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Introduction

What is the most important work of the church? What is our main purpose? Read Matt. 28: 18-20. In this account the emphasis is clearly on making disciples. It's understood that people must first hear, believe and obey the gospel before they can become a true disciple. But being a disciple involves far more than a "decision" or a "prayer for salvation."

Disciple making is perhaps the most critical element in the purpose of the church. If we fail at this point, then we are almost guaranteed to fail in all the others. It is such a critical task that Jesus focused most of his energy on it. The most significant religious movement in history was initiated through the simple act of Jesus investing his life in a small group of believers, growing them into authentic disciples.

So what did Jesus have in mind when he commissioned the church to make disciples of all nations? He wanted to create and mobilize a vast and ever-growing number of little versions of himself infiltrating every nook and cranny of society. He seeks to do this by reproducing himself in and through his people.

The name of "Christian" means "little Christs." All of the spiritual disciplines for disciples aim us toward one thing—*Christlikeness*. The purpose of discipleship is to embody the mission and character of Jesus.

Do you get the picture? He intends to multiply himself and his work through all of his disciples. Now the great commission was given to the church, but we need to see that the church's effectiveness lies not in the size of the congregation, but in the many, small individual lives of its members.

Imagine that we take two elephants, one male and one female, and we clear out these two rooms behind the pulpit area and make it suitable for sanitary conditions, food, and water, and we put those two elephants in that area, and confine them in that area for three years. Then after three years, we come back and open that door. What can we expect will come out? Three elephants--a mom, dad, and baby.

Now, instead of two elephants let's imagine that we put two rabbits in that room--a male and female with food, water, and good sanitary conditions. At the end of three years, when we open the door, what can we expect? A stampede of rabbits.

What's the point? Something as large and complex as an elephant is hard to reproduce. Something that is small and simple multiplies easily. Elephants have a long gestation period and take a long time to reach maturity. Rabbits, on the other hand, are extremely fertile all the time. They reach maturity and 4 to 6 months, and they're gestation period is a mere 30 days. They can also have multiple births, while elephants can only birth one baby at a time.

A large church, is like an elephant. It is easily visible and draws a lot of attention. But a major effort of both money and manpower is required to produce a large church. However, Jesus didn't tell us to make big churches. He said, "I will build my church." It is just up to you and me as disciples to make other disciples—lots of disciples. He wants his disciples to be like rabbits. They are not as highly visible, but they are everywhere. They have the greater potential for multiplication. It would take a long time for a country to be overrun with elephants. But a "plague" of rabbits could transform a nation in no time.

Now I want you to hold onto this illustration and think about the power of small. And I want us to think of how we view the power of the church? Does it work best through 'big' or 'small'?

The Greek word that is translated "church" is *ekklesia*. The literal meaning of the word is the "called-out ones." But the literal meaning is not warranted. It was in common usage for several hundred years before the Christian era and was used to refer to an assembly of persons constituted by well-defined membership.

For the New Testament, however, it is important to understand the meaning of *ekklesia* as "an assembly of God's people." It can be large or small. It is simply God's people coming together in various ways.

In Romans 16:5 and Colossians 4:15 Paul refers to the church that "meets in a house." In Acts 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 1:2 the church refers to God's people in a specific city, like the church in Jerusalem. In Ephesians 1:22-23 the word "church" refers to the church universal--all believers everywhere.

Now in our era, the word "church" is used in an entirely different way that has robbed it of its meaning and power. It is used to denote a denomination as in "the Catholic Church," "the Baptist Church," "the Methodist Church," etc. this is actually anti-biblical since it has the effect of dividing the church as in 1 Corinthians 1:12-13 where it records the division among brethren who were saying, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollo's"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Another common usage is using the word "church" to refer to a building as in, "I'm going to the church." It is also used to refer to the corporate worship service as in, "Did you go to church last Sunday?" This leads to defining the church and rating the church on the basis of its corporate worship service on Sunday rather than the life that its members live during the week. So what are we seeing as a result of this?

Most churches have developed into organizations or institutions. It's not that we don't need some form of structure to maintain healthy spiritual life in the church, but there is a big difference between an organization/institution and what Jesus had in mind when he said, "I will build my church." In many cases the church has mutated from its original basis as a movement into either:

- a community that embodies inherited tradition, or
- (2) a community of refuge and a safe place from the world, or
- (3) a community of nostalgia living in past successes.

Having reduced or redefined the church as something apart from ourselves, we tend to develop a dualistic lifestyle. Church is an "add-on" to our lives. As an add-on, it doesn't define how we live, it only defines a part of our life. And if that is how we understand church, then so long as we attend "church" we can call ourselves Christians, regardless of how we think, speak, or act during the week at home or on the job.

But rather than speak of "going to church" shouldn't we be thinking and speaking more in the realm of "being" the church? We the people are the church!

The scriptures speak of the church as organic--a living organism, not an organization or an institution. Its existence and growth is most often described as something that has life (i.e., the body) and has the ability to either reproduce itself (i.e., vines that bear fruit, seeds that reproduce themselves), or things that have power to permeate and affect the object it contacts with (i.e., yeast).

Let's start thinking and talking about the church as a movement rather than as a centralized organization. And let's start thinking and talking about ourselves as the

components of that movement that are to grow and reproduce the life that is in us and affect change in the environment in which we live.

Rather than focus on the attraction that our building can have, or our worship service, or the good sermons that Dennis preaches, or are excellent youth program, let's focus on how much more effective the positive and powerful influence our individual lives can have.

Now thinking back on the elephant and rabbit illustration, let's think about the power of small and the most effective way to make disciples. The method I want to suggest is what churches all across America and throughout the world are rediscovering. The church facilitates spiritual growth and makes disciples best in small groups.

After much prayer and discussion, the ministerial staff and elders decided well over a year ago that for us to be more effective in making disciples, we needed to transition to become a church OF small groups.

This doesn't mean that we do away with corporate worship. It just means that we try to integrate as many of our members as we can into small groups. Why? Not to follow a fad, but to follow scriptural precedent and assist and accelerate spiritual growth in our members.

The greatest value of being in a small group is found in its ability to provide us with three important accelerators in spiritual growth that are awfully hard to find anywhere else. But few people even consider these when deciding whether a small group works for them.

Belonging to a small group provides a valuable connection.

The primary reason to be in a small group setting is not to learn more biblical information. It's not to develop great friends. It's not even accountability. It's connectedness.

Belonging to a small group, velcroes me to the people and information I will need when a need-to-grow or need-to-know crisis shows up.

When it comes to spiritual growth, the Bible obviously plays a major role. According to the apostle Peter, it contains *everything* we need for life and godliness. But the Bible is a big book. Few of us know all the answers or life principles it contains. If you're like me, you've probably turned to it for help more than once only to be frustrated by the "I know it's in there somewhere but I can't find it" syndrome.

Those who are in a small group a small group have a special advantage. They may not have a clue what, if anything, the Bible says about a particular situation, but they

invariably know someone who does--or someone who at least knows someone who does.

But those who choose isolation and Lone Ranger spirituality have no such help. The only quick Bible answers they will ever find are the ones they already know.

Just as important are those times when we need a bear hug to help us hang in there, or swift kick in the backside to move forward. When we're in a place where relationships are genuine and transparent, there will always be someone ready to give us what we need.

Not so for those of us who choose to pursue our spirituality primarily in the anonymity of large group settings or lone ranger isolation. It's extremely difficult to self administer a bear hug or a kick in the backside.

The unconnected Christian has no one to turn to when he or she needs a shoulder to cry on, or a push in the right direction, or wise advice. And such a person almost certainly has no one to step forward and deliver truth that's hard to hear.

Ultimately, one of the most valuable aspects of a small group is that it's a hard place to hide. If you are in a small group when life hits, and a need-to-grow or need-to-know situation arises, you are already positioned to get the help you need when you need it.

Now we have several people who are not in a small group yet. Maybe you're thinking I don't need to be in a small group because I've been a Christian for a long time, and I don't need to be in a small group. Maybe you don't think you need to be in one for yourself, but maybe others need you. You could increase your ministry by being in a small group for the benefit of others who could profit from your maturity and knowledge. In that way you would be fulfilling your role as a disciple by helping make disciples.

In small groups, positive peer pressure spurs us on to greater growth.

Secondly, the close and transparent relationships of small groups also allow peer pressure to do its good work.

Peer pressure gets a lot of bad press in the Christian community. Unfortunately all the bad press has blinded many of us to the positive side of peer pressure. The negative connotations are so great we often assume that anything done primarily because of outward influence is somehow less praiseworthy than something done from a purely internal motivation.

Not so. Here's one scripture passage where we were pointed to the positive side of peer pressure: **"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."**

This passage is not just saying we should look for ways to spur one another on to love and good deeds. It's also showing us that one of the most powerful ways to do this is simply to continue meeting together.

Sermons and large gatherings have their place. They can be a powerful catalyst for spiritual insight and growth. But alone they cannot produce long-term, life-changing spirituality. The best way to produce that kind of spirituality is to hang around those who are already experiencing it. It's a law of human nature. Over time, we start to think, act, and live like those we spend significant time with. Spiritual growth especially is just plain easier when you spend more time with others who are trying to grow spiritually. It really does "rub off."

Honesty is another benefit that comes with being closely connected to a small group of Christian friends who share your faith journey. Honesty is how we really share life together. It's what **creates real fellowship**.

If I want to grow spiritually, I must be honest enough to let people in on the issues I'm facing and the reality behind the image I portray. I also need friends who are honest enough to tell me the truth--even when I don't want to know it, or it hurts to hear.

That kind of honesty is hard to come by. Mere attendance in even a midsized church, or even a Sunday school class will seldom provide it. As much as we might desire to be real it's hard to do when strangers are in the room, or people we don't know well enough to be sure they can be trusted with the truth about us.

We all need some people around us who really want to know how we are--and who we can trust with the truth. We need people who know us well enough that when they speak into our life, it fits who we really are, not our image. For most of us, this will never be found in a church service or Sunday school class. Because they aren't set up to foster honesty and transparency; they're set up to motivate and pass along information.

Just compare the standard church environment with the characteristics found in a typical small group setting. In which would you be most likely to be open and honest:

- In a classroom or living room?

- With 12 people or 250?
 - In a group where there's always a new face or one where you know everyone?
- That's why small groups foster honesty almost automatically. The environment in a typical church setting suppresses transparency in favor of either anonymity or putting up a front.

Large church services can serve an incredibly important purpose in transferring information and motivating us to action. But for genuine and lasting spiritual growth, most of us will have to find a way to move beyond the casual and conscious relationships we so easily settle for.

If you are really sincere in your desire to really grow more spiritually, then rather than confine your spiritual fellowship to worship services to large for you to know the names, much less the lives, of the people you worship with, it's imperative that you somehow find a place;

- where your reality speaks louder than your image
- where positive peer pressure spurs you on to greater heights
- and where you are positioned to receive the help you need the moment you need it.

Without that discovery, growth and God pleasing spirituality will be hard to come by.

There is one final thought I want you to seriously consider as you contemplate joining a small group. Our nation is coming into a new reality. More and more people are saying that we are living in a post-Christian era.

I believe that we are nearing the Second Coming of our Lord. I also believe that the Lord is preparing his church to survive and thrive in the coming tribulation and persecution by leading his people to begin forming and functioning more through small groups. In countries where the church has been or is being persecuted, the faithful survive and thrive only by small groups.

In countries like China where the government has outlawed Christianity, executed missionaries and local pastors, large public meetings for worship were forbidden. The only way the church could survive was in small groups.

Did small groups work in that situation? Not only did the church survive, it thrived. The only country that has a greater number of Christians is the USA.

How strong and how mature of a disciple are you? How strongly do you want to grow? Or, how strongly do you want to be used in fulfilling the purpose of the church to make

disciples? Consider that you either need to be in a small group for your own spiritual needs, or because others need you to help them grow. Don't hold back for either reason. Do what you need to do.