

Series: **Simplifying Church** – week 3

CDOBC – beginning on 2/5/17

Today's Title: "**Committed to Grow with Others**"

Step #3: Connect & Grow

*February 19, 2017 - Selected passages*

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**OBJECTIVE:** To help people realize the third step in following Christ is to connect and grow with other believers in small groups.

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### *Opening Prayer*

Band of brothers:

- Military - the deep bond forged in combat
- Sports - the deep connection with teammates in pursuit of a championship

These deep connections stand out because they're unique in our experience. We tend to protect our privacy.

- Our culture pursues sex - but not intimacy.
- Our culture has 'friends' and 'follow' each other on-line in social media - but there is no intimacy.
- We want relationships we can turn off - and click on a link when we want to engage.

This is a problem. We need intimate connections with others. We need deep and healthy relationships in our life.

### **Paul's deep connections with people**

One of the great examples we see of this bond / connection in the Church is the example we have in the letters of the Apostle Paul of his genuine and deep connection with believers throughout his ministry.

These believers were not simply workers who helped him spread the Gospel, they were dear friends.

There was a relationship which went beyond the work of ministry.

**Ephesians 4:3-6**

**3** “...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

**4** There is one body and one Spirit -- just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call --

**5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

**6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

We’re together in this.

In Paul’s letters, we see this deep connection he had with others.

**Romans 16:1-24** - he personally greets 35 people in these concluding verses.

**1 Corinthians 16:10-19** - 7 people are mentioned

**Colossians 4:7-18** - 10 people are mentioned - including a very personal comment: “Dear friend Luke, the doctor” (vs. 14)

**2 Timothy 4:9-22** - Paul shares some of the great pain in his heart. He mentions 17 people, and shares how some of them have hurt him badly - and when he was arrested and at his “...first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me.” (vs. 16)

**Titus 3:12-13** - 4 people mentioned

**Philemon** - 8 people mentioned - Paul’s most personal letter

Connecting with other believers has always been the pattern - the model for how we are supposed to relate to one another in the church.

The N.T. pattern is not for someone to believe in Christ, get baptized, and worship with a group of fellow Christians - and that's it. But this is what we see so often in the modern church.

No, there is more to it.

There is the bond of love - the bond of peace - the unity of the Body of Christ that must be expressed *from believers to other believers*.

We are a band of brothers and sisters - contending for the faith in a world that is opposed to Christ.

We are a team of ministers, working side-by-side, in the giftedness we have from Christ, to share the Gospel with the unsaved.

*Belief, baptism and worship is not the full extent of our calling.*

We are called to *connect* with other believers and *grow* with other believers.

The common misconception many Christians have is when they put their faith in Christ and obey Jesus' command to be baptized, and they begin attending a worship service, that the sermon heard each Sunday is sufficient for them to grow as a Christian.

That's like you and me trying to eat a meal on Sunday, thinking that is all the nourishment and exercise we need for our week to be healthy and strong.

Spiritually, you need more than a Sunday sermon to grow in your faith - and you need more encouragement and correction than I can give you on a Sunday morning.

Each of us needs to connect with other believers in the local church - and we need other believers in the church to connect with us to pray for us, and to encourage and correct us when needed.

As we work to simplify the ministry of the church - we've identified 5 steps which help us *reach people for Christ and help them grow in their faith*.

Step # 1 - Belief in Christ - followed by baptism

Step #2 - Commit to regular, public worship with God's people.

Step # 3 - Committed to grow with others - connecting and growing with others in small groups / connection groups.

We've considered the Apostle Paul's practice - as we see in many of his N.T. letters - his practice of connecting with other believers throughout his years of ministry.

Now I want us to look not only some of his writings in more detail - but the broader testimony of Scripture

which speaks to God's design in each of us to live in community - to connect with others and grow with others in the faith.

**We're created for connecting with others.**

This idea of connecting with others in the church is not some new idea - not some psychological technique devised by behaviorists to help us all get along - it's something God created in us - it's something in our relational DNA which has its roots in the nature of God Himself.

**Genesis 2:18**

"...the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone..."

The Triune God is in community with Himself - perfect, forever unified community. We are created in His image, and being in community with others is part of God's nature stamped on each of us.

*"Community is deeply grounded in the nature of God. It flows from who God is. Because He is community, He creates community. It is His gift of Himself to humans. Therefore, the making of community may not be regarded as an optional decision for Christians. It is a compelling and irrevocable necessity, a binding divine mandate for all believers at all times."*

Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, quoted in "Why Small Groups", by Carilyn Taketa - <http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2012/why-small-groups.html?paging=off>

## **Jesus modeled connecting with others**

We are not designed to live in isolation or autonomy.

How do I know? Well... we just read **Genesis 2:18** - and Jesus didn't live in isolation or autonomy.

If anyone was capable to do so - Jesus was. If isolation and independence was something we were supposed to do - Jesus would have modeled it for us. But Jesus surrounded Himself in relationships.

He had a wide circle of at least 70/72 disciples.

**Luke 10:1**

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of Him, two by two, into every town and place where He Himself was about to go.”

Nobody goes out alone!

We're more familiar with Jesus and His 12 disciples who were with Him throughout His public ministry, and later became the Apostles.

Within those 12, Jesus had 3 who were close to Him (Peter, James, John). These 3 were His inner circle. When Jesus walked up to what we refer to as the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-2), only Peter, James and John were with Him.

We're created for connecting with others - and Jesus modeled connecting with others - and we see:

**The early church connected with one another**

Small groups aren't mentioned in the Bible - they aren't commanded in the Bible - but we see them in operation throughout the N.T.

When the church began, we read in the book of Acts:

**Acts 2:42, 46a** (believers met in the Temple courts, and in homes)

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes...”

**Acts 5:42** (the work of the Apostles as the church was beginning)

“And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

**Acts 20:20** (Paul, meeting with the elders from Ephesus)

“...how I (Paul) did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house...”

In the early years of the Church, Christians were a persecuted minority throughout the Roman world. They didn't have the money, ability or the need to build larger buildings to gather in - and since most churches were very small, they met in homes. This was not a strategy - it was due to the political and cultural realities of the day. The first century was also a much more social, interactive culture than ours - so it was natural to meet in each other's homes.

**Romans 16:5** “Greet also the church that meets at their house.”

**Colossians 4:15** “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.”

**Philemon, vs. 2** “To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home.”

Most of the time, in the first few decades of the Church, each local church was a small group!

*“In our modern culture, small groups are often viewed merely as a program or a fellowship ministry within the church. But for the New Testament church, it was a way of life, encompassing every area of their lives. Their relationships with one another were critical to their pursuit of Jesus, their growth in Christ, and their witness to the Good News. It would be impossible to experience biblical community apart from spiritually significant, intentional relationships with other believers. Relational structures like small groups, therefore, are an integral part of "being" the church and not just "doing" church.”*

“Why Small Groups”, by Carilyn Taketa - <http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2012/why-small-groups.html?paging=off>

Today we’re mobile - we can travel miles to a central location - and we have money to erect buildings to meet in. These are blessings, but they come with a cost.

We’re very isolated from each other - we live in our own private and personal worlds - we drive into our garage and close the door before we get out of the car - and we enter our home and never interact with our neighbor. We come to church - sit in the same general



area of the sanctuary - greet the familiar faces around us and talk of the general things of life - and then we go home.

We've learned how to be very alone and isolated in a crowded space!

The early church knew the value of connecting people in healthy relationships and connecting people to the Bible. This is what Step #3 is all about - connecting people to other believers and connecting each person to the Bible.

This happened naturally for the early church due to the realities of their life - we must be more intentional about this in our historical and cultural context.

Small groups / connection groups connect us in relationship - and they connect us with the Bible, which is the ultimate purpose of small groups:

**We connect with others to grow in faith**

Connecting with other believers in the local church not only provides a social support for our life - but it's ultimate goal is to grow our faith.

**Proverbs 27:17**

"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another."

This is the primary point behind the 'One Another Commands' throughout the N.T.

The mission of the Church is a two-pronged mission:

- Evangelism (*reaching people for Christ*)
- Edification (*helping them grow in their faith*)

This is done through the teaching and preaching of the church leaders, but it's also done in the context of small groups - Christians living life together - sharing their joys and struggles with one another - praying for each other - helping each other - “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” (Romans 12:15)

Small groups are crucial for the health of our church!

Small groups are crucial for your spiritual growth!

In small groups (Connection Groups?) we see the “One Another Commands” lived out - put into practice. This is what should be happening in these small groups / connection groups. (See series: “Getting Along in the Church” - the One Another

Commands - April - Sept. 2015).

You can put the “One Another Commands” into 2 primary categories - the first is:

### **1) Tangible love and care for others**

I'm thinking of the commands which cover the relational side of church life.

Love, devotion, dependence on others, rejoicing and weeping in life's experiences, greeting, caring and serving each other, expressing kindness, compassion and encouragement to each other.

A greeting in the worship service is nice - necessary - but it is far short of what we're called to do.

**Galatians 6:2**

“Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

**1 Peter 4:8-10**

“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another...”

**Romans 12:10**

“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”

We're called to go much deeper with each other - and that cannot be done in a worship service because our focus here is vertical. Our priority here is to commune and fellowship with God and His truth - not one another.

*“Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful—Christian community is the final apologetic.”*

Francis Schaeffer, quoted in: “Why Small Groups”, by Carilyn Taketa - <http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2012/why-small-groups.html?paging=off>

Another reality in a church is the need to help each other when someone has a need.

In a small church - 100 people or less - the pastor probably knows many / most of the details of your life.

In larger churches (150+), the pastor is not able to keep up with everyone - and the pastor's role changes. He is no longer the shepherding pastor for everyone in the church - he becomes the shepherd to the various leaders who lead the various groups and ministries in the church.

As a church grows, giving appropriate care for the entire Body of Christ is ***not*** something the pastors can do - nor is it biblical for a church to expect the pastor(s) to be the care-givers for the entire church.

The pastor's job is "...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..." (Eph. 4:12)

I'm not as aware of what's going on in your life than those you meet with on a regular basis in a small group. You grow spiritually as you minister to one another - help each other in times of joy and in times of crisis. Spiritual growth is not simply an academic pursuit. If it were, the Pharisees of Jesus' day would have been the most spiritually mature people in the Gospel. But their knowledge was in their head - not in their heart. They didn't practice love and grace with others. Too many Christians equate Bible study with maturity in their faith - but studying your bible is only part of the picture! Putting the truth of the Bible into practice is how you mature in the faith.

***“But I’m not in a small group.”***

This is a problem isn’t it...

This is why this is Step #3. I mentioned last Sunday that many Christians tend to stall out in Step #2:

Worship. They believe in Christ - have been baptized - and they worship with other believers on a regular basis - and that’s the totality of their involvement with the church.

This is missing the mark - it’s falling short of the N.T. model and practice of the early church.

## **2) Spiritual encouragement and correction**

Judging others, admonishing, forgiving, submitting and bearing with one another - ministering, confessing sins, praying and instructing each other - these are some of the One Another commands which put into action the truth of Scripture. We encourage each other with the truth - and we correct each other with the truth. I do this each Sunday from the pulpit - you’re supposed to do this throughout the week with each other.

**Colossians 3:16a**

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom...”

**John 13:34-35**

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”

By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

**James 5:16**

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

**1 Thessalonians 5:11**

“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”

Each of these passages - and all the other “One Another Commands” in the N.T. - require you to be in relationship with other Christians. These commands cannot be done with strangers or mere acquaintances.

*“God uses people to form people. That is why what happens between you and another person is never merely human-to-human interaction—the Spirit longs to be powerfully at work in every encounter.”*

John Ortberg, quoted in: “Why Small Groups”, by Carilyn Taketa - <http://www.smallgroups.com/articles/2012/why-small-groups.html?paging=off>

You must commit to connecting and growing with other believers in the local church - so you can give and receive the “One Another Commands” throughout the N.T.

**Illus:** Death of a spouse - they attended worship here for many years - but never connected with others - now have no support in the greatest time of need!

## Apply it...

Commit to connecting and growing with other believers in the church.

Movement toward maturity - advance through the steps

Balance in your life

Don't get over-involved with connection groups / small groups.

Commit to a group where you can connect to each other - and connect to the truth.

If you're in multiple groups, the intimacy of your relationships will lessen - you simply cannot have deep intimate relationships with a lot of people.

If you're in multiple groups, then you won't have time / margin in your life to pursue steps 4 & 5.

Close in prayer