be priests for Israel (Num 3–4). They bless the nation of Israel by performing the tabernacle (and later temple) services for the entire people (Num 3:7). The Levites are separated into even smaller clans to perform different tabernacle responsibilities which God called each to do (Num 4). In essence, the tribe of Levi protects the rest of the Israelites from the wrath of God which comes from handling holy things (Num 1:53; 3:10). However, protecting the Israelites does not mean that they never feel the blessing of God through the Levites. During Babylonian exile, the priests continued to study the law, protecting the holy things of God. After Zerubbabel and Nehemiah led the Israelites back to Judea, the Levites, led by Joshua and Ezra, reestablished Israel's worship in the new temple and reintroduced the law:

They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. . . . Also . . . the Levites helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Neh 8:1–8)

The account continues to describe how the Levites helped the people participate again in the festivals of the law. God elected the Levites to bless Israel with holiness in a renewed life.

A NT example of God’s election of a smaller group is the selection of the apostles. Jesus receives them not because they enrolled or because a group would be better than being alone, but because he knew that God had called them: "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word" (John 17:6). In the apostles’ election God had a
vision for them to bless the world from which he had called them: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). In fact, the blessing instilled in the apostles would have far-reaching effects:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. (John 17:20–21)

The fulfillment of the group’s vision, as the representative of Christ, is found in Acts. The apostles first recommissioned the Israelites to their election as a blessing to the nations, beginning on the Day of Pentecost:

Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." (Acts 2:38–39)

Next, the apostles themselves carried the gospel to “all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). God elected the small group of apostles to empower his community as it began a whole, new life.

Whether God elected a large community, an individual, or a smaller group, similar characteristics could be found in each.

1) God set apart a group or person according to his good pleasure. He established traits such as circumcision, priestly garments, authority, baptism, a cruciform life, and even persecution, so that they might be identified as being set apart.

2) The elect were chosen to ultimately bless what they had been called out of. The Israelite nation (or apostolic church) was called from the world to bless the world. An individual or a smaller group was called from the larger community in order to bless the nation or church.

3) The elect had different functions. The called might have a prophetic function—to call the world or community to repentance. The

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elect might also have a priestly function—to contain what is holy and administer it to the world or community at the proper time.

4) The called had a time of training and maturing. The Israelites had to wait for Christ to bless the world. The Levites preserved and studied the law and temple services until the end of the exile. The apostles spent three years with Jesus before he left.

5) To fulfill their purpose, the elect would go back into what they had been called out of, whether into the community or the world. The called would lose their separateness to create something new. They were accepted, or they were rejected and even persecuted.

6) Finally, God would fulfill the purpose of election, making a new community or a whole, new world through his elect. Repentance of Israel did occur through the prophets. Jerusalem was rebuilt through Nehemiah. The apostles did begin a movement that would be felt in every nation of the earth. God still waits to vindicate his community, the church, by reconciling all creation unto himself.

Small groups, as a part of God’s overall process of election, will share in the above characteristics. God will call a small group out of the church. The small group must have a vision of how the group can bless the entire church. The group will have either a prophetic or priestly function. The small group will spend a time of preparation and growth in order to accomplish its purpose. The small group will return to the church in order to challenge or to impart a clearer view of God’s holiness. God will ultimately make the church something new by working through the efforts of the group, whether they are accepted or rejected. Is God presently electing groups to make his people new, or are ministers using groups to make individuals better?

Even though small groups do follow a biblical pattern of election with other size groups and functions, they also have their own niche in the biblical story. Groups seem to be called out of a larger community in order to empower God’s community to move into a new time. Prophetic individuals normally point to a time when God will make things new, and they may even call for that time to begin. However, small groups actually empower that transition into the new situation, new mission, or new age. When God organized his people into the Israelite nation at the foot of Mount Sinai, he elected the smaller group of Levites in order to administrate the center of the nation, the abiding place of God in the tabernacle. When God brought his people back from Babylonian exile in order to reestablish the nation, the Levites again directed the study of law and temple services to demonstrate the people’s center. When God opened his community to admit all nationalities, he elected the apostles in order
to challenge the people of Israel and embody the life of the ascended Jesus Christ. Could God be calling small groups out of his church today because he is moving his church through transition into a new age, a new stage of life?

Applications

A good theology is never accomplished until it enhances or challenges the life of the church. A theology of small groups, founded on the biblical concept of election, does have implications for the church, a few of which can be explained.

First, sign-up sheets and/or placement assignments must become obsolete, along with the establishment of churchwide small group programs. A theology of election says that God will call certain people out according to the work he wants to accomplish with and on his people. Passing around participation without recognition of a calling inevitably cheapens the sacredness of the call and the effectiveness of God’s work within the church. Establishing small groups requires vision to see where God is specifically planting dreams in the hearts of people, such as increased evangelism, closer fellowship, better equipped young people, and closer listening to the Word. Around these priestly and prophetic visions, God will call certain people from the church in order to enact his will in the church. A minister will be one who waits and challenges the group of dreamers with specific plans and opportunities for carrying out the work of their calling. A minister might look more closely for God’s calling during times when the church is moving through transition into a new time.

Second, since a group is sent out from the church in order to bless the church with a specific gift, each small group deserves the blessing and recognition of the entire community. Activities such as community prayer, laying on of hands, a blessing, and charges to both the group and congregation should accompany the separation. The small group must understand its identity as a part of the whole body, and the congregation must understand its obligation to listen to and watch the group, to allow the group’s work to run its course throughout the body. A minister will not only empower the group to do its own work, but it will also empower the church to receive the blessing God is giving the body through the group.

Third, when the group gathers around a covenant, or contract, that covenant must primarily include the vision of why the group has been called out and how the group will bless the entire church. Inevitably, a correct understanding of vision, identity, and work will bring about
truthful relationships that have always characterized God’s elect (Exod 20:1–17; Acts 2:37–47).

While other applications would involve leadership, activities, times and places of meeting, the primary purpose of this article is to show that theology should determine who one is, as a part of God’s entire community and possibly as one called from that community into a small group which becomes the instrument of God’s blessing for the whole body.

Conclusion

Jesus gave a parable not of small groups, but of God’s placing within his people something small that will change it in its entirety:

And again he said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” (Luke 13:20–21)

Yeast has very distinctive properties which allow it to perform a distinctive service when mixed with flour. Yet the yeast does not stubbornly retain its independence from the flour so that it can move on to other flour mixes or explore its own possibilities apart from a particular dough mixture. Instead, the yeast is added, dispersed, and kneaded with the other ingredients until a new dough is formed and cooked, and its aroma fills the entire area and pleases the senses of the baker.

Like yeast, a small group does have distinctive tasks to accomplish; but also like yeast, a small group’s purpose will be fulfilled only when it loses itself within the church for the creation of a new community, who will participate in God’s blessing the entire world.